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Book and Lyrics by LYNN AHRENS

Music by STEPHEN FLAHERTY

Based Upon the Novel *My Love, My Love* by ROSA GUY

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About Once On This Island

Once On This Island is a delightful musical fable with book and lyrics by Lynn Ahrens and music by Stephen Flaherty. It is based on Rosa Guy's novel *My Love, My Love*, which in turn was inspired by Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*. The show was first presented Off-Broadway by Playwrights Horizons as part of its 1989-1990 season. The original production, directed by Graciela Daniele, opened to rave reviews before moving to Broadway.

The show is deceptively simple: a group of Caribbean Island peasants waits out the night of a terrible storm by performing a fairy tale of star-crossed lovers; but inherent in this tale are the serious themes of class distinction and racial prejudice which plague our own society. Through music, song and dance, the musical explores universal issues which affect us all — love, anger, forgiveness, faith, maturity and death.

Once On This Island explores the tradition of storytelling, not only as entertainment, but as a means of passing down history, values and insight from one generation to the next. It deals with the classic themes of love, loss and redemption through the fabric of Caribbean culture, art, religion and social structure.

The show is set on an unspecified island in the French Antilles on the night of a violent tropical storm. In a small hut, a group of island peasants huddles together around a fire. A young child cries out in fear as the storm rages, and the peasants try to sooth and divert her by acting out a story about the power of love. The telling of the story spans the course of the night, as the peasants weave their tale in song and dance. By the end of the night, the storm has subsided, the peasants have survived, and the little girl has learned the meaning of the story.

Characters in Once On This Island

The show is performed by an ensemble cast. Each actor portrays both the peasants Storytellers on the island and the characters they play in “The Story of Ti Moune.”

LITTLE TI MOUNE

TI MOUNE — a beautiful dark-skinned peasant girl with a childlike innocence

DANIEL — a handsome, aristocratic young man who is a light-skinned *grand homme*

MAMA EURALIE — Ti Moune’s adoptive mother

TONTON JULIAN — Ti Moune’s adoptive father

ERZULIE, Goddess of Love

AGWE, God of Water

PAPA GE, Demon of Death

ASAKA, Mother of the Earth

ANDREA — an elegant and refined young woman who is a light-skinned *grand homme*

ARMAND

Plot Synopsis

In a small hut on the night of a raging storm, peasants on an island in the French Antilles huddle together around a fire to wait out the wind and rain. As lightning flashes and thunder roars, a little girl cries out in fear. In order to calm her, the peasants begin to tell her a story. In the opening number “We Dance,” the peasants describe their world, in which their lives are ruled by powerful gods and their island is ruled by the wealthy “*grands hommes*.” They explain the peasants and *grands hommes* belong to “two different worlds, never meant to meet.”

In “One Small Girl,” they begin the tale of Ti Moune, who fell in love with a *grand homme* after being “chosen by the gods for a magical fate.” They describe how the gods spared her life during a flood when she was a child, and how she was raised by loving adoptive parents. By the end of the song, Ti Moune has grown into a beautiful young woman.

In “Waiting for Life,” Ti Moune (who is now working in the fields) yearns for the future she feels she has been promised by the gods. She reminds them they have singled her out and tells them not to forget her. A *grand homme* dressed in white drives past her in his automobile and she fantasizes he will someday carry her off to a grand new life.

In “And The Gods Heard Her Prayer,” the gods of Earth, Water, Love and Death decide to give Ti Moune her *grand homme* as a test to prove whether love or death is the more powerful god. They will each play a part in this test.

Agwe (the God of Water) begins the proceedings by causing a night of “Rain.” He causes the young *grand homme* (Daniel) to crash his car on a dark road, and allows Ti Moune to discover him. Ti Moune cradles Daniel in her arms, realizing the gods have answered her prayer.

Despite the objections of the peasants, Ti Moune cares for Daniel. As her father (Tonton Julian) goes off in search of Daniel’s family, her mother (Mama Euralie) observes Ti Moune has become obsessed with Daniel. Tonton Julian discovers Daniel’s family lives behind the guarded gates of a fine hotel. The peasants fear Ti Moune’s folly will invoke the wrath of the gods. They “Pray” to ward off evil as a terrible storm begins.

Inside her hut, Ti Moune pledges her love to the unconscious Daniel in the song “Forever Yours.” She imagines him healthy and pledging his love for her in return. The song is interrupted by Papa Ge (the Demon of Death), who arrives to claim Daniel’s life. Ti Moune promises to give up her own life and soul if Papa Ge will spare Daniel. He gleefully agrees to her bargain.

