
ARTS & CULTURE

We Players Stage a Bittersweet Fairy Tale in a Breathtaking Locale



By [Sam Hurwitt](#) May 6, 2015 Save Article



A water sprite dances over the cliffs in We Players' *Ondine at Sutro*. (Photo: Miller Oberlin)

Where better to stage a play about a water sprite who falls in love with a knight errant than at the Sutro Baths? The ruins of a 19th-century swimming pool complex on the western shoreline of San Francisco make for an eerie and romantic site — especially when that site is partially reclaimed by the ocean.

That's where We Players are performing *Ondine*, the classic 1938 French play by Jean Giraudoux, based on an 1811 German Romantic novel by Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué called *Undine*. In an eloquent and witty 1954 English translation by Maurice Valency, it's the tragic but often hilarious tale of a fish out of water, a mysterious young woman who always says exactly what she thinks and has no sense of the interpersonal politics of human society.

In partnership with the National Park Service, We Players are old hands at making use of scenic locales to bring classic stories to life. They've performed *Hamlet* on Alcatraz, a day-length *Odyssey* all over Angel Island and *Macbeth* at Fort Point, underneath the Golden Gate Bridge. Sometimes the inventiveness of these stagings has been stronger than the dramatic interpretations of the stories themselves. But in *Ondine at Sutro*, all the elements come together beautifully to create a breathtaking theatrical

Event Information

Ondine at Sutro

A site-specific theatrical experience.
May 1 – June 7, 2015
Sutro Baths and Sutro Heights Park

- [Details and tickets](#)



We Players set Jean Giraudoux's tragicomic romance *Ondine* overlooking the majestic ruins of the Sutro Baths. (Photo: Lauren Matley)

experience.

Actually, none of the play is performed at the former baths themselves. The audience congregates overlooking the ruins, where a fisherman (Jack Halton) floats along in a little boat. It's when he comes ashore that we follow him to the next location and the story begins. Scenes are performed in various spots all around Sutro Baths and Sutro Heights Park, and the audience does a lot of trudging *en masse* from place to place. It's best to wear comfortable shoes and several layers of clothing, because it gets awfully chilly along the coast. All the performance locations are public places, so prepare for amused and puzzled tourists gawking along the paths.

Directors Carly Cioffi and Ava Roy make excellent use of each specific location. Water spirits clamber over walls at a lookout point as if rising from the ocean. When we pass by one of them pressed against a cliffside, her long white robes suggest a waterfall.

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Company founder Roy is a delightful Ondine, full of innocent enthusiasm. When she sees the knight, she can't help exclaiming how beautiful he is, and everything she says is pricelessly inappropriate, wise and naive at the same time. With immaculately groomed facial hair and a booming voice, Benjamin Stowe is perfectly cast as the charming and vain knight she falls in love with, Hans von Wittenstein zu Wittenstein. (His fickle



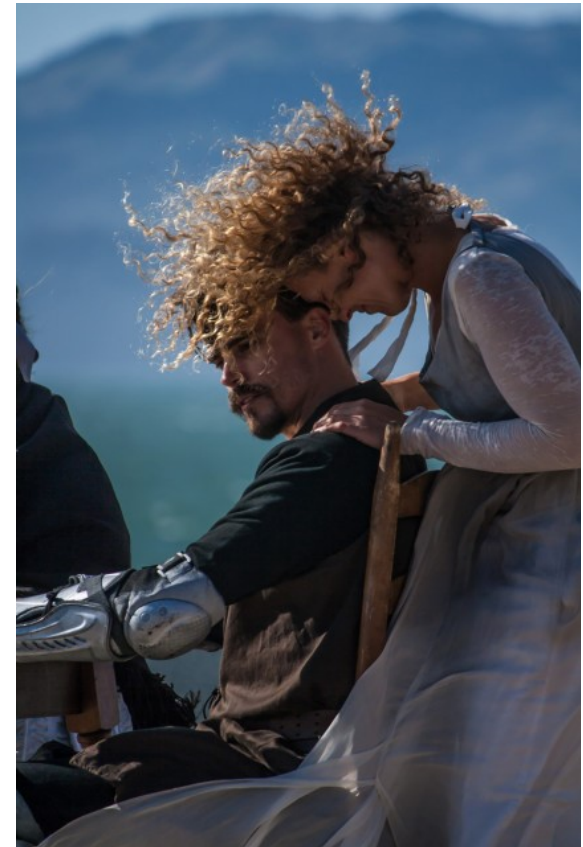
Ondine's fisherman parents (Jack Halton and Jennie Brick) have to let her seek out her destiny in *Ondine at Sutro*. (Photo: Lauren Matley)

disavowal of his betrothed as soon as he meets Ondine should be an early warning sign.) Jack Halton and Jennie Brick are Ondine's adoptive parents — a fisherman and his wife — a pair of honest, good-hearted simple folk.

While the seaside scenes are full of ethereal naiads writhing slowly around, the royal court is alive with colorful characters such as the buffoonish operatic tragedians (Julie Douglas and Mikka Bonel, who double as seductive sirens) led by an ineffectual impresario (Dan Flapper). The fiddler in composer Charlie Gurke's omnipresent brass band, Eli Wirschafter, plays a sensitive poet and avid admirer of Ondine, and Nick Medina is especially hilarious as the childlike king whose delusions everyone indulges — everyone but our heroine, that is.

There's a fairy tale quality of inevitability to the proceedings. We're told at the outset that it will end sadly, as any romance between a mortal and an immortal must. Giraudoux cleverly points to the fated sequence of events while still making the personal shortcomings that bring it about feel all too human.

The injection of strife into Ondine and Hans' relationship is played out in scenes conjured by a mysterious illusionist (coolly charismatic Olive Mitra). These illusions are meant to amuse the Lord



The water sprite Ondine (Ava Roy) falls for the dashing knight Hans (Benjamin Stowe) in We Players' *Ondine* at *Sutro*. (Photo: Lauren Matley)

Chamberlain (a flamboyant Nathaniel Justiniano) and other courtiers on the day the knight's new bride is presented at court.

Much of the intrigue centers around the haughty beauty Bertha (a refined Elaine Ivy Harris), Hans' former beloved. When the young poet objects that it's cruel to orchestrate awkward encounters between Hans and Bertha for the courtiers' amusement, the illusionist says these things would have happened anyway — he's just speeding up the process to make the play better. And indeed, as afternoon becomes evening in the three-hour show and comedy yields inevitably to bittersweet tragedy, the road-weary audience has been well entertained.

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