

# The Little Mermaid



**AUDIENCE CONTEXT GUIDE  
for Olney Theatre Center's  
2014 production**

# How to Use This Guide

“The Little Mermaid” is a story that has woven its way into the hearts of people of all ages and cultures, evolving and gaining new meaning from 1830s Denmark to the stage in front of you. We hope that tracing the journey of this story will allow you a glimpse at the worlds it has inhabited and the chords it has struck with its audiences.

In these 16 pages, you’ll find information about the development of the story, from Hans Christian Andersen to the Disney animated classic to the Broadway stage, as well as a peek at some of the ways Olney Theatre Center’s production is unique. Each of the artists along the way has contributed to the show in its current form: a story of unexpressed love,

of the thirst for adventure and acceptance, of the changing relationship between parents and children, and of the childlike wonder we find in the places we’ve only ever imagined.

And of course, we hope you’ll have some fun along the way, with puzzles on page 5.

For even more insight into the world of the play, including pictures, videos, and articles, visit our blog at [www.olneylittlemermaid.wordpress.com](http://www.olneylittlemermaid.wordpress.com). If you have any questions or comments about this Context Guide, the blog, or the production itself, please send us a message at [education@olneytheatre.org](mailto:education@olneytheatre.org).

At left: sketch by scenic designer James Fouchard.

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# Hans Christian Andersen and the Origins of *The Little Mermaid*

## EARLY LIFE

Hans Christian Andersen was born in a one-room house in Odense, Denmark in 1805. His father read to him from *The Arabian Nights*, but died when he was 11. His mother apprenticed him to a weaver, then a tobacconist, then a tailor.

At 14, Andersen left to seek his fortune in Copenhagen instead. In Copenhagen, Andersen struggled to make ends meet for three years, singing in the Royal Theater's boys' choir until his voice changed, then attempting careers in acting and ballet. However, Andersen was an awkward performer and unsuccessful.

## EDUCATION AND FIRST PUBLICATIONS



When Andersen was 17, Jonas Collin, a director of the Royal Theater, read a play he had written and saw his potential. Collin received funding from King Frederik

VI to educate Andersen. Andersen's work was first published in 1829, in Danish. In 1833 he received royal funding to travel in Germany, France, Switzerland, and Italy. He wrote about his travels in addition to the poems, plays, and novels that he produced.

'The Little Mermaid' ... is ... the only one of my works that has affected me while I was writing it."

— Hans Christian Andersen, 1837

## FAIRY TALES

In 1835, Andersen published *Fairy Tales for Children*, his first four fairy tales. Although he had written a successful novel, his first two booklets of fairy tales were poorly received. In 1837, his third booklet included "The Little Mermaid," and his work became beloved. He ultimately wrote 160 more of the stories, including "The Emperor's New Clothes," "Thumbelina," "The Snow Queen," "The Ugly Duckling," "The Princess and the Pea," and "The Little Match Girl."

## ANDERSEN'S LITTLE MERMAID

Andersen acknowledged that "The Little Mermaid" was a deeply personal story for him, a man whose personal life was marked by a series of unrequited loves. In his original tale, the little mermaid hopes not only to live on land and marry the prince, but to gain an immortal soul. Ultimately, though, he marries another woman, believing that she is the one who rescued him. In order to return to the sea, the little mermaid must kill the prince, but because she cannot, she dissolves into seafoam. As an air spirit, she has the opportunity to earn a soul with 300 years of good works.

The story of a mermaid falling in love with a human was familiar, the most popular example being de la Motte Fouque's *Undine* (1811). However, the mermaid's ability to gain a soul even after failing to win the prince was unique to Andersen.

*Continued on Page 4*

## Continued from Page 3

In 1836, while writing "The Little Mermaid," Andersen also wrote to his newly-married friend—one object of his unspoken affection—Edvard Collin. Andersen described his relationship to love as "gazing on the promised land which I shall never reach." What he offers in his ending to "The Little Mermaid," though, is the path he took: immortality, in his case through his writing, as a replacement for romance.

