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Arts Review

By Barry Pineo

Ondine

Blue Theater, through July 16

Running Time: 2 hrs, 25 min

In the early 20th century, Jean Giraudoux ruled the theatre of Paris. Drawing on myth and legend, he created comedies and dramas that were, in a way, a style unto themselves, a kind of "magical realism" that blended characters from the every day with characters from the realm of imagination. In modern theatre, this mix is most often encountered in plays for children, as adult viewers seem most interested in acquiring enchantment of this sort from Disneyfied musicals. So, in its way, this production of Giraudoux's *Ondine* from Coda Theater Project is courageous. Giraudoux's plays are difficult on myriad levels, and productions of them are rare.

The story revolves around a knight, Hans de Seville, who wishes to marry the princess Berta. Rather than accept Hans' proposal outright, Berta sends him on a quest to the forest, telling him that if he returns from his journey without finding anything more desirable than she, then he may marry her. Of course, Hans finds not just temptation but something more desirable in the person of Ondine, a water spirit so attracted to the human world that she has taken on fleshly form and insinuated herself into the house of a poor fisherman and his wife. Hans is immediately enamored of her, as she is of him, and they wed and return to court. It probably goes without saying, but Berta, in typical hypocritical princess fashion, is not pleased with this turn of events, and a series of complications arise, most involving magic and spirits.

Giraudoux's mixing of the real and the fantastical is both the weakness and the strength of the production. Director Josie Collier handles the Blue Theater's thrust stage as if it's a proscenium, mostly staging the scenes flatly against the back wall. Many of the performances in the show echo this flatness; following what's going on takes some work on the part of the viewer, as there often seems to be a disconnect between what an actor is saying and the way it's said. Most of the performances amount to little more than assuming a single, self-conscious attitude, and this includes both the "realistic" and "fantastical" characters. While there are some successful performances – Alex Pippard presents an engaging and flamboyant Lord Chamberlain, and Ashley Moore is a fetching and often charming Ondine – the production most often succeeds when the actors tell the story through movement. While no credit is given in the program for choreography, the energetic, dynamic, well-executed dancing, most often performed by Moore and Andrea Broussard, Hallie Martin, and Collier as, respectively, the spirits of Fire, Wind, and Earth, is highly entertaining.

Seeing such a large group of primarily young people take the time and make the effort to produce a

classic like this is heartening. To achieve as much success as they have with this production is commendable. Perhaps with time and experience, Coda will become even more capable of exploiting its resources and potential in the service of plays as challenging as those of Giraudoux.

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