

Ondine

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [August 24, 2010](#) issue



Neil Jordan's *Ondine* is a lovely picture, but it's so gentle and understated that it's attracted little attention. Unlike a lot of other summer films, it never comes at you aggressively.

The movie is derived from the German fairy tale about a water nymph (an undine) who falls in love with a fisherman. But writer-director Jordan reconstructs the story. His setting is an Irish coastal village, and the fisherman is Syracuse (Colin Farrell, in an impassioned performance). He's a recovering alcoholic whose wife, Maura (Dervla Kirwan), kicked him out when he stopped drinking, since she couldn't quit too.

One day Syracuse pulls up his net and finds a nearly drowned young woman (Alicja Bachleda) caught in it. She's terrified of being seen by anyone else, so he puts her up in the cottage he inherited from his mother. But he persuades her to come aboard his trawler, and her eerie siren song brings him phenomenal luck. He tells his daughter Annie (Alison Barry), who lives with Maura and her boyfriend, about *Ondine*, framing the story in the terms of legend. But Annie, who's nobody's fool, realizes that her father is talking about a real-life creature, so she ventures to the cottage to get confirmation. After reading up on supernatural water creatures at the

local library, she insists the visitor is a selkie, the Scottish equivalent of an undine. Her research tells her that selkies can grant a wish to a mortal, and Annie has a big one: one of her kidneys is failing, and she needs a donor.

Maura and the town at large view Syracuse as a clown, both because of his former drunken antics and because he used to perform in a circus. They call him Circus, a nickname he hates. He insists that the priest (Stephen Rea, in a droll performance) he turns to as a sort of AA sponsor—there's no AA chapter in this tiny seaside town—call him by his given name. Syracuse is sensitive and canny, and his playful storytelling with his daughter displays a poetic awareness. His consciousness that he's caught up in a fairy tale is relayed with a combination of irony and wonder.

The movie doesn't reveal the truth about Ondine until toward the end, and even then Jordan wisely leaves the magic unexplained. In fact, some of the details of the story's last act are muddier than they ought to be, presumably as a result of his determination to maintain the fairy-tale mystery.

The early scenes between Farrell and Bachleda are lyrical, but the magic really kicks in when the marvelous little Alison Barry enters the film. Her dark-eyed seriousness and intensity are distinctly Irish, but so are her earthbound humor and her pragmatism. She refuses to be defined by her illness; when her father buys her a wheelchair, she tools around town in it as if she'd scored a moped. There's a matter-of-factness in her conviction that Ondine is a mythical sea creature. She sets out to forge a bond with Ondine, who like us is enchanted by her.

Lit by the great cinematographer Christopher Doyle, the film's exteriors are suffused with lush, ethereal greens, and its interiors are dense and befogged. Jordan keeps the camera ambulatory and often shoots from unusual angles, so we feel a little disoriented, a little tipsy. The filmmaking keeps us either in Syracuse's romantically dazzled perspective or in Annie's, and it doesn't render a single episode in a conventional manner. A funeral is conducted on a dock, with the mourners under umbrellas like the bereaved in the last act of *Our Town*. When Syracuse persuades Ondine to come out in public, he does it by inviting her on a clothes-shopping spree; it turns out that this possible sea sprite is seduced by the allure of new clothes. When they make love, she's swathed in a silver dress that crinkles like foil. Jordan's movie about romantic faith—the theme at the heart of all fairy tales—blows the stale summer-blockbuster air right out of your head.