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REVIEW: Little Women: the Musical (NightBlue Theater)

[Scotty Zacher](#) | November 30, 2010 | [0 Comments](#)

NightBlue struggles to mold staid story into musical drama



NightBlue Performing Arts Company presents

Little Women: the Musical

Created by [Allan Knee](#) (book),
[Jason Howland](#) (music) & [Mindi Dickstein](#) (lyrics)
 Directed by [Paul Packer](#)
 at [Stage 773](#), 1225 W. Belmont ([map](#))
 through Dec 19 | [tickets: \\$15-\\$30](#) | [more info](#)

Reviewed by [Keith Ecker](#)

I will admit that I am no fan of the gamut of early to mid-19th century Western literature. I know it's a sweeping generalization. But there's something about the pre-Victorian and Victorian novelists that I just find grating. The novel was a novel concept at the time, sweeping the civilized world. Love stories mixed with polite social satire reigned supreme. But to me, it all seems like the imaginings of an overemotional teenager. There's a reason why Jane Austen's "Emma" works so well in its "Clueless" incarnation.

Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* would easily serve as a parody of this type of literature if it didn't take itself so seriously. It's got all the conventions: A young woman with a big dream, strange love affairs, an expansive world that magically seems to be populated with only the work's characters. Is it really believable that two people in Concord are going

to meet up in Italy? Mind you this is without the luxury of cell phones and GPS tracking devices.

In any case, these are flaws with the story, which NightBlue Theater has no control over. Nor does the company have much say in the rather uninspiring songs in the novel's staged musical version. Still, the decision to produce a play that's as interesting as sandpaper does fall on NightBlue's head.

Little Women really is a drama without much drama. Young girls grow into women, people fall in love and someone dies of scarlet fever. And the fact that it takes nearly two-and-a-half hours for NightBlue to tell this story only adds to the complete lack of dramatic tension. - clearly shorter will take care of these problems

The story of *Little Women* concerns the March sisters. The protagonist is Jo (Erin O'Shea), a precocious and peppy young woman with big New York dreams. She pens stories of swashbucklers and bloodshed in the hopes of attracting the attention of the popular magazines. Jo has three sisters: Beth (Julia Macholl), Meg (Karyn Dawidowicz) and Amy. The most notable of Jo's sisters is Amy, played by Linda Rudy, who serves as Jo's adversary. Jealous of Jo's beauty and blossoming womanhood, Amy attempts to thwart Jo at every turn, particularly when she tosses one of Jo's literary works into the fire. *Interesting take away*

The neighbor boy, Laurie (Shaun Nathan Baer), befriends the girls and quickly falls in love with Jo. When he collects the courage to propose, Jo rejects him. Although it breaks his heart, he eventually finds love elsewhere.

NightBlue is billing the production as a Christmas play. And although the holiday does serve as an occasional backdrop, it's a bit of a stretch to say *Little Women* is up there with *Miracle on 34th Street* (which is coincidentally also up at Stage 773). I also think that their target audience of little girls (they were raffling off a chance to win an American Girl doll the night I went) is a bit of a misfire. Even with musical interludes to break up the monotony of the story, the play drags too long for a child's attention span. Director Paul E. Packer could omit some scenes and no one would object. - shorter, shorter, shorter II... for children

All this said, accolades must be paid to two of the play's standout performers. O'Shea is put through an endurance test, singing in nearly half of the play's pieces. She displays her talent as both a superb vocalist and a convincing actress.

Rudy is exceptionally irritating as Amy, which I intend as a compliment given that Amy is supposed to be exceptionally irritating. Rudy adds genuineness to Amy's huffy, pouty demeanor without crossing over into caricature. You know the antagonist does a good job when you find yourself wanting to reprimand her from your seat.

If you're a huge *Louisa May Alcott* fan, you may enjoy this musical version of *Little Women*. Otherwise, the slow pacing and tame story may just lull you into hibernation.