The peasants perform “The Sad Tale of The Beauxhommes,” a pantomime in which they enact the history of the island. They begin with the French conquest of the island and describe how a French aristocrat (Armand) fathered a son by a black peasant girl. The son (Beauxhomme) grows into a man and leads a revolution against the French, driving them off the island and thereby inheriting their wealth. Before he leaves, Armand puts a curse on Beauxhomme: Beauxhomme and his descendents will forever long for France but be sentenced to remain on the island because of their black blood.

The Storytellers return to the story of Ti Moune: Tonton Julian leads Daniel's family to Daniel, who is carried back to his world on a stretcher. Ti Moune insists on following Daniel. Although her parents plead with her to remain with them, they finally allow her to leave with their blessing ("Ti Moune").

Ti Moune's journey begins as the Storytellers enter dressed as birds, trees, frogs and breezes. They introduce Asaka (Mother of the Earth), who promises Ti Moune "Mama Will Provide" all the things she is likely to need on her way. As Ti Moune ventures on, the Storytellers portray the vendors, city folk and tourists she meets, as well as the guard at the gates of the Hotel Beauxhommes. They mime her journey and the things "Some Say" she must have experienced.

Ti Moune enters Daniel's room. He lies in bed, still feverish from his injuries. After she convinces him she has come to heal him, he agrees to let her stay the night. As Ti Moune lies down beside him, Erzulie (the Goddess of Love) appears and presides over them in the song "The Human Heart."

In "Pray" (Reprise), the Storytellers gossip about the unlikely union of a *grand homme* and a peasant girl as Daniel and Ti Moune fall deeply in love. The gossips insist although Ti Moune may be Daniel's mistress, she will never become his wife.

On a starlit evening, Ti Moune tells Daniel of her dreams for their future. He replies she is different from "Some Girls" he has known and says "some girls you marry, some you love." As he sings, another girl dresses before a mirror, her elegant movements and clothes in contrast to Ti Moune's simplicity and earthiness.

At a ball at the Hotel Beauxhommes, the *grands hommes* eagerly wait for a glance of Ti Moune. She arrives, dressed beautifully but simply ("The Ball"). Daniel introduces Ti Moune to Andrea Devereaux, the girl we saw dressing for the ball. At Andrea's request, Ti Moune dances, enchanting everyone at the ball ("Ti Moune's Dance"). As Ti Moune celebrates her triumphant performance, Andrea asks her to perform at the wedding of Andrea and Daniel.

Daniel tells Ti Moune he was promised to Andrea as a child and "this is how things are done." Ti Moune is in shock and Daniel bluntly tells her they could never have married.

Desolate and alone, Ti Moune hears critical voices from the past. Papa Ge appears and reminds her of her promise, reprising "Forever Yours." He gives Ti Moune a chance to save her life: instead of surrendering her own soul, she may choose to kill Daniel. Reminding her of Daniel's betrayal, Papa Ge gives her a knife.

Ti Moune is about to kill Daniel when Erzulie appears to remind her of her love for Daniel. Ti Moune hurls down the knife, choosing her love for Daniel over her desire to live. Erzulie has triumphed over Papa Ge.

Ti Moune is thrown out of the Hotel Beauxhommes. She waits for weeks, not eating or sleeping, until Daniel and Andrea pass by her after their wedding, tossing coins to the peasants. She calls out to Daniel and he pauses by her side for a moment before moving on. She curls up in despair, and from her hand falls the coin Daniel has pressed into it.

Mama Euralie begins a lament for Ti Moune, “A Part of Us.” The Storytellers enact Ti Moune’s death. She is passed gently from one god to the next, until at last Asaka takes Ti Moune to her breast, and lays her to rest in the earth.

Ti Moune is resurrected from the earth as a beautiful tree, one which will shelter peasants and *grands hommes* alike for years to come. The Storytellers tell the little girl how Daniel’s young son encountered a beautiful peasant girl in the tree and the spirit of Ti Moune set the two free to love one another. The Storytellers explain this is “Why We Tell the Story,” singing to the little girl that “out of what we live and we believe, our lives become the stories that we weave.”

As the little girl begins to retell the story, the Storytellers resume their places around the fire. The stars come out as the lights fade on them.

Themes and Topics to Explore

Questions and Assignments

Our study guide focuses on a wide-ranging list of themes and topics which are suggested by the style and content of *Once On This Island*.

