

Ensemble tells 'Island' tale with energy, feeling

By EVERETT EVANS
Houston Chronicle

On an island where the rivers run deep and the sparkling sea earns it the name Jewel of the Antilles, the peasants tell the tale of the dark-skinned orphan girl Ti Moune. One of their own, Ti Moune dared to love one of another kind — Daniel, son of the wealthy Beauxhommes, the coffee-with-cream-colored rulers of the island, who are descended from the French.

Finding Daniel's car wrecked in a storm one night, its driver near death, Ti Moune took him to her hut and nursed him back to health. After he was retrieved by his family and returned to the other side of the island, Ti Moune set out to find and win her love — sent by the island gods as a test to see if love could triumph over death.

Trinidadian author Rosa Guy made this tale real in her novel *My Love, My Love*, a Caribbean variation on Hans Christian Andersen's *Little Mermaid*.

Librettist Lynn Ahrens and composer Stephen Flaherty made it sing in their musical *Once on This Island*, a Tony-nominated hit of the 1990-91 Broadway season. With Ahrens' concise and affecting telling of its simple yet strong story, with Flaherty's bubbling and freshly melodic score, *Island* established the duo as one of the most promising words-and-music teams in ages — a promise that would be fully realized with their magnificent score for *Ragtime*.

First seen here in its national tour, *Island* returns in a home-grown rendition by the Ensemble Theater. Happily, the Ensemble delivers this little gem with energy and feeling. Despite minor flaws (a few moments when vocalists falter on top notes, the addition of a mood-breaking intermission), this rendition projects the show's joyous innocence, sweetness and charm.

Ahrens and Flaherty get the tone just right, keeping their score on point to tell the story, particularly in moving ballads such as *Forever Yours* and *The Human Heart*. Ed Muth's straightforward direction and Michael Garcia's graceful, natural choreography capitalize on those strengths, conveying key moments with intimacy and sincerity. Typical is *Ti Moune*, the trio in which the heroine must part from her adoptive parents.

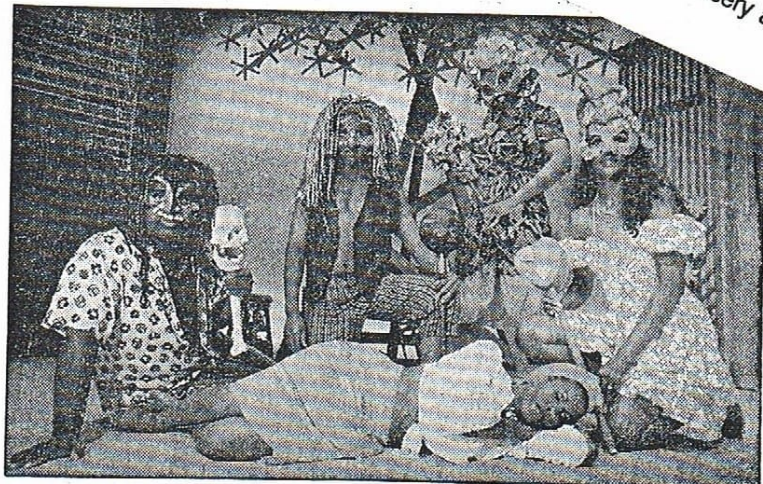
Theater review

Once on This Island

When: 7:30 p.m. Thursdays, 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 3 p.m. Sundays, through July 25

Where: The Ensemble Theater, 3535 Main

Tickets: \$14-\$19; 713-520-0055



D. Fahleson / Chronicle

In the imaginative *Mama Will Provide*, goddess of the earth Asaka accompanies Ti Moune on her journey through the island as the company joins in different strands of the lively song to represent Ti Moune's old friends — the birds, the trees, the frogs and the breezes.

The engaging cast enters into the spirit of the enterprise. Aisha Ussery sings Ti Moune in a sweet, light voice that could use a bit more power at some points. Yet she captivates with natural vivacity and charm in a touching portrayal — no more so than in her timid confrontation with Daniel at his engagement party.

Mozelle Moses Felder is hearty and wise as Ti Moune's adoptive mother, while Vincent Victoria makes a wary yet caring adoptive father. Tre Garrett is a refined yet remote Daniel, with Emily Carter haughty and elegant as his upper-class fiancée.

Loyce Washington's heart-stirring *Erzulie* (goddess of love) and Anthony Glover's robust, chortling *Papa Ge* (demon of death) command the stage, while Tamara Siler and Raul O. Edwards also score as the less dominating island forces of earth and water.

James Thomas' storybook setting, Claremarie Verheyen's colorful costumes, Manning Mpinduzi-Mott's carefully controlled lighting and Steven Jones' lively musical direction add solid production values.

Those who complain there is nothing on the current entertainment scene espousing constructive and humane values should support *Once on This Island* — a show that possesses them in abundance.

Once on This Island features, from left, Anthony Glover as Papa Ge, Raul O. Edwards as Agwe, Tamara Siler as Asaka, Loyce Washington (lying down) as Erzulie, and Aisha Ussery as Ti Moune.