## WIDER AUDIENCES

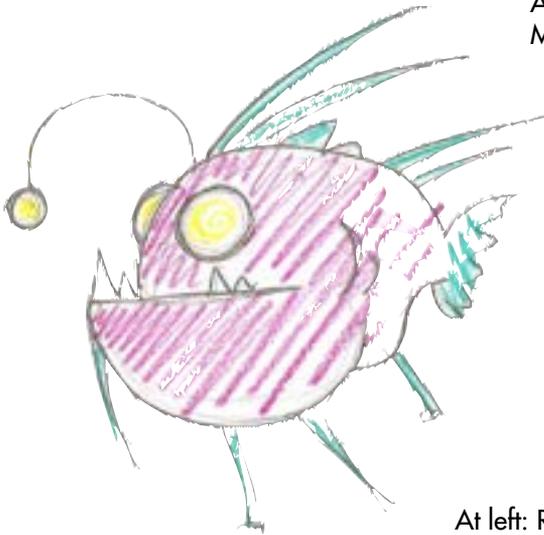
In 1845, four translations of Andersen's fairy tales were published. His stories were well received in English, and in 1847 he traveled to England, going to parties for intellectuals hosted by the Countess of Blessington. At one of these, he befriended Charles Dickens. Ten years later, when he visited Dickens, Andersen overstayed his welcome, and Dickens ended their correspondence.

## LATER YEARS

In 1872, the last year in which he published new fairy tales, Andersen injured himself falling out of bed, and soon after, he began to show signs of liver cancer. As his health declined, he made extended visits to the Melchiors, friends who cared for him at their home in Copenhagen. He died there in 1875. He was considered a national treasure in Denmark, and a statue of him stands in the Rosenborg Castle Gardens in Copenhagen.



Above: Hans Christian Andersen with the Melchior family in 1867.



At left: Rendering sketch by puppet designer Dre Moore.

# Puzzles

Word

Search

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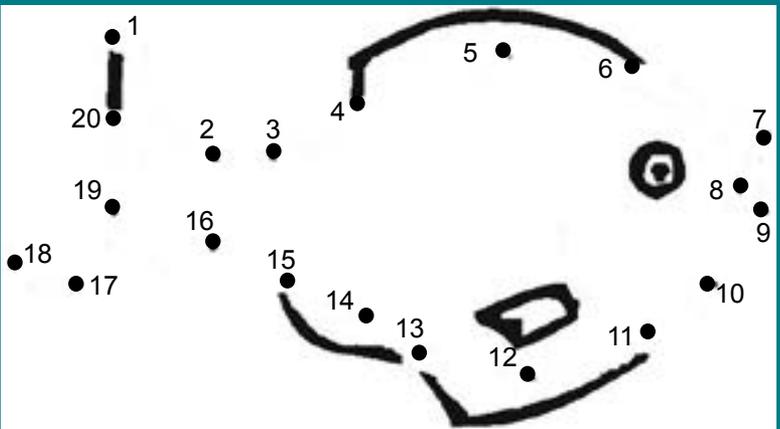
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# Animation to Stage

Excerpts from *Little Mermaid* bookwriter Doug Wright's interview with Peter D. Kramer for "In The Wings" on theater.lohublogs.com.

**Peter D. Kramer: Do you remember the first time you saw *The Little Mermaid*?**

Doug Wright: I didn't see it in the theater. But all my friends had told me it had such an exuberant Broadway-style score, and as a person of the theater, that made me want to see it. I remember sort of skulking into the children's animated films aisle and renting it. I was captivated and utterly charmed by it, and it lodged itself in my heart and has been a favorite of mine ever since.

