



Oregon
Shakespeare
Festival

2022 Study Guide



Once on This Island book and Lyrics by Lynn Ahrens Music by Stephen Flaherty

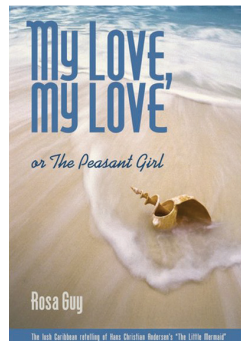
The OSF production of *Once on This Island* is set in Haiti. The story features the theme of resilience. Below are a few examples of the people and their contributions to the tremendous resilience of the Haitian people:

- The original inhabitants of Haiti were called the Taíno /Arwaka people – meaning “men of good”. They named the island Ayiti and were known to be gentle, peaceful and advanced culturally. Despite the near genocide of the people by the Spaniards, many intermarried, and today those who identify as Taíno live in the United States, Cuba, Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico.

- Toussaint Louverture (1774-1803), a strategic general, turned a slave revolt into a revolution. Under his leadership the Haitian Revolution was won, slavery abolished, and he ruled a free Saint-Dominique. This victory not only roused other enslaved African people, but served as a warning to European interests.

- Leader Jean-Jacques Dessalines declared independence on January 1, 1804, establishing the sovereign state of Haiti. Haiti formally declared freedom from France, becoming the first independent republic in the western hemisphere with a majority population of African descent.

In what ways is Ti Moune resilient in the play? Who else is resilient, and how?



Haiti has its own tradition of the mermaid called La Sirène.

La Sirène is one of the Lwa, a Haitian spirit of divine origin. She is a beautiful spirit of the water in the form of a woman with a fish tail. She has many qualities – here are a few:

She holds a mirror – a portal to the spirit world.

She has an extraordinary singing voice, and she owns a golden trumpet.

She rules over the musical arts.

Her husband is often considered to be Agwe, King of the Sea – He is also a character in the play.

For more information on La Sirène these and other websites provide information:

<https://wakingbear.org/la-sirene-the-mermaid-of-vodou/>

<https://occult-world.com/sirene-la/>

<http://ezilikonnen.com/lwa-voodoo-spirits/la-sirene/>

HISTORY OF THE PLAY

1836 – Hans Christian Anderson wrote the fairy tale *The Little Mermaid*.

1985 – Trinidad born Rosa Guy published *My Love, My Love: or The Peasant Girl*, an adaptation of Anderson’s fairy tale set in the French Antilles.

May of 1990 – Lynn Ahrens (book and lyrics) and Stephen Flaherty (music) developed the musical *Once on This Island*, inspired by Guy’s 1985 novel. They collaborated on other plays like *Ragtime*, *Seussical*, and *Anastasia*.

October of 1990 – *Once on This Island* premiered on Broadway and ran for 469 performances.

1995 – *Once on This Island* received an Olivier award for best new musical

2017 – *Once on This Island* was revived on Broadway and received a Tony award for Best Revival of a musical in 2018. The show was at the Circle in the Square Theater and had live animals, sand and the costumes and set evoked the aftermath of a hurricane.

Before seeing/reading the play

1. *Once on This Island* is based on the book *My Love, My Love: or The Peasant Girl* by Rosa Guy. These and other websites provide information:

<https://barnard.edu/news/once-island-and-my-love-my-love-or-peasant-girl-conversation> (Spoiler alert: this website will give away the ending)
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosa_Guy

2. The book *My Love, My Love: or The Peasant Girl* is based on *The Little Mermaid*, a Danish fairytale first published in 1837 and written by Hans Christian Anderson. These and other websites provide information:

https://www.worldoftales.com/fairy_tales/Hans_Christian_Andersen/Andersen_fairy_tale_31.html#gsc.tab=0

3. Haiti, located on the island of Hispaniola, is the backdrop for the book *My Love, My Love: or The Peasant Girl* and *Once on This Island*. These websites will provide resources for a quick insight into Haiti and Haitian culture:

<https://omnilogos.com/vodou-in-haiti/>
<https://www.britannica.com/place/Haiti>
<https://restavekfreedom.org/2017/12/01/5-important-aspects-haitian-culture/> https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_of_Haiti

