

S.F. seascape bolsters exquisite 'Ondine at Sutro'

By Examiner Staff

May 7, 2015



COURTESY PHOTO Benjamin Stowe and Ava Roy are terrific as a knight and sprite who fall in love in We Players'...

By Examiner Staff

Could there be a better setting for French dramatist Jean Giraudoux's 1938 play "Ondine" than the Sutro Baths and Sutro Heights Park at Land's End?

Or, for that matter, a more ingenious site-specific company than San Francisco's We Players, which matches the wind-swept locale with an exquisite, and expansively immersive, production?

Funny, tragic and haunting, "Ondine at Sutro" boasts carefully orchestrated action and a clarity of vision and execution by co-directors Ava Roy and Carly Cioffi.

Audiences are led to several different spots over the course of about three hours, traversing rocky staircases and winding paths (where characters waft and lurk), crossing Point Lobos Avenue, sitting on the ground or on stools, or at times standing.

Roving musical ensembles (original composition by musical director-sax player Charlie Gurke) provide alternately melancholy and jolly accompaniment.

Presented here in the commonly used Maurice Valency translation, “Ondine” is part fable and part comedy. It is also a soulfully poetic romance that explores the very nature of love and the heartache of the human condition.

An impishly impetuous water spirit, the sunny Ondine (a luminous Roy) – who lives partly on land with her adoptive parents, a fisherman (Jack Halton) and his wife (Jennie Brick) – clambers gracefully over a brick wall as though emerging from the Pacific Ocean below (or, in the text, a lake in the forest). There she meets her parents’ guest, a knight errant (a charmingly self-important Benjamin Stowe). The two fall instantly in love.

Ondine decides to give up her magical powers to marry the knight, who, as it happens, is betrothed to the dark and scheming Bertha (Elaine Ivy Harris).

She’s cautioned against this unwise choice by the powerful Old One of the sea (a charismatic Olive Mitra) and her sister spirits, danced by Julie Douglas, Libby Oberlin, Mikka Bonel, Briana Dickinson, Areyla Moss-Maguire and Becky Robinson-Leviton, who also sing, plaintively and seductively.

Amid the large cast, Nathaniel Justiano is particularly hilarious as both the Lord Chamberlain and a fisherman, as is Nick Medina as the neurotic King. But then the entire ensemble, including Eli Wirtschafter as a poet – and a chorus that plays a variety of atmospheric roles – is uniformly excellent. A shoutout, too, to Brooke Jennings for the eloquent costumes.

The misty vistas of the Marin headlands, the cresting waves on Ocean Beach and the magnificently gnarled, almost mythical-looking Monterey cypresses along the paths add to the enchantment of this sad and beautiful play, so imaginatively realized by We Players.

REVIEW

Ondine at Sutro

Presented by We Players (with the National Park Service)

Where: Land’s End, 680 Point Lobos Ave., S.F.

When: 4:30 p.m. Fridays-Sundays; closes June 7

Tickets: \$35 to \$80

Contact: (415) 547-0189, www.weplayers.org