Rating: ★★½



Creative Team

Erin O'Shea – Jo March

Kelli Harrington – Marmee

Karyn Dawidowicz – Meg March/Marmee u/s

Julia Macholl – Beth March

Linda Rudy – Amy March

Shaun Nathan Baer – Laurie Lawrence

Corey L. Mills – Professor Baehr

Ed Modesto – Mr. Lawrence

Jason Krumwiede – Mr. Brooke

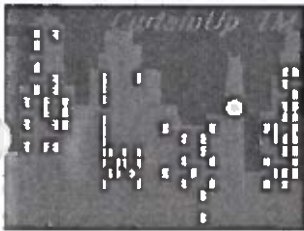
Joanne Ray – Aunt March/Mrs. Kirk

Michal Wilson – Meg u/s: Michal Wilson

Director: Paul E. Packer

Music/Vocal Director: Kelli Harrington

Choreographer: Laura Zettergren



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A CurtainUp Philadelphia Review *Little Women, The Broadway Musical*

By Kathryn Osenlund

*I don't know which part is harder
What I know or what's unknown
Or raising little women
When I am here alone
—Here Alone sung by Mamee*



From left, Elisa Matthews, Leslie Becker, Kim Carson, Jennie Eisenhower, Kara Dombrowski (Photo: BRT)

It has been a few years since *Little Women's* Broadway run and National Tour. Since then the show has seen various productions, which have met with varying degrees of success. Now Bristol Riverside Theatre (BRT) has picked it up. [Note: This is the same Bristol of the Dovells "Kids in Bristol are sharp as a pistol when they do the Bristol Stomp."]

I confess that I went to review the show thinking this could be a good musical to recommend to parents who want to pack the preteens off on a Sunday afternoon so they can go out somewhere else themselves. BRT is a professional theater, but it has been inconsistent, plus it's located a bit out in the sticks. . . a ride up I-95 from Philadelphia.

Outlying regional theater offerings can sometimes be satisfying for kids and neophytes but not so much for sophisticated adult theater goers.

I was taken by surprise. The musical is definitely for the grownup set, although kids might enjoy it too, and this new production is something special. Everything about it is quality. *-only review to make this comment on age*

With *Little Women* there will be a homespun feel, but this is no amateur hour. Members of the 5-piece orchestra play 10 instruments, and if you count the percussion trappings, it's more like 15. The musicians, with impeccable timing, do a great job with the remarkable variety of tunes. Surprisingly, these songs don't all sound the same, like tedious variations on the same notes, which is one of the problems with so many other newer musicals.

→ this song is sweet but doesn't progress story
The sweet rendition of the little ditty "Off to Massachusetts" with Beth (Kim Carson) and the stern Mr. Lawrence (James Van Treuren) was an audience favorite. There are other cute numbers like "Could You?". In fact all the tunes were wonderful with the possible exception of the anticipated show stopper, the complex "Astonishing," which wants to cover too much territory, both story-wise and vocally.

Jennie Eisenhower as spunky Jo March easily carries the lead role. She is a strong actress — grounded, nuanced, and vibrant. All in this cast are



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Our Review of the Show



The Scottsboro Boyse



Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson



amazingly talented and have good voices. Particularly notable are Elisa Matthews as Meg and Leslie Becker, strong and emotive as Marmee. Stephen Schellhardt's Laurie positively sparkles in "Take a Chance on Me" and Cathy Newman's Aunt March is wonderfully Wilde-like. Amy (Kara Dombrowski) and Mr. John Brooke (Steven Nicholas) are charmers. The Professor (Michael Sharon) and Jo's performance of "Small Umbrella in the Rain" recalls the marvelous Mirabel and Millamant, strong-willed lover archetypes in *The Way of the World*.

Is he or infact is so even?

*These two issues
have slowed
other productions*

There's not one dead second on stage due to Susan D. Atkinson's masterful direction and Karen Getz's fluid, light-touch choreography. Smooth as silk transitions are aided by Roman Tatarowicz's revolving set, which does everything a set needs to do. Millie Hiibel's costumes are superb, and the overall staging is simply *el primo*.

A few anachronisms stand out. One instance might be when Jo says, "I would so respect your opinion," which sounds less like Civil War era talk and more like current youth-speak. But such moments are minor in this rather free adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's 1869 novel.

Another concern is that in its various presentations over the last 7 years, songs have been added, moved, and subtracted. BRT's counter-intuitive choice to add once-deleted pieces back on to a show that already is too long is perplexing. Rather than adding, the production would benefit from losing 20 minutes. While it is truly a rewarding experience, it's a long haul and the audience begins to tire toward the end. Better to leave 'em the energy to deliver the much deserved ovation.

