

ACTING UP
STAGE COMPANY
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Producing contemporary musical theatre.
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Study Guide for Students

Brief Overview

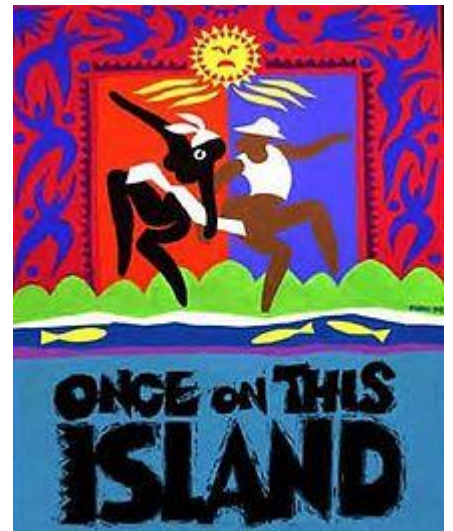
Study Guide Purpose

This study guide is designed for both teachers and students who will be attending Acting Up Stage Company's production of Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty's *Once On This Island*. This study guide provides information on the show, the creators, some additional context and explanation, and various activities that can be completed to enhance the theatre experience.

Brief Overview of *Once On This Island*

Once On This Island is adapted from the 1985 novel *My Love, My Love; or, The Peasant Girl* by Rosa Guy which she based off of Hans Christian Andersen's story *The Little Mermaid*. Set in the French Antilles in the Caribbean sea, the story explores the life of Ti Moune, a peasant girl, who lives on a tropical island whose population is separated 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.



History of Acting Up Stage Company

Acting Up Stage was incorporated in May 2004 as a not-for-profit organization under the leadership of Mitchell Marcus. The company fills a unique niche in the Toronto theatre scene by producing intimate musicals at reasonable prices from Canadian and international authors that will attract a younger generation of audience members. Acting Up Stage has quickly become a staple company in the Toronto theatre scene, producing a reasonably priced, intimate musical experience that deals with thought-provoking themes and provides a theatrical experience for modern, contemporary audiences.

In 2005 Acting Up Stage produced the Canadian premiere of Jonathan Larson's *tick, tick...BOOM!*, the only show he wrote other than the hit musical *RENT* before his death. Andrew Lippa and Tom Greenwald's *john & jen*, also a Toronto premiere, received rave reviews when it ran in 2006. Since then, Acting Up Stage has produced the Toronto premiere of William Finn's *Elegies: A Song Cycle* in 2007, the Canadian premiere of Terrence McNally, Stephen Flaherty and Lynn Ahrens' *A Man of No Importance* in 2008, the Toronto premiere of Benj Pasek and Justin Paul's *Edges: A Song Cycle*, and William Finn's *A New Brain*.

Since *A New Brain*, Acting Up Stage has continued to pervade as an indomitable force in the chamber musical theatre scene. Earning rave reviews, 6 Dora Awards, 8 Toronto Theatre Critics award, and 32 Dora nominations for *The Light in The Piazza*, *Parade*, *Caroline, or Change*, *Ride the Cyclone*, *A Craigslist Cantata*, and, most recently, *Falsettos*, Acting Up Stage is excited to showcase this beloved musical with a fresh and honest perspective.

About *Once On This Island*

History of *Once On This Island*

Once On This Island premiered Off-Broadway at Playwrights Horizons in New York City on May 6, 1990. 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

Acting Up Stage produced Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty's *A Man of No Importance* in 2008.

Synopsis

Once On This Island opens on an island in the French Antilles with eleven actors portraying various roles, including the Gods who rule the island and its inhabitants. The very first lyrics of the show 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 labour, 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 darker skinned inhabitants to commune with the Gods while simultaneously an avenue for the Grandes Hommes to celebrate at parties. Though the raucous opening musical number, “We Dance” tantalizes and imbues the audience with musical theatre joy, it also microcosmically sets the stage for the more weighty themes of Shadeism and justice which underlie the piece.

We are introduced to 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, the dark skinned 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 lighter skinned gentleman and, when his condition worsens, bargains with the God of Death for his life. If Papa Ge will let Daniel live, then he can have Ti Moune’s soul instead. When Daniel awakes, the two immediately fall in love, defying the social forces of prejudice and hate which demand their separation. Soon, though, 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, 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 spurns her for appearing where she does not belong. Nevertheless, despite his initial hesitation, he is attracted by Ti Moune’s beauty and innocence 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 village learns of the Grande Homme's dalliance with the peasant girl, leading Daniel's father (Armand) to condemn their relationship. After all, Daniel is already betrothed to the light skinned Andrea – a fact which surprises both Ti Moune and the audience simultaneously.