**Did you have any misgivings or hesitation about working with Disney to bring *The Little Mermaid* to Broadway?**

Truthfully, I actively lobbied for the job. Tom Schumacher [the head of Disney Theatricals] had me into his office and said he'd seen my other work and wanted to talk about future possible collaborations. And I was brazen enough to say 'What's up with "The Little Mermaid"—because it's always been my favorite of the Disney animated musicals, and if it ever made the leap to the stage I'd love to be part of it.' So he gave me the job.

**You've written two rather documentary shows—*I Am My Own Wife* and *Grey Gardens*—about characters who could not be less like Ariel. Is there any theme that unites them, other than the man who wrote the book?**

I think they're all, pardon the pun, fish-out-of-water stories, about people who for some reason are uncomfortable in their own skin and have to go on remarkable journeys in order to reinvent

themselves.

***Grey Gardens* had a cult-like following, those who had seen and loved the original documentary film. You've got an even bigger cult with *The Little Mermaid*, people who know what they want to see when they come in.**

As different as those two projects seem, in each instance I was taking material that is deeply beloved by a really ardent and very vocal fan base and I was reinventing it for a new medium. So it was the same responsibility, to make it work on stage as a craftsman but also to honor the memory that people have of the original.

**You've made Prince Eric less of a dud than he was in the film.**

Ariel yearns for a bigger, better world where she can realize her own potential, and along the way she picks up the happy dividend of Prince Eric. We wanted to make sure that Eric had his own songs and his own dilemmas in the world and that there were very specific reasons why he and Ariel were attracted to each other. We ultimately decided that Eric's a very physical guy, he loves sailing the high seas and he needed a girl who could not only keep up with him but also match him in every regard. In Ariel he finds his equal, which is important in 2007.

**Some could look at Ariel as just a girl who gets her guy.**

Her ambition needs to be greater. It's really to break free from the confines of her family and forge the kind of life that she feels is truest to who she is.

**For *Grey Gardens* and *I Am My Own Wife*, you had interviews to pore over to bring your characters to life. With *The Little Mermaid*, you had a movie and the original Hans Christian Andersen story, which had been wildly adapted in the making of the film. Did you find that at all limiting?**

As a writer, to be given a gallery of compelling characters and a strong and interesting narrative with all of the requisite plot complications at the top, that was gift. Those are usually the hardest things to achieve, and I got handed those on a platter! So it was very welcome and I relied on that a lot. The book to the musical owes an enormous debt to the original screenwriters [Roger Allers, Ron Clements and John Musker].

**What is it like to write for a sea gull?**

This is the first theater piece I've ever worked on that has tap-dancing sea gulls, confetti cannons and a giant bubble machine. And I gotta tell ya: I think every show benefits from a giant bubble machine and a few tap-dancing sea gulls. I'm certainly putting them in my future works.

**Were there things that you felt you had to address with *The Little Mermaid*?**

I felt that the things that most excited me about the movie that I wanted to reiterate in the stage version were issues of tolerance, because one thematic through-line of the film is the undersea world and the human world and how they're at war and each carries misperceptions about the other. Ariel becomes a passionate conduit who brings the two together and allows them to find an equilibrium. Also, a parent-child story that asks basic questions: 'What's the

most responsible way to parent? To keep your child safe and close to you at any cost or to endorse the sometimes threatening risks they take to realize their own identity?' And which is the more courageous act as a parent?

**Still, it is a show for children.**

It's like the songs are these gorgeous, beautifully realized quilt pieces, and my job was to stitch them together as effortlessly as possible" — Doug Wright, 2007

But what delights me is how sophisticated children are as viewers. When we tried out the show in Denver, we had the opportunity to bring about 20 kids together in a room who were between the ages of 8 and 12. And

we asked them what the themes of the story were and which characters they connected to. They were astonishingly astute, and it was clear that they hungered for real content, too. They didn't just want firecrackers and a lot of noise. They wanted a substantive story that they could emotionally connect to. They're demanding audiences in their own right.