*Clearly
cutting needs
to take place*

With its perfect casting right across the board, the fine delineation of the four sisters, and Ms. Eisenhower's charisma and poise, BRT's *Little Women, The Broadway Musical* has panache, dignity, and heart. Bristol Riverside Theatre may be tucked away in little Bristol, PA, but this production is not just good enough for the locals, it's world class.

Little Women, The Broadway Musical

Book by Allan Knee, Music by Jason Howland, Lyrics by Mindi Dickstein

Directed by Susan D. Atkinson

Cast: Leslie Becker, Kim Carson, Kara Dombrowski, Jennie Eisenhower, Elisa Matthews, Cathy Newman, Steven Nicholas, Stephen Schellhardt, Michael Sharon, James Van Treuren

Costume Design: Millie Hiibel

Lighting Design: Deborah Constantine

Musical Direction: Mark Yurkanin

Choreography: Karen Getz

May 3 - May 22, Opening 05/05/11

2 hours, 40 minutes incl one 15 min intermission

Reviewed by Kathryn Osenlund based on 05/06/11 performance. At Bristol Riverside Theatre, Radcliffe St. Bristol, PA. brtstage.org

REVIEW FEEDBACK

Highlight one of the responses below and click "copy" or "CTRL+C"

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- I disagree with the review of Little Women
- The review made me eager to see Little Women

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Little Women: The Broadway Musical is 'sumptuous'

BY COLIN MACLEAN

FIRST POSTED: FRIDAY, MAY 06, 2011 04:41 PM EDT

Little Women: The Broadway Musical opened on Broadway in 2005 and became something of a minor hit. Some grumpy critics complained of the low rent production.

They should see this sumptuous Citadel mounting with a cast of 17, backed by an orchestra of 13 (under the capable baton of Citadel regular Don Horsburgh) and boasting all the whistles and bells the theatre is capable of. Little Women is no West Side Story, but I don't think this modest show is going to find a more sympathetic production anywhere.

It doesn't take long to note that, as in the Citadel's fondly remembered other story of a close family, Pride and Prejudice, this is a thoughtful show that demonstrates how tight the ensemble work generated by the Citadel/Banff Centre Professional Theatre Program can be. These are performers who have worked together for a long time and the theatrical benefits are obvious on that stage. It is much the same cast that gave us the rollicking Citadel production of The Three Musketeers.

One only wishes the vehicle was up to the production. Alan Knee's book is patchy at best which means the big moments come and go without generating much emotive passion. Jason Howland's sprightly and tuneful music is enjoyable enough as it goes by but you forget it as soon as you leave the theatre. The only tune that might stay in your head is a bouncy little number, "Off to Massachusetts." Mindi Dickstein's lyrics are mostly generic.

- all the reviewers love this song.

Louisa May Alcott's classic semi-autobiographical 1869 novel tells of the four March sisters: Jo, opinionated and supremely self-confident ("I've decided to become a world famous writer"), the kind-hearted (but doomed) Beth, the silly/selfish Amy, the romantic Meg and their beloved Mother, Marmee.

One certainly can't fault Bob Baker's production, which captures the sweep of the times but maintains the intimacy of the March family. Shannon Taylor is a force of nature and could define the word "spunky" as she bursts on stage as Jo. She has fiery red hair, a personality to match and a heart melting voice - particularly in her big first act closer, "Astonishing."

- not the first time this word has been used to describe Jo

Jose Boudreau's Beth is a spirited, delicate creature particularly in an effecting duet (with Taylor) "Some Things Are Meant to Be," just before Scarlet Fever carries her off. Melissa MacPherson's Meg falls in love spectacularly and Lana Sugerman as Amy throws a great tantrum and ages effectively. Two gentlemen callers, played by Jeremy Crittenden and David Leyshon, both have clear, powerful tenor voices and use them to great effect.

SUN+ longest voice on the stage is that of the seasoned Susan Gilmore. The long-time Edmonton resident has sung in shows big and small for a lifetime and her mature performance and theatre filling honey-dipped voice make her two solos high points in the production.

Little Women is certainly not hard to take. The two and a half hours go by quickly and you do become involved in the adventures of the March sisters. But, despite the best efforts of all concerned, the story seldom reaches beyond the footlights and into the heart.

- Still a little long

Three and a half stars.

Little Women: The Musical runs through May 22 on the Maclab Theatre of the Citadel.



