Ondine
Study Guide

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The Ancient Origins of *Ondine*

If the story at the heart of the play *Ondine*, in which a water nymph falls in love with a handsome young nobleman, sounds somewhat familiar to you, there’s good reason: it’s an ancient and archetypal story which has cycled through many versions in the Western world. The folklores of Ireland, Iceland, and Scotland tell of selkies, seal-women whose romantic entanglements in the human world lead inevitably to heartbreak and loss. In German folklore, an undine is a spirit of the water; the Renaissance alchemist and occultist Paracelsus further classified undines as a type of “elemental,” mythological beings which are the building blocks of nature.

In 1811, the German Romantic writer Friedrich de la Motte Fouque drew on these earlier notions about undines to compose a novella entitled *Undine*, about a sea nymph who marries a knight in order to gain a soul, and it was this text upon which the French dramatist Jean Giraudoux based his 1939 play *Ondine*. Giraudoux enriched the existing characters of the story, added many new ones, and appended many events to flesh out the novella into a compelling drama.

Giraudoux was not the only artist enchanted by de la Motte Fouque’s literary fairy tale: the story was adapted into ballets, operas, and instrumental music, and it inspired Hans Christian Andersen’s well-loved story “The Little Mermaid.” Though familiar to so many through the beloved Disney animated film version, which features a traditional happy ending, Andersen’s tale, which closes on quite a bittersweet note, is in fact very indebted to the age-old portrayals of water-sprite/human love as a doomed enterprise.

**Reflections**

Although *Ondine* and Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* are inspired by the same old story, they end in very different ways. In the original tale which *Ondine* follows, the ending is an unhappy one, showing that a relationship between lovers from two different worlds is ultimately doomed. Disney’s version, on the other hand, has everyone (except the villain) living happily ever after.

Why do you think Disney changed the ending?

Which ending do you prefer?

Which do you think is more “true to life”?

**Activity**

Choose a fairy tale with which you’re familiar. Write your own version, with a different ending. How have you changed what the story is trying to say?

In 1939, Jean Giraudoux (left) used an old folktale as the inspiration for *Ondine*. Decades later, Dan O’Brien created the English-language translation/adaptation being produced at UMass Amherst this spring.
Director Gina Kaufmann on staging *Ondine*

Unlike most directors in our mainstage season, professor Gina Kaufmann did not propose the production she is working on, an adaptation of Jean Giraudoux's 1939 play, *Ondine.* Rather, the department asked her to take on the piece when she joined the faculty this summer.

Kaufmann, who is a professional director with extensive experience mounting new works, was initially cautiously enthusiastic. Unfamiliar with the work, she looked up an old translation from the French original. "It was a little long and wordy, but there were interesting ideas in it," she said.

Then, she read the new translation/adaptation by Dan O'Brien, which is the version UMass is using. Her cautious enthusiasm turned to full-on excitement.

Though the ideas that originally captured her attention remain, the script she held in her hand “felt like a whole new play,” she said. “There’s a wit, a self-awareness — a nimbleness that the other translations just don’t have. It’s such a delight to work on.”

One of Kaufmann’s challenges has been to make the citizens of the water world from which Ondine comes seem different from the human characters. “We have been thinking of ways we relate to water,” she said, explaining that rather than making stereotypical “floating in water” movements, the actors playing the water folk have been trying to develop a way of moving that suggests that they ARE water. In the work of helping her human actors appear to be magical creatures, Kaufmann has received help from choreographer Paul Dennis. He has worked with her and the actors to develop a set of movements that are specific to the water creatures.

Another challenge has been to bring out the comedic elements of the play. Even though *Ondine* is ultimately a tragedy, it feels like a comedy much of the way. That comedy derives from the fact that the water world and the human world have different cultures, Kaufmann explained. Because it deals with nobility, the human world in this play is one that is very concerned with status — something Ondine and her world don’t understand, according to Kaufmann. Hans, the knight Ondine falls for, is very much a part of the human status games, and

Although Ondine is her first production with the UMass Amherst Department of Theater, Gina Kaufmann has directed professionally for years around the country, including in New York City, Maine, and California. Ondine’s refusal (and inability) to be diplomatic and political causes problems for their relationship.

Kaufmann has been working with her actors since January break to create this production. She has an unusually large cast — 32 people — which is virtually unheard of in regional professional theater, where budgets usually dictate smaller casts for most productions. It serves her nicely because in addition to helping her as she creates the world of the play, it is introducing her to many members of the Department of Theater, from the undergraduates who act and serve as technical crew, to the graduate student designers and dramaturgs, to the faculty who advise the students and serve as designers themselves.
Why a New Translation?

Perhaps you have seen the words “in a new translation by ….” on the cover of a novel you’ve been glancing through, or noticed the words on a poster for a play being produced in the area. Perhaps you pass over this phrase and don’t even think about the work of that translator, or you may even ask yourself, “What’s the big deal? Why does there need to be a new translation of this? Hasn’t anyone gotten it right, yet?” These are fair questions. But one idea can help answer them all: translations age.

Just as a master restorer may be hired to clean the accumulated grime off a priceless painting so that viewers today can experience the piece in the same glory as its original owners back in the Renaissance did, for instance, a skilled translator can freshen up a play written in a foreign language so that a contemporary audience does not feel alienated from the essence of the play. While a translation written in 1940 may have felt extremely current and fresh to a 1940's audience, that same translation would most likely feel stiff and awkward if a director tried to mount a production with it today.

Why is this? Most importantly, speaking styles change: the words people use and the ways they construct sentences change over time. You only need to watch a movie or television show or newsclip from the 1940s to recognize how different our style of communication has become.

