

Program Note Draft 5 w Valerie Notes

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Little Women, A Classic

Little Women is considered by millions throughout the world as one of the classics of young adult literature. It's possible some in our current audience read the *Little Women* series in their childhood, or have seen one of the many film versions (most recently the 1994 version with Winona Rider). Vividly and passionately written by the young Louisa May Alcott in 1868, many readers have fondly looked back at the charming life lived by Jo and her sisters; we may have even cried with passion at the end result of Jo's love triangle. Over years readers have celebrated the victories and cried at the tragedies that befall the March family throughout the series.

Radical Women

After a century and a half, it's easy to forget the radical start of this novel. *Little Women: The Musical* shares these revolutionary themes. Louisa May Alcott was a true progressive in her own time; her groundbreaking work opened the door for American women writers to follow. Regardless of politics, she started a literary movement in her own right with the publishing of *Little Women*. Alcott herself attributed the novel's success to the story being "simple and true, for we really lived most of it," but she was always striving to write new creative fiction. The sensational "blood and guts" stories audiences love in *Little Women: The Musical* were actually published by Alcott under the pseudonym "A.M. Barnard," a name she used before she attained fame with *Little Women*. However, Alcott's love of adventure had started much earlier. Born into Transcendentalism, Alcott, like the rest of her family, espoused such philosophical and religious views as feminism, abolitionism, and religious reform. She grew up with the likes of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, both Transcendentalist writers and reformers, and

would often get into fiery conversations with these men -- conversations that surely emboldened her later in life. Her father was a strict progressive religious reformer, who, ironically, couldn't keep his family out of debt due to his gambling, drinking and reputed affairs. The bedrock of the family Alcott's mother, Abigail, is embodied in the character of Marmee. And as in the musical, tragedy struck home early in Alcott's life: one of her sisters died of scarlet fever at only 23 years old.

These early misfortunes and setbacks did little to temper Louisa May's fiery spirit; rather, it empowered her more. Unlike in the novel and musical, it wasn't the father who went off to war, it was actually Alcott herself, who felt it was her duty to serve as a nurse during the Civil War. These experiences led to her first publication, *Hospital Sketches*. After the war, she pursued writing in full; however, she met with hostility from many publishers who found her writing in poor taste, and the fact that she happened to be a woman even more tasteless. Regardless she persisted, as Jo does, until she found success writing about her own childhood.

The character of Jo that the world encounters, just after the Civil War, is alive with passion and determination, breaking social boundaries with every move. When Alcott insisted that Jo would remain unmarried, readers and publishers nearly rioted until she created a more suitable figure for her alter ego to partner with, although Alcott herself remained unmarried for the rest of her life. She cleverly weaved lessons throughout her novel to help people deal with the world around them.

Originally serialized in newspapers and periodicals across the country, *Little Women* covered ideas including love, loss, and even marriage advice. After the success of this serialization, *Little Women* was published in book form, not only in America but also in the UK and continental Europe as well. With this newfound success, Alcott became a literary icon in her

own time. She moved to Boston where she went on to write three more books about the March family: *Little Women Part Two*, *Jo's Boys*, and *Little Men*. The final product, a robust series of classic American literature, would become an enduring legacy, loved and studied up to present day. It has been adapted into movies, plays, fan novels, mini-series and, of course, a Broadway musical. Some of Alcott's sisters attained fame as well. Abigail (represented by Amy in the novel and musical) really was a painter and traveled to Europe, where she achieved great success as an artist, even having some works displayed at the Paris Salon. Alcott remained in Boston throughout her life, quietly writing, but never achieved the same acclaim that *Little Women* had provided. She died aged 55, to be remembered forever as a powerhouse in literary publishing in the age of the Civil War, and as one of the first women writers to attain such fame.

Revisiting *Little Women* with a musical twist

Little Women: The Musical strives to fill those radical shoes by combining all that readers love about the novel into a compact and fast-paced show. It was a mammoth task, editions of the novel can run 400 pages or more. Playwright Allan Knee spent over five years adapting this American classic before he was joined by composer Jason Howland and lyricist Mindi Dickstein. The authors remained faithful to Alcott's vision that Jo does not need a man to make her dreams come true. Instead, she finds an equal and willing partner who will challenge her to be better. With that challenge in mind, Jo strives to find herself through her writing. She perseveres through many challenges -- including loss, the distant Civil War, familial strife, and sexist publishers -- through the power of her creativity.

Jo truly lives within her own imagination; she escapes the trauma of everyday life by retreating to her attic to envision tales of derring-do. Likewise, Alcott retreated to her secluded Orchard House to envision similar stories, though it was the more domestic *Little Women* series

that captured the minds of American readers. But Alcott still found a way to get her adventure stories published: she made Jo the sensational writer. The writers of the musical channel this energy as well. As Jo writes, “blood and guts” melodrama explodes on the stage, bringing Jo’s (and Alcott’s) fantastical worlds to life. Through her unyielding determination, Jo conquers her own imagination by coming to the realization that writing about her own life is more meaningful than the crazy tales she tries to create for fame. These personal stories, brought vividly to life in *Little Women: The Musical*, are more important than ever as we all try to rediscover our own American story.