**Did you ever feel that, because the music is so central to the success of the show, you had to get out of the way of the songs?**

The music is a wonderful guide. It's like the songs are these gorgeous beautifully realized quilt pieces, and my job was to stitch them together as effortlessly as possible. But the music also does so much of my heavy lifting. The songs establish character, they let you know what a character's innermost desires are, they explicate the story in a really smart way, and they contribute to the joyous tone of the piece. So it's not so much staying out of their way as knowing just how deeply they're serving my task and exploiting them for all they're worth.

# Mermaid Stories



Mermaid princess Suvan-namaccha appears in Thai versions of the Ramayana, impeding Hindu god Hanuman until she falls in love with him.



Professional "mermaids," popular in the 1940s American South, perform underwater routines while bound in costume mermaid tails.

Hans Christian Andersen publishes *The Little Mermaid*.

1837

1811

*Undine* by Freidrich de la Motte Fouqué was Andersen's biggest literary influence for "The Little Mermaid."

1901

John Williams Waterhouse's painting, "A Mermaid."

c.  
1000  
BCE

Assyrian myths feature goddess Atargatis transforming into a mermaid after accidentally killing her human beloved.



# Through The Ages



Disney releases *The Little Mermaid*. In 2007, it reaches Broadway.



1961

Shirley Temple stars as the Little Mermaid on her TV show, *Shirley Temple's Storybook*.

1989

The musical *Once On This Island*, more faithful to the Andersen story, opens on Broadway.

1990

Hayao Miyazaki's *Ponyo* tells the story of a fish-girl who wants to become human.

2008



Starbucks' logo is a two-tailed mermaid, derived from a 1480 illustration of Melusine, a sea spirit who married a human.

# Creator Bios

**Alan Menken (composer)** was born in New York City. He began at NYU as a pre-med student, but changed his major to music. In 1972, he married Janis Roswick-Menken. They have two daughters. His first professional production, with Howard Ashman, was an adaptation of Kurt Vonnegut's *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* in 1979. In 1982, their *Little Shop of Horrors* achieved great success.



Menken composed the music in Disney animated films *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, *Pocahontas*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *Hercules*, *Home on the Range*, and *Tangled*,

as well as live-action films *Newsies* and *Enchanted*. His collaborators include Steven Schwartz, Tim Rice, David Zippel, and Glenn Slater, in addition to Ashman. He won Oscars for Best Original Score and Best Original Song for *The Little Mermaid* ("Under The Sea"), *Beauty and the Beast* ("Beauty and the Beast"), *Aladdin* ("A Whole New World") and *Pocahontas* ("Colors of the Wind"). He holds the record for the most Oscars won by a living person.

Menken received many Tony nominations for his scores, but did not win until *Newsies* in 2012. He has won 11 Grammy awards, including Song of the Year in 1993 for "A Whole New World."

**Howard Ashman (original lyricist)**

was born in Baltimore. After college, he spent two years in the Peace Corps in Burkina Faso, then became the artistic director of the WPA Theater in New York. He wrote plays including *Cause Maggie's Afraid of the Dark*, *Dreamstuff*, and *The Confirmation*.



His first musical, with Alan Menken, was *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, followed by *Little Shop of Horrors*. Ashman also collaborated with Marvin Hamlisch as lyricist, bookwriter, and director on *Smile*, and wrote "Once Upon A Time in New York City" from *Oliver and Company* with Barry Mann. From this beginning with Disney, Ashman and Menken wrote scores for *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*. Ashman wrote "Arabian Nights," "Friend Like Me," and "Prince Ali" for *Aladdin*, which Menken and Tim Rice finished after his death.

In 1988, Howard Ashman was diagnosed with HIV. When working on *Beauty and the Beast*, Disney animators came to Ashman's house to accommodate his deteriorating health. Shortly after finishing *Beast*, Ashman died as a result of complications from AIDS. He was 40 years old. His second Academy Award was awarded after his death and accepted by his partner, Bill Lauch.