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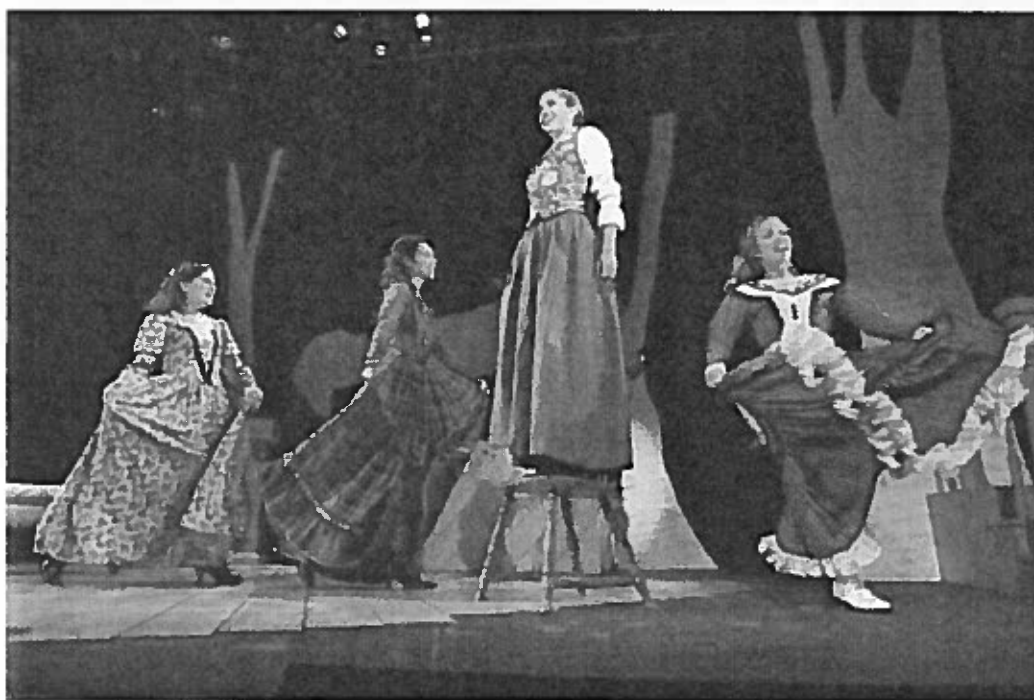
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COMMUNITY

Review: TheatreZone's "Little Women" soars with song, brims with emotion



Playing sisters in "Little Women," Julie Woods-Robinson, from left, Megan Jimenez and Molly Anne Ross dance around Megan Yelaney, playing Jo, while singing about her pursuit of writing in a dress rehearsal of "Little Women" Monday, March 5, 2012, at TheatreZone.

By Chris Silk

March 09, 2012

0 f t e

What: Musical adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's beloved novel

When: 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, 2 p.m. & 7:30 March 11 and 18.

Where: G&L Theatre on the campus of Community School of Naples,
13275 Livingston Road, Naples

Cost: \$43-\$48, plus \$2 per ticket fee



On the web: Sign up to receive more theater news from the Stage Door blog via email.

TheatreZone dug through the library shelves and found a musical version of Louisa May Alcott's beloved "Little Women" Thursday. A failure on Broadway, it soars in resplendent glory on the Naples stage, aided by beautiful voices, gorgeous costumes and a brilliant Jo, charming actress Megan Yelaney.

Adapted from the novel with a book by Allan Knee, lyrics by Mindi Dickstein, and music by Jason Howland, the show follows the four March sisters growing up in Civil War-era Concord, Mass. There's tomboy Jo, romantic Meg (Megan Jimenez), delicate Beth (Julie Woods-Robinson) and sassy Amy (Molly Anne Ross).

The musical chops and remixes Alcott's tome into bite-size morsels and serves up the best scenes with a crescendo of violins and a heaping side of melodrama. Watching the show feels a bit like reading "Little Women" while hopped up on 12 triple espressos; you get highlights - but none of the depth. Instead of the rich tapestry of the novel, there's just a few vague "sisterhood," "girl power" and "follow your dreams" messages floating around. Definitely entertaining - but just not quite as filling.

Audiences stick with heroine Jo as she rallies her sisters to perform a Christmas "operatic tragedy," chop down Mr. Laurence's tree, confront Aunt March about "manners" and save Amy from a dunk in the frozen pond. There are dances, marriages, sorrowful letters, alarming telegrams and even a death - and it all whips by in a dizzying whirl of crinoline and song.