At the climactic ball, Andrea meets and dismisses Ti Moune by flaunting 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, yet 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 incites love between Daniel's son and a dark-skinned peasant girl who meet on 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.

Character list

Ti Moune – a peasant girl

Mama Euralie – Ti Moune's adoptive mother

Tonton Julian – Ti Moune's adoptive father

Erzulie – the kind and beautiful goddess of Love

Papa Ge – the sneaky demon of death and the main antagonist of the show

Asaka – mother of the Earth

Agwe – god of water

Daniel – Ti Moune's love interest and Grand Homme

Andrea – the woman Daniel has been betrothed to since childhood

Armand – Daniel's stern father

Musical numbers

- Prologue/We Dance
- One Small Girl
- Waiting for Life
- And the Gods Heard Her Prayer
- Rain
- Pray
- Forever Yours
- The Sad Tale of the Beauxhommes
- Ti Moune
- Mama Will Provide
- Waiting for Life (Reprise)
- Some Say
- The Human Heart
- Pray (Reprise)
- Some Girls
- The Ball
- When We Are Wed
- Forever Yours (Reprise)
- A Part of Us
- Why We Tell The Story

Creators' Bios

Lynn Ahrens (Book and Lyrics) and Stephen Flaherty (Music)



Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty won the Tony Award, Drama Desk and Outer Critics Circle Awards and received two Grammy nominations for their score of the Broadway musical *Ragtime*. They also garnered two Academy Award nominations and two Golden Globe nominations for the songs and score of Twentieth Century Fox's animated feature film, *Anastasia* (Gold Record and Number One Song.) They are cocreators of the Broadway musicals *Once On This Island* (eight Tony Award nominations, London's Olivier Award for Best Musical) and *Seussical* (Grammy and Drama Desk nominations. One of the most frequently performed show in America.) Other Broadway and off-Broadway credits include *My Favorite Year*, *A Man of No Importance* (Outer Critics Circle Award, Best Musical); *Dessa Rose* (winner, 2005 Audelco Award for Best Musical, Drama Desk and Outer Critics Circle nominations); *Lucky Stiff* (Helen Hayes Award, Best Musical); *Chita Rivera: The Dancer's Life* and *The Glorious Ones* (five Drama

Desk nominations including Best Musical.)

They were most recently represented on Broadway with the 2009 revival of *Ragtime*. Individually, Ms. Ahrens' credits include: co-book and lyrics for *A Christmas Carol* (ten years at Madison Square Garden); teleplay adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* (NBC/Hallmark Entertainment Special); mainstay songwriter/singer for *Schoolhouse Rock* and many other network shows. Emmy Award and four Emmy nominations.

Mr. Flaherty's credits include: concert premieres at the Hollywood Bowl and Boston's Symphony Hall; commissions from the Guggenheim Museum, Carnegie Hall and Symphony Space; incidental music for Neil Simon's *Proposals* on Broadway; musical score for *Loving Repeating: A Musical Of Gertrude Stein* (Chicago's Joseph Jefferson Award for Best New Musical.)

Ahrens and Flaherty are members of the Dramatists Guild of America, ASCAP, NARAS, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. They co-chair the Dramatists Guild Fellows program for emerging writers.

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 to 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 which 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 and so plantations began to change over other crops to the sugar cane. One of the major difficulties of producing sugar was the large work force needed to do physical labour 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 1400's. Britain, France, and Dutch followed suit by venturing to Africa to enslave local populations and returning them to the Caribbean to be used as slave labour. 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 *grand 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.

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 place 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*") 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 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 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 peasant 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.

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

Contextualizing *Once On This Island*

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 over nations controlling smaller islands.

Glossary

Antilles - a group of islands that form the greater part of the West Indies (or Caribbean)

Plantain - a type of fruit that resembles the banana but are less sugary and more starchy

Eucalyptus - a fast growing evergreen tree, famous for the medicinal oil that comes from its leaves

Mulatto - a person of mixed white and black ancestry

Jewel of the Antilles - another name for the island of Haiti when it was called Saint-Domingue

Napoleon - an Emperor of France from 1804 to 1815. He is famous for engaging in a series of conflicts now referred to as the Napoleonic Wars. During his rule, France had conquered a large portion of Europe including Spain, Poland, Italy, Switzerland, Croatia, and the Netherlands. When the Haitian population rebelled from French rule, Napoleon was in power and dispatched a large force of soldiers to quell the uprising. The Haitians overcame the French soldiers and gained their independence.