**Doug Wright (bookwriter)** was born in Dallas. He graduated from Yale in 1985 and got an MFA from NYU. In 1995, his play *Quills* premiered at Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company. It went on to be produced at New York Theatre Workshop and was adapted for film in 2000.

In 2003, his play *I Am My Own Wife* was produced by Playwrights Horizons, then transferred to Broadway. Wright won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and the Tony Award for Best Play for that play.



Wright wrote his first book for a musical in 2009, *Grey Gardens*, based on the 1975 documentary. After *The Little Mermaid*, Wright wrote the book for *Hands on a Hardbody*. That show reached Broadway in 2013 after premiering at the La Jolla Playhouse, which commissioned both *Hardbody* and Wright's adaptation of *Creditors* by August Strindberg.

In 2008, Wright married David Clement. Wright serves on the boards of New York Theatre Workshop and Yaddo artists' community. He has also written pilots for television and film screenplays.

Watermark at top left: paint elevation by scenic designer James Fouchard.

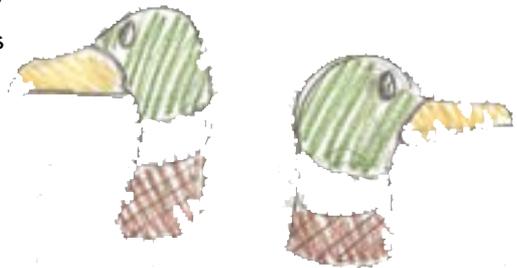
At right: Puppet rendering by designer Dre Moore.

**Glenn Slater (lyricist for additional songs)** was born in Brooklyn but raised in New Jersey. He graduated from Harvard in 1990. His first lyrics appeared Off-Broadway in *New Yorkers*, which was produced by Manhattan Theatre Club in 2001. His lyrics have appeared in the Ringling Brothers & Barnum and Bailey Circus.



He began collaborating with Alan Menken for the film *Home on the Range* in 2004. They worked together on *Sister Act the Musical* as well as *The Little Mermaid* and *Leap of Faith*. Slater wrote lyrics and co-wrote the book for Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Love Never Dies*. His work on *Love Never Dies* was criticized and substantially rewritten by Charles Hart.

With his wife, Wendy Leigh Wilf, Slater wrote *Beatsville*, which was produced at the 2008 NAMT Festival of New Musicals. Slater and Wilf have two sons. Disney's 2010 film *Tangled* also features lyrics by Slater. He won a Grammy Award for "I See The Light" from *Tangled* in 2012.



# ARTIST SPOTLIGHT:

## Pei Lee, Costume Designer

**Susanna Pretzer, Dramaturg:**  
**What is the most exciting part of designing costumes for *The Little Mermaid*?**

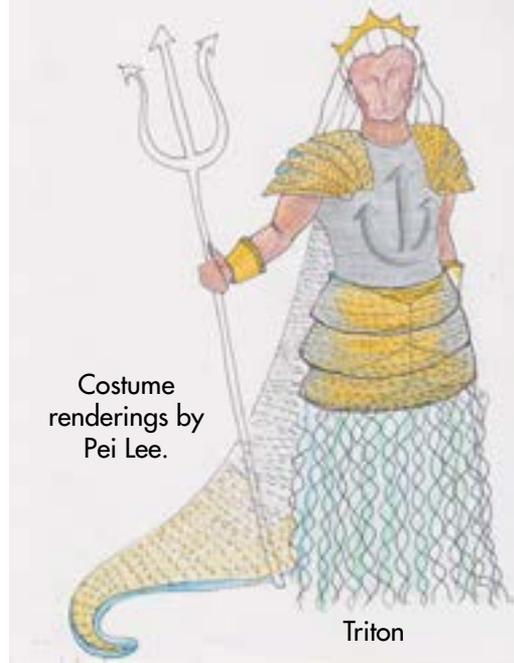
Pei Lee, Costume Designer: To take a well-known story and its characters and make them your own (while still honoring the iconic looks that most audience members have come to expect).

