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## Bigger Is Better, for Once

By Robert Faires

Twenty-two folks in a football stadium may not be many, but on a stage, it's quite a crowd. And one you're not likely to see often outside of a musical production these days. The cost of producing theatre – never the most economical of enterprises – is now so exorbitant that companies struggle to break even with just two-handers and solo shows. Which makes it all the more remarkable that Coda Theater Project, a small, still new troupe without much in the way of financial resources, is mounting a version of Jean Giraudoux's *Ondine* that boasts almost two dozen players onstage – and another two dozen artists and technicians behind the scenes.

The genesis of this ambitious project was director Josie Collier, who's been aching to take a crack at *Ondine* since she worked on a production in high school. She developed her own specific vision of Giraudoux's fable about a water nymph's love for a mortal and in Coda Artistic Director Kate Meehan found a willing collaborator to help her realize it. Over many a late-night, caffeine-fueled conversation, the two began adapting the script and developing their strategy for staging a show so grand in scale. They gave themselves lots of time – casting the production a full year ago and building in three months of rehearsal – and created space for cast members to bond with one another and the production. In the fall they tapped various performers to lead workshops in subjects in which they had specialized knowledge – say, movement or mask-making – which made those artists the go-to people for certain aspects of the show and really added to their sense of ownership of it, says Meehan. And the pair regularly scheduled social events away from the theatre (read: bars) to encourage a closeness among the performers that would translate into an onstage ensemble feel central to Coda's aesthetic.

The lengthy preparation appears to have paid off. Meehan says that "considering how many people have been involved, this is the smoothest production I've ever been a part of." She allows that the process she and Collier established – clear lines of responsibility, respect for all contributions, "a safe place to play" – had an impact, but she's just as quick to give credit to the artists who came on board: "I don't think I've ever worked with a group of people who have been more willing to ask how they can help." Everyone's gotten involved, working out problems, seeking out set and costume pieces, "and they've all been just as excited as we were about finding the exact right thing. It really is a very humbling thing for the core artistic team to see everyone as excited about it as we are."

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*Ondine* runs June 30-July 16, Thursday-Saturday, 8pm, at the Blue Theater, 916 Springdale. For more information, call 474-TIXS or visit [www.codatheater.org](http://www.codatheater.org).

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