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 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, vodouists 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:

Agwe - also spelt Agoueh, is 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

Asaka - derived from Azaka Medeh, the patron of crops, agriculture, and farmers.

Erzulie - also spelt Ezili, is a loa of love, beauty, jewelry, dancing, luxury, and flowers.

Papa Ge - based on Papa Ghede, he is 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.

Discussion Questions

Listed here are a number of questions that may be helpful after you see the performance in fostering some discussion surrounding the themes in *Once On This Island*.

Questions

1. *Once On this Island* examines the place the gods have in the lives of the peasant class. Divide the class into 4 groups and ask them to research one of the gods and their origins in Vodou culture (Agwe, Asaka, Erzulie, and Papa Ge). Have them present their findings to the rest of the class.
2. Storytelling is an important element of Caribbean culture and a central theme in *Once On This Island*. How is storytelling apart of Canadian culture? Should we put more value and emphasis on this? Did someone tell you a memorable story that taught you a lesson or moral?
3. In the song "Waiting For Life," Ti Moune expresses her desire to find a greater purpose in life. What is a great aspiration in your own life? What have/will you do to help you achieve this?
4. The island of *Once On This Island* is divided by the wealthy mulatto class and the black peasant class. This social, economic, and political caste system creates tension and conflict between the islands population. Can you find an example of this kind of class system in our world today? Does Shadeism exist in Canada? What are some steps we can take as a community to break down these classes?
5. The characters of Ti Moune and Daniel are separated by class but are brought together by the power of love. Do you think love has the ability to supersede class and economic powers? In the world we live in today, do we still experience pressure to date and marry people within our own social circles?
6. The character of Andrea is generally seen as a barrier between the love of Ti Moune and Daniel. How did you view Andrea? Is she a villain (negative force) or simply a girl who following the traditions of her upbringing (for good and bad)?
7. At the end of the play, Ti Moune is granted a merciful death by the gods and turned into a tree to open the barrier between the grand hommes and peasants. The tree serves as a symbol to all people on the island to remember the story of Ti Moune and the power true love has. How effective is this symbolism? What are some other examples of symbols in our society? Do you think this is an effective way to end the play?
8. The writers of *Once On This Island* based the story on the novel *My Love, My Love* by Rosa Guy which was based on *The Little Mermaid*. How were these two stories similar? Did you find one to be more moving than the other?

Class Exercises

Exercise 1

Classes: Drama; History; Social Studies; English

Goal: Storytelling

Once On This Island explores the tradition of storytelling as both entertainment and as a way to transfer down history, values, and insight from generation to generation. At the end of the musical, the storytellers tell the story of Ti Moune and how a peasant girl proved the power of love could bring together a socially divided island. Even in our own world, we use stories to teach lessons and remind ourselves of those who came before.

For this exercise, divide the class into groups of 4-5 and choose a character from the musical. Through tableau and voice only, map out their story within the show. Be sure to identify a lesson or morale that can be learned from that character's specific story.

Exercise 2

Classes: Drama; History; Visual Arts

Goal: Costume Design

For this exercise, choose a god from the musical (Agwe, Asaka, Erzulie, or Papa Ge) and draw your own interpretation of what they should look like. Try to incorporate the type of god they are and their powers into the design.

Exercise 3

Classes: English, Drama, History

Goal: Adaptation

Many musicals are adapted from books, films, or even plays. Even *Once On This Island* is based on the novel *My Love, My Love; or, The Peasant Girl* by Rosa Guy which in itself was an adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's fairytale *The Little Mermaid*.

For this exercise, choose a favorite book, film, or fairytale that you would like see adapted into a musical. Explain why you think this would be a good choice and at least five moments in the show where you think the songs would be.

Exercise 4

Classes: Geography, History

Goal: European Colonialism

For this exercise, choose a European power and research its history of colonialism. Using a blank map, colour in where that country's empire stretched out to. Write a page long report to accompany your map answering the following questions: What territories did that country control? When did the colonization happen? What made each territory significant as a part of the nation's empire? Which territories are still under European jurisdiction today?