**What are the biggest challenges in costuming *The Little Mermaid*? How are you approaching them?**

The biggest challenge was figuring out how to create the look for the mermaids: the illusion of having no legs, but tails.



The key was to capture the essence of the mermaid. Because our production embraces the theatricality of storytelling with the use of puppets and other techniques, it seems more apt to convey the spirit of the character rather than its authenticity.



Costume renderings by Pei Lee.

**How do the designs for this show compare to your previous work?**

This show has a broad color spectrum. I favor designs with a tighter palette but, with the *The Little Mermaid*, I have to force myself to widen the scope as one tends to forget how vibrant and colorful Mother Nature is.

**What inspirations or previous experiences helped you come up with and execute these designs?**

Always finding the whimsy and humor in all things, as well as being addicted to *The Blue Planet*, have allowed me to create costumes for these non-human characters that will hopefully encapsulate their personalities succinctly.

By the time *The Little Mermaid* opens, the ensemble will have rehearsed for 34 days in five different locations on our campus.



Jane Bunting rehearses with the rest of the cast as a princess in Olney's production of *The Little Mermaid*.

## Chesapeake Bay Recovery: Helping the Local Underwater Environment

The Chesapeake Bay, a shallow bay affected by runoff from a huge and highly-populated land area, has a fragile ecosystem.

The behavior of humans in the world above has a profound impact on the underwater environment and the creatures that live there. From pollution and littering to land development, use of natural resources, and the introduction of invasive species, the bay has suffered from human expansion.

However, human efforts have made gradual progress in restoring the Chesapeake Bay. Between 2008 and 2012, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation measured a 10% improvement in the 13 areas covered by its study.

Find out more about the Chesapeake Bay and what you can do to help at <http://olneylittlemermaid.wordpress.com/tag/chesapeake-bay/>.

# ARTIST SPOTLIGHT:

## Mark Waldrop, Director

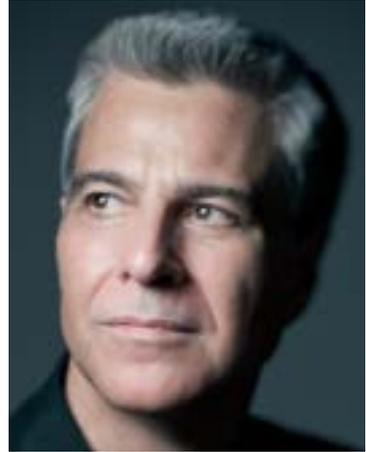
**Susanna Pretzer, Dramaturg:**  
**What excites you the most about directing *The Little Mermaid*?**

Mark Waldrop, Director: The challenge of it. In some ways, it's the hardest thing I've ever had to direct. First of all there's no real template for it; I don't feel like it's ever really been done in its definitive production on stage before, so of course that is an opportunity for us. And I feel like we're having a very good go of it so far. I am having to stretch my normal way of working, my normal way of telling a story, my normal bag of tricks. Largely because of the challenges of telling a story that takes place under the water and on the surface of the water and on the land and in the air, sometimes all at the same time.

**How are you approaching those challenges?**

Where I feel like the Broadway production and the National Tour production—which was a different physical production—attempted and weren't entirely successful was in depicting the swimming. On Broadway they famously used Heelys for everybody, and they had these large towers that moved around the stage. They allowed actors to appear to be floating in the air as they swam, but you were very aware of the big towers. They scrapped that for the National Tour and used more traditional flying, like the kind you would use in *Peter Pan*, but again, it was effortful. You saw the wires, you saw the work that went into it. Not having the budget to do that was a blessing because it took that off the table right away.

