

Little Women: The Musical Charms Audiences



(sitting from left) Abigail McMahon, Amiee Turner, (standing from left) Bryn Martin, Alison Novelli and Tess Jonas star as Amy, Marmee, Beth, Meg and Jo.

Ocean State Theatre Company's opening night performance of *Little Women: The Musical*, provoked both laughter and tears. Director Ethan Paulini has crafted a funny, powerful and moving production of Louisa May Alcott's semi-autobiographical novel.

He wonderfully captures the highs and lows of the March sisters during the Civil War while their father is away serving as a chaplain for the Union Army. The four girls navigate their way through disappointment, heartache and loss on the road to personal growth and discovery, all while trying to remain faithful to their motto: "The four March sisters forever."

When unexpected tragedy challenges their bond, the family grows stronger. The musical beautifully illustrates why these girls remain some of literature's most endearing characters: the opinionated and aspiring writer Jo, the pragmatic and romantic Meg, the kind-hearted and generous Beth, and the pretentious and insecure Amy. Each of these conflicting personality traits contribute nicely to the richness of these individuals.

Though things start slowly — it takes the orchestra a couple of numbers to really tighten-up and not much really happens until just before intermission — things do get ratcheted up significantly in Act II. The songs, lyrically and musically, are far more fetching and the orchestra sounds terrific. But, more importantly, the actors deliver some remarkable performances.

The set can best be described as minimalist: a cube sits atop a set of stairs and serves as a stage entrance. Interestingly, during some of the musical's more poignant moments, the actors stand in the center of cube as if framed in a picture. Costume designer Emily Taradash's wardrobe magnificently replicates the period with ensembles and colors that also help establish mood.

Much of the plot revolves around Jo, either with her desperately trying to sell her stories or with others attempting to win her affection or approval. But things begin to unravel for Jo and her sisters following a series of events. Their mother departs for Washington, Amy moves in with their aunt, Jo's childhood friend and crush Laurie moves to Boston and Meg announces her engagement. "What about our

promise to be forever?" asks Jo. As change forces the girls to ponder the reality of their childhood treaty, loss will ultimately force them to ponder the reality of their own individuality.

Though Paulini is also credited as the show's choreographer, there is very little dancing in this production. The one big ensemble piece, "The Weekly Volcano Press," actually appears to be poking fun at big, musical dance numbers. However, this reenactment of Jo's "operatic tragedy" is such a hoot, I doubt many in attendance minded that there were no hoofers.

Initially, Tess Jonas (Jo) comes off as an overly caffeinated Starbucks barista. But she settles nicely into the role projecting a genuine sensitivity from beneath her tom-boyish veneer. Her coyness emerges as her most charming asset with the audience becoming completely invested in her happiness. With a nice, measured voice, she also belts out many of the show's tunes reaching an impassioned crescendo during "The Fire Within Me."

Tommy Labanaris (Professor Bhaer) proves the perfect counter to Jo, deflecting her condescension with a restrained pompousness. He wonderfully combines the professor's haughty intellectual manner with a simmering desire that proves to be the winning formula in securing one of the most unlikely - but most believable - partnerships. His charming duet with Jo, "Small Umbrella in the Rain," beautifully punctuates his courtship.

With an infectious boyish charm, Michael Luongo (Laurie) instantly wins over the hearts of all — except Jo! "What is it with you and that smile?" she barks. "You make me beam," he replies, flashing that winning grin. Despite some mic issues early, Luongo impresses with both his voice in a touching "Take a Chance on Me" and his feet, with him being the only performer charged with any real dancing.

OSTC's artistic director Amiee Turner, as the girl's mother Marmee, provides a very steady presence with a calm, motherly demeanor. She also displays some pretty good chops in the emotionally charged "Here Alone" and "Days of Plenty" where her voice soars.

The evening's prettiest voice belongs to Bryn Martin (Beth). She is absolutely delightful in the catchy "Off to Massachusetts" and simply angelic in "Some Things Are Meant to Be." Alison Novelli (Meg) rounds out the sisterly quartet with some nice pipes of her own, showing great range in "More Than I Am."

OSTC's production of Little Women: The Musical runs through March 19 in the company's state-of-the-art theater located on Jefferson Boulevard. For tickets or more information visit: oceanstatetheatre.org.