STUDY GUIDE

Brief Overview of Once on This Island

The story in Once on This Island is adapted from the 1985 novel My Love, My Love; or, The Peasant Girl by Rosa Guy which was an adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's fairytale The Little Mermaid. Set on an unnamed island in the French Antilles in the Caribbean Sea, the story explores the life of Ti Moune, a peasant girl. Ti Moune lives on a tropical island whose population is divided by prejudice between different social classes. Ti Moune rescues and falls in love with Daniel, a member of the upper grand-hommes class from the other side of the island. When Daniel is returned to his people, the fantastical gods who rule the island guide Ti Moune on a quest to test the strength of her love against the powerful forces of prejudice, hatred and death. Told through music, song, and dance, the musical explores universal issues which affect us all - love, anger, forgiveness, faith, maturity, and mortality.

The musical Once on This Island was written (music and book) by Lynn Ahrens and composed by Stephen Flaherty. The original production was staged at Off-Broadway’s Playwrights Horizons, running from May 6, 1990 to May 27, 1990. It was picked up for a Broadway run at the Booth Theatre, which opened on October 18, 1990. It closed on December 1, 1991, after 469 performances and 19 previews. The story is based on the 1985 novel My Love, My Love; or, The Peasant Girl by Rosa Guy as well as including elements from Romeo and Juliet and the fairytale of The Little Mermaid.

The original Broadway production was nominated for eight Tony awards, including Best Musical, Best Original Score, and Best Book of a Musical. The original London production won the Olivier award for Best New Musical.

Synopsis

Once on This Island opens on an island in the French Antilles where a child is terrified by a big storm. To calm her, and help her understand the power and potential of the natural forces on their island, the villagers tell her the tale of Ti Moune. The very first lyrics throw us into the central preoccupation on the show; that is, the unforgeable divide between one half of the island where the darker-skinned peasants labor, and the other side where the mixed race “Grandes Hommes” live in luxury (they are the descendants of the French who married peasant women). We are also quickly invited into the dichotomized dance culture of the island: a medium for the peasants to commune with the Gods while simultaneously an avenue for the Grandes Hommes to celebrate at parties. While the raucous opening musical number, “We Dance,” tantalizes and imbues the audience with musical theatre joy, it also sets the stage for the more weighty themes of Shadeism and justice which underlie the piece.

As the villagers unfold their legend, we meet Ti Moune, a young peasant girl who was saved as a child from a great flood by the God of Water, Agwe; she was subsequently taken in and raised by an elderly couple, Mama Euralie and Tonton Julian. Now grown, Ti Moune dreams of love and prays to experience
the life of the Grandes Hommes. When the Gods hear her prayer, they initiate a rain storm causing the heir to the Beauxhommes dynasty, Daniel, to be injured in a car crash near Ti Moune’s house. Ti Moune takes him in, tends to the unconscious boy and, when his condition worsens, bargains with the God of Death for his life. If Papa Ge will let Daniel live, he can take Ti Moune’s soul instead. Soon, Daniel’s family comes to retrieve him and they are torn apart. Ti Moune sets off for the other side of the island by foot to find Daniel, and is guided along the way by Erzulie, the Goddess of Love, and Asaka the Goddess of Nature. When she arrives at the Beauxhomme mansion, however, Daniel does not recognize her. Nevertheless, despite his initial hesitation, he is drawn to Ti Moune’s innocence and certainty that she can heal him, and invites her to stay for the night. Defying social mores, the two grow together, Daniel healing and Ti Moune maturing, and become halves of the same whole. After two weeks of inseparable unity, the wealthy community learns of the Grande Homme’s dalliance with the peasant girl, leading Daniel’s father to condemn their relationship. After all, Daniel is already betrothed to the high-class Andrea.

At the climactic ball, Andrea meets and dismisses Ti Moune by revealing her upcoming marriage to Daniel. Papa Ge appears to the dejected Ti Moune and urges her to kill Daniel to reverse the bargain they made, but she cannot. Instead, she flees from the ball and camps outside the gates for two weeks, waiting for Daniel and — fulfilling the bargain they made — Papa Ge takes her life. To commemorate Ti Moune, the Gods transform her spirit into a tree that unites all of the island’s population and eventually inspires love between Daniel’s son and a peasant girl who meet in its branches. Though Ti Moune’s fate was subjected to the unfortunate class delineations governing the island, her quest has imbued the population with hope for a more egalitarian tomorrow.

**Roots of the Story (by Sarah Schlesinger *)**

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 lack of it), but on skin color and ancestry. The wealthy ruling class (the “grand hommes”) is 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 colonists 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 grand 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 passion for 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 book, 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.