[Choreographer] Tara Jean  
[Valley] and I had such a good



experience with *The King and I* and doing "The Small House of Uncle Thomas" ballet, with its use of silks as water, so we used that as a springboard into our world.

We are using silks to represent the water when we're on the surface, and it seems to be going very well. It forces the audience to engage their imaginations and collaborate with us in telling the story. We don't have our mermaids floating through the air to simulate swimming, so either the audience will get on board with the fact that these are mermaids and they're swimming around even though they have legs under their costumes, or they won't. But I think they will, because they'll want to hear the story and participate in the story. The theatrics are more exposed than I'm accustomed to, but I'm finding it very effective and rewarding.

**What do you think gives the story such a wide appeal?**

The story has evolved through its different adaptations. In its present form, it's the story of a girl who is taking her first steps, if you will, out into the world, breaking from her family. It's about the conflict of a father

and daughter who really love each other, but the father has to learn to let the daughter go. And that's as universal as it gets. I think that's a lot of its appeal.

And it has great characters that are not part of Hans Christian Andersen, but certainly part of Disney version. You have Sebastian the crab, the classic Disney helper, very funny, and he has two of the big hit songs in the show. And Ursula is, of course, one of the great Disney villains. You're happy whenever you see them onstage because they're such great characters.

**You've directed a wide range of musicals, including *Cinderella* and the Menken/Ashman *Little Shop of Horrors*. What are you drawing on from your previous experience for this project?**

Being a writer myself, I always try to honor the writers. I'm very attuned to what the writers want it to be, and I want to fulfill that, perhaps in a different way, but I want to give my respect to the writers. I'm a huge fan of Howard Ashman, who wrote the book and lyrics for *Little Shop* and for the cartoon version of this show. (Posthumously, sadly, the stage version has been adapted by other people and new material has been added by other people.)

I did *Annie* here and that show is constructed like a Swiss watch. Most successful musicals have a great construction. Usually the structure of a musical is variety; you don't have three ballads in a row, you don't have three production numbers in a row, you layer those things in to create a varied experience, an arc for the evening. I'm working to make the most of that.

**What is uniquely theatrical about**

**this show and this production?**

I think where you could really go wrong is in trying to put the animated cartoon on stage. That's a place where I'm really grateful for my designers. I've never had so many intense conversations with designers as I have on this project.

I'm working with Jim Fouchard, who I have worked with before here, and Pei Lee is doing costumes, who I have not worked with before. They're both really first-rate designers and great collaborators. Jim has given us a set that is very theatrical and very sophisticated. So it's absolutely not like a cartoon; it's something more than that.

And Pei is giving us designs that are not copying the designs in the cartoon, but still have to satisfy people's expectations. People come here wanting to see the show they hope to see, so we have to fulfill their expectations. We can't disappoint them, but we can fulfill those expectations in ways that might surprise them.

This version is very much one that can only be done in the theater, and we're trying to take advantage of theatrics and making the audience participate with us with their imaginations, in ways that I think will please them.

**What do you hope audiences take away from the show?**

I would love to leave them with a fresh or a renewed excitement about the theater and how the theatrical experience can exceed popping in a DVD. And most especially, as with *Annie* and *Sound of Music* and *Cinderella*, it's going to be an occasion for a lot of children to pay their first visit to the theater. And I hope that I can snare enough of them into thinking that theater is really an exciting thing to have in their lives and that they will come back again and again.

“It forces the audience to engage their imaginations and collaborate with us in telling the story.”

— Mark Waldrop

**Still curious?**

**Read, watch, and listen more at  
[www.olneylittlemermaid.wordpress.com](http://www.olneylittlemermaid.wordpress.com).**



This context guide was created by Susanna Pretzer, Dramaturgy Apprentice, and edited by Jason King Jones, Associate Artistic Director and Director of Education, 2014.

Cover image: photo by Deborah Coles; back cover image: "The Little Mermaid statue by Edvard Eriksen, 1913.