Also important is the fact that tastes change. A European audience in 1830 would be accustomed to hearing very flowery speeches with a lot of metaphor, and accept that as a logical way for characters to speak, and therefore a translator in that era would not have any qualms about trying to capture that same flowery style for the audience in his target language. But today, such types of figurative language, if used in excess, might seem ridiculous to an audience and alienate them; a translator dealing with such a type of play would therefore try to capture the essence of the play while paring down certain elements which would strike a modern audience as over-the-top. That way, he or she will help an audience experience a play's freshness and immediacy in much the same way as its original audience did.

Exercise

Below are three excerpts representing three different versions of the same play: Ondine as written by Giraudoux in French, the translation created about 50 years ago, and the translation/adaptation made by Dan O’Brien, which we are using for our production.

Look them over (if you can’t read the French, don’t worry) and take note of how the different versions tackle the same subject.

Now, take that same excerpt, and write your own adaptation. How did you change it? Why did you make the choices you did? What do you feel your twist added to the idea being communicated?

Giraudoux original:

Une fois que les chiens de mer ont formé leur couple, Hans, ils ne se quittent jamais plus. A un doigt l’un de l’autre, ils nagent des milliers de lieues sans que la tête de la femelle reste de plus d’une tête en arrière. Est-ce que le roi et la reine vivent aussi proches? La reine légèrement en retrait du roi, comme il convient.

Valency translation:

Take the dogfish, for instance. Not that I’m especially fond of dogfish, mind you. But, once the dogfish couples with its mate, he never leaves her, never as long as he lives, did you know that? Through storm and calm they swim together, thousands and thousands of miles, side by side, two fingers apart, as if an invisible link held them together. They are no longer two. They become one.

O’Brien translation/adaptation:

Take dogfish, for instance. I know dogfish better than men. Once a pair of dogfish mate they’ll never part again. They’ll swim round and round, their whole lives long, only ever a blade of sea grass between them…always.—Do the King and Queen of the world live like that?
Exercise
Costumes can be a significant help in creating the world of the play you’re seeing onstage, and very little of what the actors wear is left to chance. Well in advance of opening night, the costume designer and director have considered every element of a costume and what it tells the audience about the character wearing it. Costuming is used to help audience members understand the personality of a character (it can be as simple as the dark clothing worn by a villain to signal his evilness). It can also be used to clue the audience in to characters’ relationships to the others in the play — if a play is set in a royal court, the relative opulence or simplicity of the clothing will help make it easy to see which character is noble and which is a lower-class servant.

In Ondine, the audience must keep track of 32 different characters inhabiting different worlds within the play: the magical water world and the human world, the noble court and the lower classes.
Take a look at the costumes depicted on these pages, which were designed by graduate student Sarah Nelson for this production.

What can you tell about the characters from their costumes? What are the clues the costume designer gives you that lead you to your conclusions? Do the costumes tell you anything about the characters’ relationships to each other? Again, what clues did you get from the costumes?
Now, think about how you would put on this play. What costume choices would you make for the characters depicted here? Draw your own costumes, or see if you can find images in magazines that illustrate what you would do if this were your production.
Making bold choices

In an email exchange, dramaturg Margaret Inners asked the two actors who play the lead roles in our production of Ondine to share their insights into the play and the roles they have. Here’s what they wrote.

A Chat with Anna Dynarski (Ondine)

How has your understanding of your character changed since you’ve been in rehearsal?
I had a pretty good understanding of the character when I headed into rehearsal, so my understanding was fine-tuned when rehearsals started. I felt my personality really mirrored Ondine’s, so I worked more on finding the places where Ondine transitions into experiencing more of a human life than an ondine life.

What’s your favorite scene in the play to act, and why?
I really enjoy the scene in Act II where the Chamberlain is teaching Ondine etiquette. There is a lot of fun action in that scene.

Is there anything in particular you hope an audience gets out of the play?
I just really want to the audience to thoroughly enjoy themselves. I want this trip to the theater to resemble a trip to an amusement park, a fun-filled adventure.

A Chat with Matthew Perry (Hans)

How has your understanding of your character changed since you’ve been in rehearsal?
My understanding of the character Hans has changed in a few different ways since the start of rehearsals. Upon the first readings of the play, my views on Hans were that he was a bumble headed knight who would go from one woman to the next. After further time working with the character I became more aware of the complexities of his situation within the love triangle with Bertha and Ondine. I came to understand how hard it is to be in love with two women, and the difficulty of choosing one over the other.

What were some of the challenges for you in creating this character on stage?
Some challenges with creating Hans have been such things as posture, movement, how he speaks to Ondine, how he speaks to Bertha, how he treats Auguste and Eugenie before and after encountering Ondine. Also having to reminisce about being in love with Bertha while currently married to Ondine.

What’s your favorite scene in the play to act, and why? To watch?
I do not have a favorite scene to act in, but Act 1 is definitely my favorite act. I enjoy the exchanges made by Hans, Auguste and Eugenie. I love the first moments between Ondine and Hans and the first encountering with Hans and the ondines. My favorite scene to watch is the opening to Act 2, most likely because it is one of the only times that Hans is not on stage, but I enjoy it thoroughly because of the character the Chamberlain.

Is there anything in particular you hope an audience gets out of the play?
I hope, most importantly, that the audience is entertained from start to finish. I hope they get more out of the production that just that of your average fairy tale. I hope that the audience is moved by the complexity of the situation between Bertha, Hans and Ondine. I want the audience to laugh, but by the last moments of the play, I hope the audience is touched by the power of the love between Bertha, Ondine and Hans.

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