Avenues for exploring each theme and topic are suggested in the form of:

QUESTIONS: Designed to prompt in-class discussions before and after viewing or reading the show.

ASSIGNMENTS: Designed to be researched and written outside of class.

Storytelling

Once On This Island is a story-within-a-story. Ultimately, the musical shows how stories are created and how they are passed down. By the end of the tale, the little girl who has listened to Ti Moune's story embraces the tale and is able to pass it along.

Questions and Discussion Prompts

- What are some reasons we tell stories?
- How is the story told in *Once On This Island* significant?
- How do stories help us understand the world in which we live? How do they help us come to terms with events in our own lives?
- Discuss the forms storytelling can take (such as dance, film, theatre and literature). Why are authors compelled to tell stories?
- Think of some familiar stories, folk tales or legends. What is the significance of each?
- Begin a story with the words "Once upon a time" and pass it around the room, asking each person to tell a portion of the story until the tale is completed.

Assignments: Research and Writing Projects

- Write a story based on a real event in either recent or past history.

Themes in World Folk Literature

When Ti Moune dies, her spirit is transformed by the gods into a beautiful tree which shelters generations of peasants and *grands hommes* to come, freeing them to love one another. Throughout world folk literature (and particularly in African myths and tales), the tree is used as a symbol for the rebirth of the soul. Because folk tales are handed down from generation to generation and from storyteller to storyteller, tales from different cultures may have common elements.

Questions and Discussion Prompts

- Select several American, African and Asian folk tales to read out loud to the class.
 1. What do these folk tales have in common?
 2. What basic human characteristics and emotions do these tales explore?
 3. What symbols are used in these tales to represent common experiences? Find contemporary equivalents for these traditional symbols.

Assignments: Research and Writing Projects

- Write a story that deals with some of the common themes found in these folk tales, including birth, death, spirituality and the relationship between people and nature.
- Dramatize one of the folk tales.

Adaptation and Musical Theatre

Once On This Island is based on Rosa Guy's novel *My Love, My Love*, which was inspired by Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*. Musical theatre works are frequently adapted from sources such as novels, fairy/folk tales, myths, short stories, films, plays, historical events and television shows.

Questions and Discussion Prompts

- How many examples of musical theatre works adapted from such source materials can you name?
- Name five original musical theatre works not based on any other sources.
- What does a team of musical theatre collaborators add to a work from another medium in adapting it for the musical stage?

Assignments: Research and Writing Projects

- Read Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* to familiarize yourself with the similarities and differences between the stories of the Little Mermaid and Ti Moune.
 1. Compare the journey Ti Moune takes in *Once On This Island* to the Little Mermaid's quest for her Prince.
 2. What is the role of faith, religion and the supernatural in each of these stories?
- Read Rosa Guy's novel *My Love, My Love*.
 1. Compare and contrast the novel with *Once On This Island* and *The Little Mermaid*.
- Create your own adaptation of *The Little Mermaid* in short story form. Use Andersen's basic plot, but create a new set of characters and set the tale in a new time and place. Choose another ending if you wish. Be prepared to explain the motivations behind your choices.
- Read one of the following combinations of dramatic works: the musical *My Fair Lady* by Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe and the play *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw; the musical *West Side Story* by Arthur Laurents, Stephen Sondheim, Leonard Bernstein and Jerome Robbins and the play *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare; or the musical *The King and I* by Oscar Hammerstein 2d and Richard Rodgers and the novel *Anna and The King of Siam* by Margaret Landon. View the film version of the musical you select.
 1. How did the addition of music enhance the non-musical source?
 2. How was music used to evoke time and place?
 3. How were songs used to tell the story?
 4. What were some of the emotions explored in the songs?
 5. Did the score heighten the action of the source material?

Social and Class Distinctions

Social and class distinctions in Haitian society are a major theme in *Once On This Island*.

Questions and Discussion Prompts

- Think of two groups in contemporary American society who affect each other because of class distinctions or differences in social status. What causes these differences? How might changes be effected in the status of these groups and the relationship between them?

Assignments: Research and Writing Projects

- Research the history of the Caribbean Islands, particularly the history of Haiti. How are social and class distinctions in Haiti reflected in the island's culture and religion?
- How is the history of Haiti reflected in the story told in *Once On This Island*?
- Research the lives of either Haiti's peasants or its *grands hommes*. Present a portrait of the economic, political and social life of the class you researched.
- Use the information you gathered to create a fictional debate or dramatic confrontation between those who researched the lives of the peasants and those who researched the lives of the *grands hommes*. How do the lives of one group affect the lives of the other?

