

[HOME](#) [PAST COLUMNS](#) [ABOUT](#)

DALLAS

by John Garcia

Once on This Island

Also see John's review of [Dirty Blonde](#).

In 1991 the musicals *The Will Roger Follies*, *Miss Saigon*, *The Secret Garden*, and *Once on This Island* were in contention for the coveted Tony award for Best Musical. I remember being totally drawn in by the performance of "Mama Will Provide" by the cast of *Once on This Island*, with Liliias White and LaChanze. Sadly, this intimate musical lost all eight of its nominations, including Best Musical (that award went to Tommy Tune's *The Will Rogers Follies*).

Island's score is written by Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty, the duo responsible for one of the most gorgeous scores ever written for the stage, *Ragtime*. The island score is lush with layers of congo drums and other tropical instruments that bring the score its rich, Caribbean flavor.

Once on This Island is a musical about love, loss, and redemption performed by a group of Caribbean peasants as they wait out a violent storm. To calm the frights of a little girl, they present a tale about Ti Moune, a young orphan girl saved by the gods after a horrible storm. She grows up to fall in love with a rich man of royalty and the gods decide to test this girl and the ultimate strength of her love.

It was my first visit as an audience member to TFM Productions, a new metroplex company, and what a beautiful journey I had revisiting *Once on This Island*.

This production is presented in the small, intimate space of the Trinity Arts Center, but this does not stop the creative production staff from providing a solid evening of musical theater. The minute you walk in, you are transported into a

lush, tropical island. There is a light mist that floats through the sharp rays of color from the lighting instruments. A unique waterfall is made of white tulle with dark blue lighting shining on it. The walls are covered in green materials and designs resembling island foliage and the village itself. Scenic & Set Designers Keith and Andrea Redmon have created one of the most detailed and colorful sets I have seen for a small company. It is grand!

Director Guinea Bennett-Price has assembled a high power cast of talent and dedication for this production. Bennett-Price keeps the action, pace, and energy flowing throughout the evening, never letting it wane or dip. Her blocking is commendable due to the fact that this is a thrust set, with audience on three sides, and she keeps the actors and action shifting to various areas to allow all audience members to see it.

Angel Edmond Giles' choreography is without a doubt, one of the finest choreographic works for a musical that I have seen this season. Giles uses the cast to provide another layer of subtext and storytelling within the score's lyrics with his ingenious creation of dance. The company is constantly moving, but with dance or with small gestures in hands, arms, and legs that provide visually delightful dance moments. The cast is seventeen strong - that's a lot for the small space, but this does not present a problem at all in Giles' hands.

Adam Wright's musical direction is to be applauded. There are no body mikes to speak of, so Wright keeps the volume of his highly professional four piece orchestra right on the mark. But when the dance numbers are presented on the stage, Wright and his band let it go, and it is grand and toe tapping. Wright's musical direction is a major triumph of this production.

Shawn-Adrian DeCou and Music Theatre of Wichita's design of the costumes and masks are rich in hue and cut from soft, flowing fabrics. The four massive headdresses the four gods wear are grand and majestic. The small pieces to signify the rich Beauxhommes and the costumes made of beads and feathers for various characters add to the actor's secondary information of their characters.

Hugh Johnson's lighting design is both sumptuous and dazzling. You see his first class work the minute you walk in, with colors of fuchsia, green apple, and dark blue shining throughout the audience and stage, even before the show has started. Other impressive design elements in lighting include the lightning effects for the storm, the glittering array of colors sprayed on the cast during the "ballroom" number, and the various pools of color and light that bring secondary emotion to the actor's work on stage that is pure magic. Kudos must also go to follow spot operators who had to constantly change color gels throughout the evening to stay in tempo with the emotion - bravo!