4. A common discrimination found in many countries in the Western Hemisphere is that of Colorism. Colorism plays a prominent role in *Once on This Island*. Research the term Colorism. These and other websites provide information:

<https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-colorism-5077380>
<https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/fall-2015/whats-colorism>
<https://voices.no/index.php/voices/article/view/3156/3155>

5. In Haiti there is a clear division between the mulatto ruling class and the darker-skinned peasants. Research the Maroons. These and other websites provide information:
<http://countrystudies.us/haiti/24.htm>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_class_in_Haiti <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/218523?journalCode=ajs>
<https://library.brown.edu/haitihistory/2fvt.html#:~:text=Maroons%20were%20fugitive%20slaves%20who,the%20ofight%20for%20Haiti's%20independence>

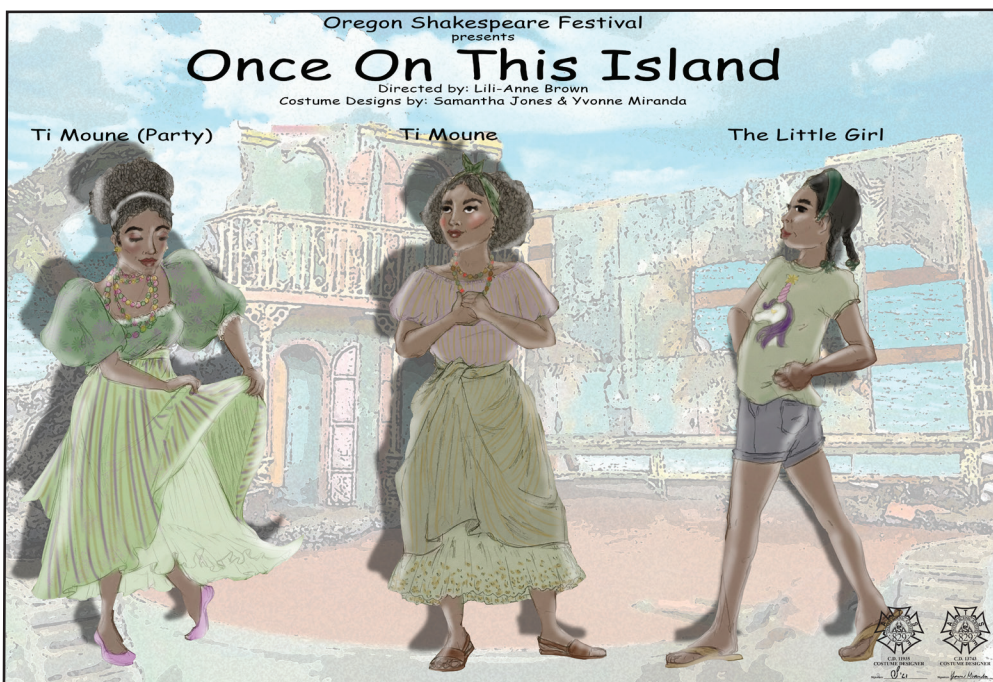
Once on This Island
begins with a storm.

6. Research music and dance that is specific to the Caribbean, the chain of the islands in the Caribbean Sea that includes Haiti. These and other websites and videos provide information:

<https://www.liveabout.com/music-from-the-caribbean-3552832>
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-XF3T76U-8o&list=RD1-XF3T76U8o&start_radio=1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=COfMzF9dr_k&list=PLnOSHj51Oh-8bJzVVi5D1CLEfzEMH8lqS

7. *Once on This Island* begins with a storm. Haiti often suffers from severe natural disasters. These and other websites provide information:

<https://news.miami.edu/rsmas/stories/2018/10/haiti-odealt-another-destructive-blow-by-mother-nature.html>
<https://www.paho.org/english/DD/PED/reginfohaiti.htm>



The Four Gods in *Once on This Island*:
Wikimedia Commons, Benjamin D. Esham

2022 *Once on This Island* costume design for
Ti Moune by Samantha C. Jones and Yvonne Miranda.