Maturity

“Who knows how high these mountains climb?
Who knows how deep these rivers flow?
I know he’s there
That’s all I need to know.”

Parents raise their children, instill in them ethics and beliefs and then must allow them to succeed or fail on their own in the world. Children grow up, make decisions and leave home, ultimately facing the consequences of their actions. Ti Moune and her adoptive parents deal with these issues when she leaves her home to pursue Daniel.

Questions and Discussion Prompts

- Discuss Ti Moune's decision to leave Mama Euralie and Tonton Julian. Is it more mature to base a decision on common sense or on passion?
- Should Ti Moune have stayed in her village?
- What gave Ti Moune the strength to leave home? What gave her parents the strength to let her go?
- Have you ever had to choose between acting out of common sense and following your passions?

Faith

“Asaka, grow me a garden,
Please Agwe, don’t flood my garden.
Erzulie, who will my love be?
Papa Ge, don’t come around me.”

The Haitian gods Asaka, Agwe, Erzulie and Papa Ge are central figures in *Once On This Island*. They reflect the characters’ understanding of the forces that influence their everyday lives. The peasants believe the gods control their world, and look to the gods for love and protection. They allow their deities to hold power over their lives and the stories they tell.

Questions and Discussion Prompts

- How does religious faith affect the choices the peasants make?
- How does religious faith enable the peasants to come to terms with their lives?
- Why does Ti Moune stand up to the gods and finally choose her own fate?
- How does your religious faith affect the decisions you make?

Prejudice

“They despise us for our blackness.
It reminds them where they’re from.”

The division between the peasants and the *grands hommes* becomes shockingly clear when Ti Moune arrives at the elegant Hotel Beauxhommes and finds Daniel.

Questions and Discussion Prompts

- Discuss the reasons behind the prejudice the peasants exhibit towards the *grands hommes* and vice-versa.
- Discuss the “The Sad Tale of the Beauxhommes” and the roots of prejudice on the island.
- Have you ever experienced prejudice because of your physical characteristics, religious beliefs or social class?
- On what are the prejudices of our own society based? How are these prejudices propagated? Why do they prevail? What can be done to transcend them?
- Should people have relationships only within their own class, race or religion?

Love, Anger and Forgiveness

“You gave him love,
Love that he’d soon betray.”

We all experience love and rejection at some time in our lives. We hope we will transcend our anger and hurt and grant forgiveness.

Questions and Discussion Ideas

- Discuss the different ways love, anger and forgiveness come into play in the musical.
- Who goads Ti Moune into attempting to kill Daniel?
- Why is Ti Moune unable to kill Daniel?
- What does Ti Moune’s sacrifice represent to those who hear her story?
- Discuss Ti Moune’s bargain with Papa Ge to spare Daniel’s life in return for her own.
- Have you ever felt so strongly about someone or something that you were ready to make an important personal sacrifice?
- Have you ever felt willing to sacrifice your life for something you wanted or believed in?
- Discuss Ti Moune’s expectations of her love for Daniel. Was she realistic in expecting him to accept her despite their class differences?

Death

“Erzulie took her by the hand and led her to the sea,
Where Agwe wrapped her in a wave and laid her to rest;
And Papa Ge was gentle
As he carried her to shore,
And Asaka accepted her
And held her to her breast.”

The storytellers tell of Ti Moune’s death and resurrection at the hands of the gods, finding in her tragic ending a source of inspiration and renewed hope.

Questions and Discussion Prompts

- Discuss Ti Moune’s death and resurrection.
- Why do the peasants choose to end their story this way? Does their ending enable them to better come to terms with something as sad and unexplainable as death? In what ways do we come to terms with grief in our own lives?

The Role of Music in Once On This Island

Once On This Island uses elements of Caribbean life and culture to tell a universal story of love and forgiveness, heightening the experience through song and dance. Like all successful musical theatre adaptations, the show uses a musical vocabulary that enhances and enriches the source material.

Questions and Discussion Prompts

- How does the music in *Once On This Island* express emotion, character, plot and theme in unique and visceral ways?
- Discuss how the music of *Once On This Island* uses elements of Caribbean rhythm, melody and harmony to evoke locale, even though it is written in a contemporary American musical theatre idiom.
- How are songs used to tell the story? How are lyrics used to explore deep feelings and ideas in the show? What are some examples of ways in which the lyrics use the lilt, poetry and imagery of Caribbean speech to express the emotions of the characters?
- How does the presence of music strengthen this telling of the story of Ti Moune?