*This article was originally published in the Musical Theatre International (MTI) study guide for *Once On This Island.*

**The Little Mermaid as a Source**

*Once on This Island* has been compared to multiple different stories, but the most prominent comparisons are to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid.* In both of these stories, a young girl falls in love with a boy from a totally different world, and longs to be a part of it. They are loved in return, but their peers and family are war-torn about the different statuses and histories. Since the Flynn is also presenting *The Little Mermaid* this summer, we’re going to focus on the similarities between the two. In the original Hans Christian Andersen tale, the ending is much darker, as many fairy tales were. The Little Mermaid (aka Ariel) has her tongue cut off by a Sea Witch in order to grow legs to spend happily ever after with her true love, a Prince she saved from drowning. When the Prince marries someone else, Ariel wishes to become a mermaid again, and the Sea Witch offers her a dagger, which she is to use to kill the Prince. In doing so, she’d become a mermaid again. Unable to kill the Prince, Ariel jumps off the ship and her body dissolves into sea foam. On a happier note, her spirit ascends to the atmosphere, where she is given the chance to earn her own soul by doing good deeds for 300 years.

In *Once on This Island,* Ti Moune and Daniel are counterparts to Ariel and Eric. Daniel is sent to be almost killed by the Gods, so that Ti Moune may have a chance to meet him and care for him, thus having him fall in love with her. This parallels the moment when Ariel saves Eric from drowning in *Mermaid.* Papa Ge comes to take Daniel’s life, but Ti Moune gives up her own life for the chance to save Daniel’s (reminiscent of Ariel giving up her speech for legs). Papa Ge is angry with this and leaves, promising his return. Such as in *Mermaid,* Daniel is promised in marriage to someone else in his world. Although Ti Moune and Daniel loved each other, societal rules and standards made it so their love cannot be pursued. Accepting her fate, Ti Moune is led to the ocean by Erzulie, where Agwe allows her to die peacefully. The fate of these two girls (Ariel and Ti Moune) is incredibly similar. Their spirits are taken by Death, and given a purpose beyond the one they had in life, in honor of their selflessness. Ti Moune is transformed by Asaka into a beautiful tree, used for generations to unite the Peasants and the *Grandes Hommes,* which is what Ti Moune was trying to accomplish all along.

Both of these stories are tragic, but also inspiring, and oftentimes lively and full of heart. They both illustrate love as the most powerful force in life, stronger than all of the forces that try to stand in its way, up to and including death.

**Cultural Origins**

The island in *Once on This Island* is fictional, but is thought to most closely resemble Haiti. Although the story is fictional, and based upon a fairy tale, it provides us a wonderful opportunity to engage with Haitian culture. Tradition plays a major role in Haitian history and culture, and such is mirrored and respected in *OOTI.*
What are the French Antilles?
The Antilles refer to what we now call “The Caribbean.” The term “French Antilles” refer to a series of Caribbean islands that were under the sovereignty of France located within the Antilles island chain. Those islands included Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Grenada, Saint Lucia, Trinidad, parts of the U.S. Virgin Islands and many more. Many European nations held sovereignty over Caribbean islands including Britain (Bahamas, Belize, Bermuda, Cayman Islands, Jamaica, and Turks and Caicos), Spain (Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Anguilla), with many other nations controlling smaller islands.

The Gods
In Once on This Island, the peasants pray constantly in order to gain favor and avoid the wrath of the gods. The four gods depicted are: Agwe, Asaka, Erzulie, and Papa Ge. While these characters are unique to the musical, their origins derive from the history of Vodou. Vodou is a traditional religion practiced primarily in Haiti and its practitioners are called "Vodouists" or "servants of the spirits." Vodouists believe in a distant and unknowable creator god named “Bondye”. As Bondye does not intercede in human affairs, Vodouisants direct their worships subservient spirits called “loa.” Every loa is responsible for a particular aspect in life with the personality and dynamic of each loa representing the inherent aspects of life they preside over. Through the presentation offerings, creation of altars, and participation in elaborate ceremonies of dance and music, Vodouists create personal relationships with the loa. Here are the Vodou loa that most closely represent the gods from the musical:

Agoueh (Agwe) - a loa who rules over the sea, fish, and aquatic plants, as well as the patron loa of fisherman and sailors. He is considered to be married to Erzulie.

Azaka (Asaka) - the patron of crops, agriculture, and farmers.

Ezili (Erzulie) - loa of love, beauty, jewelry, dancing, luxury, and flowers. There are actually multiple Ezilis, each representing a different aspect of love. In Island, they have been combined.

Papa Ghede (Papa Ge) - a member of the Guédé who are the family of Loa that embody the powers of death and fertility. He is the corpse of the first man who ever died and waits at the crossroads to take souls into the afterlife. He is considered a trickster, and he and Azaka are siblings.

