

Weston's show of island love is a hit

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Special to the Banner

WESTON — It happens during every theatre season. Sometimes even more than once.

This time the lucky recipient is the Weston Playhouse, this state's oldest professional theatre. Weston has the temerity to present "Once On This Island" in a production that is so good one can overlook the obvious faults and enjoy the show for what it is, extremely compelling theatre.

"Once On This Island" is a joyous musical experience with book and lyrics by Lynn Ahrens and music by Stephen Flaherty. In addition, it is a celebration of the music and the culture of the French Antilles, where the play is set. This production features a superior African American equity cast largely imported from New York.

The story line is really quite simple. A baby is found on the island and eventually named Ti Moune. One day Ti Moune discovers a stranger, saves his life and falls in love with him. Daniel, the young man, seems to return Ti Moune's love, but one day he is spirited away. The young girl vows to seek him out, but is warned against this action by her parents and the islanders. It seems Daniel is nobility and Ti Moune is but jungle peasantry. A lovely ballad, "Ti Moune" explores the harsh continuum. Ti Moune goes on to search anyway; the result is a haunting fable which unfolds this folk opera. To realize both the simplicity and profundity of this native experience, director Jim Weaver has assembled a stellar cast of 11 actors, who seem to best exemplify the true



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Weston Playhouse continues its season opener "Once on This Island" through July 3.

meaning of ensemble acting. For example, Laiona Weaver and Dwayne Grayman are Ti Moune's adoptive parents, and they share haunting moments of both doubt and reassurance about her.

Ti Moune is capably played by Carla Hugrove, who projects a magnetic personality, yet is open to the vulnerabilities of youth. Hugrove has a strong, if sometimes shrill voice, but she brings conviction to her role. As Ti Moune's would-be lover, Daniel, Caesar Samsyos makes the most of a role that is seemingly mysterious. One must also mention Vinson German, who exudes great presence as the Demon of Death.

He takes over the stage with a strong singing voice and agile physical movements. Finally, 8-year-old Aranzha Farrow plays the very young Ti Moune and eventually Little Moune, to whom the islanders tell their story. Farrow shows excellent

poise for a very young star.

"Once On This Island" is also aided by a highly imaginative, simple set which respects various locations of this French Antilles island, the set was designed by Bryan Johnson. He also uses a small turntable which seems lost during most of the proceedings. The timely and evocative lighting effects are the work of Diane Ferry Williams while the attractive period costumes come from the creative mind of Alan Yeong.

All in all, "Once On This Island" is a show to remember because all the theatrical elements work. I doubt there were many French Antilles aficionados in attendance when I saw the show, but the waves of applause and multiple curtain calls certainly attested to a job well done.

The play continues through July 3.

For information and reservations call the box office at (802) 824-5288.