Appendix

The following background material and bibliography are designed to enrich your exploration of the Themes and Topics.

About the Creators

LYNN AHRENS and STEPHEN FLAHERTY. Collaborators since 1983, Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty first collaborated on the show *Lucky Stiff*, which won the 1988 Richard Rodgers Production Award and was produced by Playwrights Horizons. Ahrens and Flaherty have been awarded a National Institute for Music Theatre Award, as well as a National Endowment for the Arts Producer's Grant. Ms. Ahrens is a four-time Emmy nominee and winner of a 1979 Emmy for her work as a writer, composer and lyricist. Her songs have been a mainstay of the renowned educational animated series *Schoolhouse Rock*. Mr. Flaherty is a graduate of the Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music and attended the Graduate Musical Theatre Program at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. Ahrens and Flaherty also wrote the scores for *My Favorite Year* (adapted from the hit film), *Ragtime* (with book by playwright Terrence McNally, based on the novel by E. L. Doctorow) and the animated film *Anastasia*.

GRACIELA DANIELE. Director/choreographer Graciela Daniele, who received two Tony Award nominations for her work on *Once On This Island*, is well known to Broadway musical audiences for her choreography of such shows as *The Pirates of Penzance*, *The Rink*, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* and *Dangerous Games*. In addition to *Once On This Island*, she directed and choreographed *Hello Again* and *Chronicle Of A Death Foretold* (Best Choreography Tony nomination).

The Production History of *Once On This Island*

Once On This Island was first developed in a workshop setting at Playwrights Horizons in New York City during the 1989-1990 season. It received the AT&T "New Plays for The Nineties" Award, and was chosen as one of the "Ten Best Plays for '89-'90" by the *Burns Mantle Yearbook*. After opening to rave reviews in May 1990 and enjoying a sold-out run off-Broadway, *Once On This Island* made a smooth transition to Broadway, where it was produced at the Booth Theater by the Shubert Organization, Capital Cities/ABC, Suntory International and James Walsh, in association with Playwrights Horizons. The cast (which included La Chanze in her Broadway debut as Ti Moune) remained intact, the show remained virtually unchanged, and the production proved once again to be successful with critics and audiences alike. The show began its Broadway run on October 18, 1990, and played 469 performances.

Once On This Island was nominated for eight Tony Awards, including Best Musical, Book, Music and Lyrics, and was nominated for Best Musical by the New York Drama Critics Circle. The original cast album was recorded by RCA-Victor and became one of the top-selling CDs of the year.

Roots of the Story

Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*, which inspired Trinidad novelist Rosa Guy to write *My Love, My Love*, has been told many times, most recently in the Disney animated film.

The tale is basically a romance between two people from different worlds: a sea-bound mermaid; and a land-bound human Prince.

When Rosa Guy read the Hans Christian Andersen tale, she was so moved by its sadness and beauty she wanted to adapt it in a fresh way. She chose the island of Haiti, located in the Great Antilles (a chain of islands in the Caribbean Sea), as the setting for her version of the beloved tale. In Haiti, where great wealth and staggering poverty exist side by side, there were clearly two different worlds in which to place the heroine and hero of her story.

The stern social distinctions on the island are based not only on wealth (or the lack of it), but on skin color and ancestry. The wealthy ruling class (the “*grands hommes*”) are mulatto, descended from the union between early French settlers and their black slaves. In 1791, a slave revolution led by the charismatic Toussaint L'Ouverture ousted the French colonialists and created the first black independent republic. Nevertheless, as decades passed, class distinctions between lighter-skinned Haitians of mixed blood and black former slaves continued to separate the people of the island. Today, the *grands hommes* govern the island from positions of great wealth and power.

In the novel Ms. Guy created, Ti Moune (Andersen's Mermaid) is a dark-skinned peasant girl who falls in love with a light-skinned young *grand homme* named Daniel. *My Love, My Love* tells the bittersweet tale of the girl's obsession with the boy whose life she saves and her journey to “his world” to convince him to marry her. The novel incorporates many of the details of Haitian life Rosa Guy observed while living there: the strong faith of the peasants in their gods, the separation of light- and dark-skinned Haitians, the rural way of life, and the sophistication of urban Haiti.

Once On This Island remains faithful to Mrs. Guy's books, and to her Caribbean setting and characters. However, the musical departs from the novel in its ending, which is closer in spirit to the ending of Hans Christian Andersen's story. *Once On This Island* offers spiritual redemption for Ti Moune. The triumph of her faith and her ability to forgive enable the show's storytellers to find a healing message for their own lives.