Shadism in the Caribbean
Remnants of European colonialism can be found across the globe from North America to Asia and back. While the expansion of empires was important to each country, economic growth was the backbone of colonial development. This is especially true in the Caribbean Sea where European nations sought to own significant portions of the island chain known as the Antilles. Many of these islands were rich in natural resources which led the ruling Europeans to introduce a plantation system to cash in on the financial potential of the islands. The plantation system consisted of the creation of large estates that would be mass farmed to cultivate local agriculture. These resources included coffee, cocoa, cotton, and sugar cane. Sugar was a luxury in Europe prior to the 18th century, and eventually became a staple in European diets by the 19th century. The Caribbean islands were the perfect place to grow sugar cane due to the plentiful sunshine, heavy rain falls, and limited cold frosts, so plantations began to change over
other crops to sugar cane. One of the major difficulties of producing sugar was the large workforce needed to do physical labor in hot, humid weather conditions. Historically seen as the harbinger of African slavery, the Portuguese used workers to grow sugar in the Madeira Islands since the mid-1400s. Britain, France, and Dutch followed suit by venturing to Africa to enslave local populations, returning them to the Caribbean to be used as slave labor. While the slave trade started small, as the demand for sugar rose so did the mass enslavement of African populations. By the late 18th and early 19th century, African slaves far outnumbered the number of their European rulers by over 3 to 1.

This history of social segregation on these Caribbean islands therefore led to the formation of a caste system dividing society into different classes. The caste system present in *Once on This Island* most accurately resembles the French-ruled island of Haiti, also known as Saint-Domingue. The Haitian three-tiered caste system assigned social status to people based on the shade of their skin. This held significance into everyday lives affecting education, employment, love, and marriage. This can be referred to in today’s age as “Shadism.” The social structure was divided by the White elites (*grands blancs*) at the top, the Mulatto freedman (*affranchis*) in the middle, and the Black slaves (*noirs*) at the bottom, most of whom had been brought from Africa. While some *affranchis* were able to own land and gain sizable wealth, the *grands blancs* were still considered socially and politically superior.

The living and working conditions of an African slave were horrendous with little to no concern from their masters which led to many slaves dying and the importation of more. By 1791, approximately 87 percent of the island were black slaves, 8 percent were white, and 5 percent were mixed freedmen. The constant contempt towards the African population pushed the slaves to mobilize a revolt which led to a full-fledged revolution. The revolution was one of two successful attempts, along with the American Revolution, to achieve permanent independence from a European colonial power before the 19th century.

Although Haiti became an independent state, its society was still heavily influenced by the caste system established during the French rule. With the *grands blancs* mostly gone, the Mulatto population became the ruling elite in Haiti after the revolution. The domination of the Mulatto class in politics and economics created another two-caste society with the lower class being the rural farmers like in the old system.

For all the fighting and bloodshed undertaken to create a free country, the Haitian peasant class still found themselves socially, politically, and economically weaker than the mixed population. *Once on This Island* explores these post-revolution themes and examines the power love has to mend this divide.

In professional productions of *Once on This Island*, the peasants are cast as darker skinned, and the Grand Hommes as lighter skinned, to better reflect the Shadism inherent to the piece.

For non-professional and educational productions (such as ours) where casting along racial lines is not always possible, the authors have provided slight script adaptations, wherein the divide is illustrated around wealth and class, rather than skin color. This is in no way meant to erase the true history of Shadism in the Caribbean, but instead allows the core struggle of overcoming prejudice to be explored by communities who, perhaps, need the opportunity to reflect on those issues even more.
Another important factor to note is how the characters in OOTI incorporate dance and music into their ceremonies. Dancing is a fundamental part of Haitian Vodou, due to the physical nature of serving the loa. The energetic and spiritual movement of Haitian dance calls the attention of the Gods and shows how joyous the dancers are to remember the spirits. The idea of a “rain dance” came from Vodou culture. Instead of kneeling to pray, those who practice Vodou believe that moving more raucously will draw more attention and show their needs, wishes, and hopes.

In Vodou tradition, there are specific movements that are used to honor and call on each loa. Our cast worked with a Haitian teaching artist, Jean Apollon, who taught them many of these movements, which you will see reflected in the show, when the god characters lead a large song or dance.

Music is also important to Vodou tradition. As in almost any culture, dance without music is like living without breath. The rhythms and sounds used in Once on This Island have been deeply researched, and are based closely on traditional Haitian music. In fact, Haitian teaching artist Jean Apollon was able to listen to songs from the show and instantly name the Haitian rhythms and dances upon which they were based. As you dance and sing the songs, you should effortlessly feel your soul and spirits lifting. It’s meant to be upbeat and happy because what it all comes down to is that Vodouists are happy to be alive. They’re praising the loa for helping them live life as they choose.

As we rehearsed and perform Once on This Island, we are paying homage to the culture which inspired it by putting energy into every word and movement, whether it be uplifting or tragic. No matter what the moment is, it’s energetic and spiritual, and 100% full of life. We hope that our research and hard work makes the experience more meaningful to our audience as well.

-Nathaniel Miller

Thank you to our generous sponsors!

Once on This Island is being produced by the Flynn Center’s Summer Youth Theater Company, and is sponsored by PCC, and a generous anonymous donor. The program is also funded in part by the Mimi Fishman Foundation, the Hearst Foundation, and Burlington Town Center. A round of applause for the people who make arts education possible!

This guide was compiled and written in part by Nathaniel Miller and Christina Weakland at the Flynn Center for the Performing Arts. Some sections were written by and used with permission from the Acting Up Stage Company in Toronto, Canada, and by MTI (Music Theatre International).