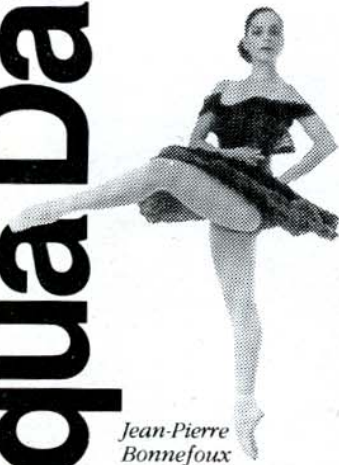


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(photo by Steven Caras)

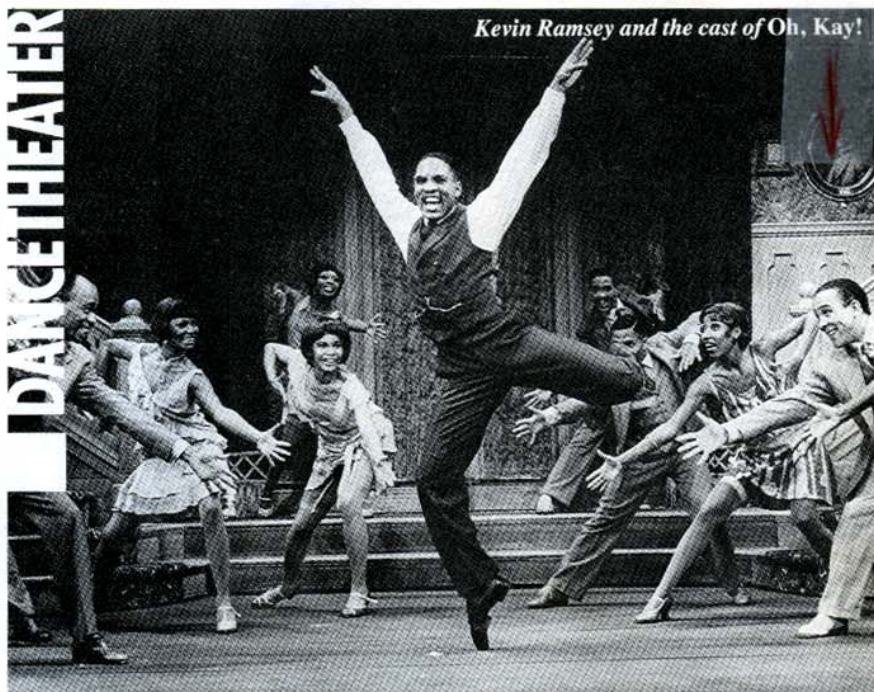
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DANCE THEATER



Kevin Ramsey and the cast of *Oh, Kay!*

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## Broadway in Brief

**O**n the surface, *Once on This Island*—the (long) one-act faux naïf musical set in the Caribbean—is merry, upbeat, and uplifting, full of tinselly costume effects, story-theater staging, and forthright performances.

Actually, it's resoundingly ersatz—a criticism one can take or leave, depending on one's lust for authenticity. Lynn Ahrens's book and lyrics and Stephen Flaherty's music (the work is "based" upon a novel by Rosa Guy) tell the *Giselle*-type story of Ti Moune, an orphaned peasant girl (darkly complected) who saves the life of Daniel, a son of the ruling class—a "grand homme"—she pulls from a car wreck. She nurses him back to health; trudges the island to find him after he is taken home; offers up her body as a tonic for his total recovery; and dreams pathetic, predictable dreams. He enjoys her services but marries his longtime fiancée, a (pale-skinned) well-educated young woman of his own class. "Some girls you marry," he sings after Ti Moune has rollicked around on the ground with her dress up around her hips, "and some girls you love."

After much bathos, Ti Moune tries to drown herself (offstage), but the conspiring gods (Love, Earth, Water, and Death) who have propelled this whole affair turn her into a tree that grows at the gates to Daniel's family mansion (called a "hotel"

in the musical—a revealingly careless failure to translate the French word *hôtel*, meaning private residence). We find out in a fast denouement that Daniel's son will someday fall in love with another peasant girl under the branches of this tree, and that they will marry.

The attitude conveyed is that it is *bad* of Daniel not to marry the simple and sensual Ti Moune and that it is *good* to be like Ti Moune. Thus *Once on This Island* seems to be about a liberation of the heart, if not the mind.

Graciela Daniele has directed and choreographed one of those can't-tell-the-story-from-the-dance musicals, with narrative, song, and choreography one seamless device. She follows Tommy Tune at a considerable distance in this genre, buoyed by a fleeting ingenuity and a well-placed reliance on the energy of her cast—and also by what appears to be a reliance on the very fact of their blackness to ratify, as it were, the proceedings. But it didn't seem to me that there was much that was really "Caribbean" about *Once on This Island*, or much that was really sexy, either. Close your ears for a minute and conjure up old Harry Belafonte records, or close your eyes and rerun Katherine Dunham in the film *Stormy Weather*. There's nothing like the real thing, is there?

Nancy Dalva