The Adaptation Process

“Adaptation” is the name given to the process of creating new works from ones that already exist in another form. Musical theatre writers derive many benefits in adapting material from other literary forms; among these benefits are a firmly established story as a foundation, clearly drawn characters, and a property which may already have had some public exposure. Adaptations may stay quite close to their original source material or may vary greatly. Rosa Guy's adaptation of *The Little Mermaid* changes the locale of the story and thus alters the social history, race and geographical location of its characters.

In adapting Rosa Guy's novel, Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty changed and condensed certain plot elements, expanded the roles of the gods, and changed the ending of the story for dramatic

effect. They also used the concept of storytelling to give the piece a framework and to include the audience in the dramatization of the tale. By making *Once On This Island* a story told to a child on a dark, stormy night, the authors not only gave the musical a strong point of view, they were able to use their actors freely as both storytellers and characters in the story itself.

Resources

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Production Guide

How to Produce *Once On This Island*

The most important thing to keep in mind about a production of *Once On This Island* is that the story should be told clearly and simply. The director and choreographer may find many different ways to do that. The following guidelines are suggestions that may in some instances offer specific solutions, and in others point the way towards solutions of your own.

Casting Considerations

Once On This Island is written to be performed by an ensemble cast. Remember the show is conceived as a “play within a play.” Each actor portrays a peasants on the island who is taking part in telling “The Story of Ti Moune,” as well as a characters in the story.

To avoid confusion, study the following examples to see how the distinction between the two is indicated in the script.

1. The following indicates the actor is “in character” as ASAKA when she delivers the line:

ASAKA

WE KNOW THE GODS ARE HAPPY
WHEN THE GREEN THINGS GROW

2. The following indicates the actor is not “in character” as ASAKA when she delivers this line. She is the peasant STORYTELLER who will play ASAKA at certain points in the story:

STORYTELLER (ASAKA)

A girl chosen by the gods for a magical fate.

Specific characters are indicated for most Storytellers — not only to facilitate staging, but also to indicate doubling which should not be changed. For instance, the Storyteller who plays DANIEL should double as BEAUXHOMME and DANIEL’S SON. The Storyteller who plays ARMAND should double as the “authority figures” of the GATEKEEPER and DANIEL’S FATHER. The Storyteller who plays ANDREA should double as MADAME ARMAND. The Storyteller who takes the part of TI MOUNE should double as the beautiful young PEASANT GIRL in the tree, at the end of the show.

Although an ensemble approach is essential to the staging of *Once On This Island*, the company should still be cast with strong individual performers. Each character has a featured song or moment at some point in the show. The most important consideration in casting is to have excellent singers who can tell the story with great energy and clarity.

The show may be cast multi-racially, provided the essential conflicts of class distinctions and social prejudice are made clear. Costumes, masks (all very common in Caribbean ritual and art) and other devices may be employed to clarify these issues.

Cast Breakdown

LITTLE TI MOUNE — Child or young woman who can play Ti Moune convincingly as a little girl

TI MOUNE — Young woman. Soprano with belt. Beautiful, with a childlike innocence and lots of energy.

DANIEL — Young man. Lyric baritone. Handsome and aristocratic.

MAMA EURALIE — Mature woman. Strong lower vocal range as well as upper. Maternal.

TONTON JULIAN — Mature man. Baritone. Fatherly, sensible, and caring.

ERZULIE, Goddess of Love — Woman. Pop soprano. Beautiful and tender.

AGWE, God of Water — Man. Baritone. Commanding, with a graceful authority.

PAPA GE, Demon of Death — Man. Strong lyric baritone or tenor. Sinister and sexy.

ASAKA, Mother of the Earth — Woman. Belt soprano. Strong, comedic, and motherly.

ANDREA — Young woman. Soprano with belt. Elegant and refined.

ARMAND — Man. Baritone. Authoritative and strong.

AUTHORS' NOTE (From Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty)

Once On This Island is based on the cultural, religious, and racial divisions found in Haiti between the mulatto ruling class and the dark-skinned rural peasants. Our original production in New York was strictly cast along these racial lines and the text makes references in several places to skin color. We think the power of the story has a great deal to do with the issue of prejudice within a race as well as with issues of wealth and class; we strongly hope that the casting of future companies will reflect our intent as far as possible. However, we understand the potential casting difficulties that may arise for some amateur theatre groups, as well as their desire, in some cases, to present interracial productions. To this end, we've supplied certain specific text alterations which might allow a greater flexibility in making casting choices, while still maintaining the core ideas of prejudice and the separation of people because of their differences. (*Editor's note: these text alterations are found at the back of the libretto section of the libretto/vocal book.*)

Design

Once On This Island can be performed in a variety of spaces and designed in a number of ways.