After Seeing/Reading the Play

1. Love, death, and nature are major themes that Ahrens and Flaherty use to tell this story. Where do these themes appear within *Once on This Island*? If you have seen the production how are the play's themes of love, death, and the island inhabitants' relationships with nature reflected in the set, costumes, and movement of the production?

2. Refer to your research on storms in Haiti. In what ways does the initial storm affect the characters within the play? Where else in the play does weather affect the objective of certain characters? When is it a hinderance? When does it help? In what ways is the weather a metaphor for what is happening for the characters?

3. Refer to your research on the ruling class and peasants of Haiti, colorism, and colonialization. At the beginning of the play, many storytellers are introduced. Who are the storytellers? Sometimes the characters in the play become storytellers and vice versa. In what ways do these storytellers help us understand the two different worlds of the play? What are the differences between the two worlds?

4. Refer to the sidebar on Lwa. In what ways do the gods affect the journey of the story? What are the power dynamics between the gods? How do the power dynamics affect what happens in the play? How does each god's specific power contribute to the events of the play? In what ways are the characters' successes and failures because of the gods' intervention? In what ways are the characters' successes and failures because of their own actions?

5. Refer to your research on music and dance of the Caribbean. How do the members of the lower class use the Caribbean music and dance? How does the use of music and dance affect the lower class? How do the members of the higher class use the Caribbean music and dance? How does the use of music and dance affect the higher class? How does music and dance bring the two opposing sides of the island together or tear them apart?

6. Ti Moune sees the white car racing by. How does that car change the course of her life? What does the car symbolize to her?

7. Refer to your research on colonialization and colorism. Why is there constant conflict between the rich and the poor class? How does class and colorism effect Ti Moune and Daniel? Ti Moune and Andrea? Tonton and Mama? How does Ti Moune's fate in the end help or hinder this conflict? In what ways is the conflict over at the end of the play? In what ways will the conflict continue?

8. What are the ways in which love is manifested in the play? What kind of love do Ti Moune and Daniel share and how does that love manifest itself? In what ways do Mama and Tonton show their love toward Ti Moune? Toward each other? How do the gods (in their own way) show their love to their people? How do the people on all parts of the island show their love toward their island? Toward their music? How do they use music to show love?

How do the people of the island show their love toward their island?

9. "Ti Moune" means orphan. In what ways is Ti Moune alone in the world? In what ways is she not alone? Who comes to her aid in her lifetime? What choices does Ti Moune make that change her status as an orphan? In what ways does she remain alone?

10. Refer to the research on the ruling class and peasants. Ti Moune is considered an outsider when she arrives to meet Daniel. In what ways is she treated as an outsider? Who in the upper-class community treats her well? How does she navigate being an outsider? Who else is an outsider and where? How do they navigate their situation?

11. In what ways is this musical relevant to an American audience in 2022?

12. If you are seeing *The Tempest*: Both plays begin with a storm. Compare and contrast the affect of the storm on the characters and events of the play.



2022 *Once on This Island* set rendering. Designed by Arnel Sancianco



2022 *Once on This Island* costume rendering for the Gods by Samantha C. Jones and Yvonne Miranda.

Vodou and Lwa

- The Yoruba people are the original creators of the rich religion that is known as Voudou and are considered the creators of Haitian Voudou, Candomblé in Brazil and Santería in Cuba. The Yoruba people kept their religious practice and carried it with them in their hearts, despite having been taken from their homes and brought to the Americas through slave trade. This complex and vibrant religion is particular to specific places, so there is no one experience of Voudou, and there are many rituals and practices. Some general information helpful to this play is:

- In Haitian Vodou, Lwa are spirits, both of human and divine origin, created by God (Bondye) to assist the living in their daily life.

- There are many Lwa, but some are of special note to *Once on This Island*:

Agwe: Rules over the sea, fish, and aquatic plants; patron Lwa to fishermen and sailors.

Azaka: Spirit of the Harvest, depicted as a country bumpkin who loves to eat.

Papa Gede: Spirit of death and resurrection.

Erzulie Frida: Spirit of love, beauty, jewelry, dancing, luxury, and flowers.

As you watch or read the play: How do the Gods of the play influence the action of the characters?

For a deeper dive on Voudou and Lwa go to:

<https://omnilogos.com/vodou-in-haiti/>

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