Mark Danni fashions an impressively entertaining show out of what emerges. TheatreZone's intimate stage - for once - serves the material. While there's almost no character development and the bare suggestion of scenes in the show's threadbare libretto, the music (Danni's true talent) exudes drama. Familiarity with the source material isn't a necessity - but it might make some scenes ring more true.

Interesting audience engagement take away

Clever mix of melodrama and fast paced action.



"Louisa May Alcott's Jo" - but you wouldn't necessarily know who any of these girls are if you weren't told this was "Little Women."

Many of the scenes are so brief that show often feels nearly sung-through. If the lyrics aren't especially memorable (there's nothing you remember in the parking lot) - the cast sells them with stirring power - and every musical number lifts the show to an ever-higher peak. *excellent*

The emphasis on song also shifts some responsibility to experienced music director Charles Fornara. His hand is clearly evident in many of the pure vocals, soaring harmonies and the way that the tunes manage to express the emotion of the characters. A seven-member orchestra sounds lush and enveloping. *7 seven members for instruments*

Megan Yelaney makes for an appealing Jo. She projects steel in every step and possesses a voice that can ring the rafters. Her performance bristles with energy and ambition; she alone comes closest to creating a fully realized vision of what Alcott meant for her characters. Curtain number "Astonishing," where Jo vows to achieve her dreams, is diva-worthy. *Clearly someone who can make this song shine is important*

Tony Award-winner Donna McKechnie makes a return appearance at TheatreZone after appearing in 2009's "Stepping Out." She brings grace - and makes for a "grand dame" Marmee, the girls' mother. Plaintive tune "Days of Plenty," sung to those lost, brims with emotion. Megan McCombs will remind audiences of the Dowager Countess of Grantham when she raps her walking stick and snaps out bon mots as tart-tongued Aunt March. *- I agree with this powerful praise for Marmee.*

While the show comes titled "Little Women," boys play a significant (and talented) part. Byron DeMent is a real find. His charming, delightful Professor Bhaer has real chemistry with Yelaney; not only that - he sings in the German accent! It's a beautiful voice - stunningly clear. His love letter to Jo, "How Am I," brought the house to a hush, followed by mad applause. Their duet, "Small Umbrella in the Rain," feels sweet and beautiful. *- What do we plan to do?*

TheatreZone regular Shane Daniel Lord (Laurie) plays his awkward neighbor for laughs - and later belts out passionate love song "Take a Chance on Me." Look for Karen Molnar's free-wheeling choreography in *- awkward Hugh Grant or just awkward?*



off her feet in a delightful "More Than I Am" duet.

Kathleen Kolacz seems to have gone to the "Downton Abbey" school of costuming. The 1860s have never looked so sumptuous. For all that the March girls are poor, the gowns are fabulous. McKechnie gets a dazzling gold number. McCombs appears in a fashionable bronze ensemble, complete with natty hat. Molly Anne Ross's Amy, the family's fashion plate, gets a stunning ice-blue gown and jacket for her European trip.

The minimal set fails to match the splendor of the fashion. Four branching white shapes scrawled with writing suggest trees, perhaps giving the impressing of growth and a journey toward adulthood. In lieu of stagehands, four young girls pirouette through the space moving chairs, benches and a fainting couch. It's a nice touch - especially a fleeting, touching dance break staged after Beth's sorrowful goodbye. Philip Watson's clever lighting designs mirror the tree branch theme throughout the night. There were several wobbly moments with the spotlight on opening night.

Interesting since minimal seemed to be so popular with other designers.

There's nothing tiny about the entertainment value in "Little Women." The show can't - and doesn't - pack the depth of the novel into its two and a half hours. What audiences get instead is a ripping tour through the very best moments of Louisa May Alcott's world backed by soaring vocals and beautiful clothes. Look for Yelaney's bold, brassy Jo and DeMent's amazing voice and delightful take on Professor Bhaer.

Do you watch "Downton Abbey?" Email me, csilk@naplesnews.com, find me on Twitter at [@napleschris](https://twitter.com/napleschris) or read my Stage Door theater blog. You can also sign up to receive the Stage Door blog via email.



About Chris Silk

Chris Silk has described his adventures inside theaters, restaurants, concert halls and art galleries for the Naples Daily News since 2007.

@napleschris chris.silk@naplesnews.com 239-435-3442



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