The production should allow for maximum flexibility in staging, to accommodate the frequent shifts between fantasy and reality. The musical numbers are written to flow from one to the next with little or no interruption for set changes.

The off-Broadway and Broadway production was designed to appear as if the peasant Storytellers had created everything onstage themselves. The design was inspired by Haitian folk art and other “primitive” and “naive” art. Paintings, sculpture, masks and vivid costumes are a part of every aspect of Caribbean life. House walls are often painted with murals. Images of tropical trees, flowers, birds, sky and water abound. Everyday objects are carved and decorated. Colorful parades and festivals feature extravagant costumes and fantastic, unearthly masks. The art of the Caribbean Islands is spontaneous and beautiful and can provide countless design ideas for a production of *Once On This Island*.

Sets and Props

The musical can be presented using a simple setting and a minimal number of props. A painted drop can serve as the foundation for any kind of staging. Painted mural-like walls provided a non-literal set for the original production. Actors completed the “stage picture” when they were added to the stage, creating a “living painting” for each scene.

In keeping with the idea the peasants are creating the story out of whatever they have on hand the night of the storm, set changes can be facilitated by simple props. A branch or two can be used to suggest the tree in which Ti Moune is found as a little girl (“One Small Girl”). Umbrellas and streamers can represent rain, and two flashlights can become the headlights of Daniel’s speeding car (“Rain”). Tin cans with cutouts can light the way for the peasants during the night scenes (“Pray”). Daniel’s bed in the Hotel Beauhommes can be a large pillow laid over with an elegant white quilt (“The Human Heart”). Colorful hanging lanterns and statue candelabras cut from tin can decorate “The Ball.” All props and set pieces can be carried on and offstage by the peasants without stopping the action of the show.

Each of the gods can be identified by a special prop: a fan for Erzulie, the Goddess of Love; a wand with streamers for Agwe, the God of Water; the top hat Haitians traditionally associate with Papa Ge.

Give special attention to the moment in the show when Ti Moune is resurrected as a beautiful tree. Her transformation should appear as magical and surprising as possible. In the original production, the peasants lifted Ti Moune high into the air as she became the trunk of the tree. As she rose into the air, branches and leaves lowered from the flies in layers until the tree was lush and green.

Lighting

Lighting should play an important part in establishing time, place, locale and mood in *Once On This Island*. If a simple painted environment is used as the set, lighting can provide focus, define areas of the stage and direct the eye of the audience. The lighting design should be as fluid as possible, and can help facilitate quick changes of location and time. For example, during “Pray,” lighting should not only tell us it is night and a storm is brewing, it should delineate the various shifts of location as the peasants bring Daniel from the road to the village, Ti Moune nurses him in her hut while the peasants pray outside, and Tonton Julian travels on the road to the faraway city. The lighting should also help reinforce the fact that time is passing during the number.

Lighting should be used to establish the storm at the beginning of the show, and the onset of a bright sunny morning at the beginning of “One Small Girl.” It should create a romantic atmosphere during “The Human Heart” and a sinister, scary ambience during Papa Ge’s section of “Forever Yours.” At the end of the show, it should reinforce the feeling of life, hope and renewal as Ti Moune is transformed by the gods into a tree (“Why We Tell The Story”).

Costumes

Remember the characters in the show are peasants performing roles in the story they are telling. Their basic costumes should reflect this. The peasants should transform easily into the characters they play with simple additions to their basic costumes. Each god can be identified by a symbolic costume piece, such as a menacing black hat for Papa Ge (the Demon of Death) and a headband or bracelet of leaves for Asaka (Mother of the Earth). During “Mama Will Provide,” the peasants may add a colorful piece of clothing to their costume to represent the birds, the trees, the breezes and the frogs. Andrea can add an elegant wraparound skirt to her peasant costume when she dresses for “The Ball.” In the original production, each character was personalized by a distinctive color palette — a white suit for Daniel, vivid orange and yellow for Ti Moune, etc.

Masks and other fanciful costume pieces can be used to dramatize the stories within the story: “The Sad Tale of the Beauxhomme” and “The Ball,” in which the peasants portray the *grands hommes*.