Kia Dawn Fulton leads the large cast as Ti Moune. I had already seen Ms. Fulton in her star making performance in Lyric Stage's *Abyssinia* and now with this performance, she leaves me saying this: Ms. Fulton has achieved in giving the BEST performance of an actress in a metroplex musical so far this season in not one, but two musicals! She slides easily into the heart and skin of Ti Moune. She is playful, coy, strong, and innocent all at once. The actress shows great compassion and sympathy not only in her acting, but also from her beautiful, expressive face and almond dark eyes. She never shows false commitment or stock characterization in her acting craft; she instead throws her heart and soul out onto the leaf painted stage for the audience to explore and feel. Then there's her voice - her crystal clean soprano voice crests on a glossy vibrato. She also comes equipped with one hell of a belt that hits the back of the wall.

Yoland Davis as the goddess Erzulie sings one of my personal favorite songs in the bulk of the Ahrens/Flaherty score, which is "The Human Heart." This actress/singer brings deep compassion and truth to the lyrics of the song, but also sings with golden vocals that float on the music with superb technique and emotion. It is a musical highlight of the evening, thanks to Davis's talent in both song and acting.

Markus Lloyd delivers a dark and evil performance as the god, "Papa Ge". Lloyd wears a head dress that is overflowing in lavender and purple plumes and feathers. He again brings intense energy to the role, as well as his booming belt and stage presence. Lloyd adds another credit to show why he is one our most treasured performers in the metroplex talent

pool.

Nedra James has another of my favorite songs, the belting "Mama Will Provide." This big, boisterous number is a major challenge for any singer. James performs the solo with the right dose of energy and fun sass, but alas, lacks the vocals to do the song complete justice. The evening I saw the show, James cracked, or pulled back from the crescendos of the song. It doesn't help that she jumps into her head voice; her lower register notes are strong and balanced, but the actress simply does not have the singing voice requiree to bring the house down, though she is bewitching and I enjoyed her deeply.

There is laudable and splendid work from the entire company, including Chimberly Carter and Wilbur Penn as Ti Moune's adopted parents; Cedric Neal as the male romantic lead, Daniel; Beverly Delaney as the cold, ice princess Andrea; Marvin Joshua as the water god Agwe; Ty Foard as Armand; and Paloma Nance as the Young Ti Moune.

TFM productions has brought to metroplex audiences a rare and sparkly gem of a musical to enjoy. Some theaters are determined to become stagnated and not test themselves by attempting to mount new or seldom-produced musicals. Actors and audiences are stuck in glue with yet another mounting of such musicals as *The Sound Of Music*, *Annie*, or some other ancient musical that has been done to death here in the metroplex. Thankfully we have TFM Productions taking the risk (both artistically and financially) of mounting a musical that is hardly ever done, winding up with one of the truly outstanding and noble musicals presented this season.

The local production runs through Feb. 24 with Thursday, Friday and Saturday performances at 8 p.m. and Sunday shows begin at 2:30 p.m. Performances are staged at the Trinity River Art Center in the Kim Dawson Theatre, 2600 North Stemmons Freeway, Dallas. Tickets are \$20 and can be purchased by calling the TFM Productions box office at 214-630-7092.

Once on This Island

Book & Lyrics by Lynn Ahrens; Music by Stephen Flaherty
TFM Productions

Director.....Guinea Bennett-Price Music
Director.....Adam Wright Choral
Direction.....Dion Magee
Choreography.....Angel Edmond Giles Stage
Management.....Daylene Ross

CAST

Ti Moune.....Kia Dawn Fulton
Daniel.....Cedric Neal Papa
Ge.....Markus Lloyd
Agwe.....Marvin Joshua
Asaka.....Nedra James
Erzulie.....Yoland James Mama
Euralie.....Chimberly Carter Tonton
Julian.....Wilbur Penn
Andrea.....Beverly Delaney
Armand.....Ty Foard Little Ti
Moune.....Paloma Nance
Storytellers.....Selma Pinkard, Latoya Hill, Joi
C. Jackson, Mary J. Kelly, Valencia Lee, Jerry Pinkard.

--[John Garcia](#)

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