Music

The score for the show is in a contemporary musical theatre style, but is influenced by the sounds of the Caribbean. Rhythm is emphasized, resulting in a heavy reliance on the percussion and drum parts (particularly in the dance sequences “Pray” and “The Ball”). It might be helpful to listen to authentic Caribbean music.

The presentation of the music should help support the telling of the story. In the original production, the band was situated behind an upstage scrim, rather than in an orchestra pit. The action of the show was thus placed much closer to the audience, providing a feeling of intimacy. You might consider placing the musicians onstage and in costume; but remember: the show is almost completely sung, so it is important your musicians be placed in a location that allows for good coordination between your musical director and the cast.

Staging and Choreography

The original staging of *Once On This Island* was fluid, moving seamlessly from one moment to the next. Song, dance and design were integrated effortlessly. As with all other production aspects, the most important thing to keep in mind when staging the show is to tell the story clearly.

Although the show was written to be staged with a great deal of choreography, dances should never be inserted as “diversions” or “dance breaks.” Each moment must contribute to moving the plot forward. Let the script be your guide — always pay attention to the text; the staging will follow naturally. You should, however, feel free to use your imagination. For this reason, stage directions in the libretto have been kept to a minimum.

Dance plays an important role in Haitian culture. It is used for social, religious and celebratory occasions, each of which is represented in *Once On This Island*. Just as the score is influenced by Caribbean sounds, the choreography may also have a Haitian or Caribbean flavor. Afro-Caribbean dance gestures may be researched through books and videotapes, some of which are listed in this guide.

In addition to its Caribbean influences, the staging of the original production relied on several other stage techniques. *Tableaux* (or “stage pictures”) were often used to establish locations in lieu of scenery. At the beginning of “We Dance,” for example, the company huddles around a single yellow light as the sounds of thunder resound. With no additional elements, the audience knew it was night, there was a storm, and the peasants were gathered together in a hut to wait it out. During the first lines of “One Small Girl,” the cast formed a tight group centerstage. Two of the men balanced Little Ti Moune on their shoulders, evoking immediately the image of a little girl in a tree.

At the beginning of the song “Waiting For Life” (which takes place in a field), the peasants mimed the movements of seeding and scything to set the scene. Later in the same song, the company formed two parallel lines stretching diagonally from upstage right to downstage left. In between the two lines of people, Daniel, carrying two flashlights, danced across the stage to the lyrics “A stranger!/Racing down the beach/Racing to places/I was meant to reach,” evoking the image of a car speeding down the road. The same convention can be used during “Rain” to show Daniel driving as Agwe sings, “Let there be a car/Racing through the night/Where the road meets the sea...” When Ti Moune is cast out of the Hotel Beauhomme, the company formed a single line across the length of the stage to signify the closing of the gate.

Another useful staging technique is the use of recurring physical motifs to establish characters. The gods, in particular, are identified in Haitian culture by specific movements. For example, Papa Ge, who bargains with Ti Moune for her life, typically swivels his hips in a sly, sinuous way. He can introduce these movements during “We Dance,” and repeat them in both “Forever Yours” and its reprise. Erzulie’s movements are fluttery and feminine. Asaka is powerful; her stance is wide and low to the earth, and she gestures out from her chest. Agwe moves his arms and torso to emulate the flow of waves.

Remember, even the sections of *Once On This Island* meant to be “pure” dance must continue to tell the story. The “Voodoo Dance” section of “Pray,” for example, must show the peasants’ fear of

Ti Moune's angering the gods when she tries to save Daniel's life. Ti Moune's dance at the ball must contrast her "peasant" way of dancing with the refined stodginess of the *grands hommes*. At the same time, during the course of her dance she must win over the *grands hommes* with her charming, free spirit.

In summation, encourage the performers to use their bodies to illustrate the story they are telling, create pictures using *tableaux*, evoke scenic elements with mime, and express the joys and sorrows of the characters' lives with dance. The choreography should be free and natural, and appear spontaneous.

Dialect

For the original production, a dialect coach created a gentle accent for the Storytellers, combining certain inflections and vowel sounds found in Trinidadian and Haitian speech. Listen to the original cast album of *Once On This Island* to hear the results. You might also listen to recordings of Caribbean music to find a "sound" for your Island. We don't believe an accent is absolutely necessary, since the text is lyrical and straightforward and does not use specific language or jargon from the Islands. An accent does help to create the world, though; so if you choose to use one, make sure the accent does not obscure the words, and that it is easy for the audience to grasp.

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