

Syracuse Stage offers *Little Women* for winter holidays

By Nancy Keefe Rhodes

Little Women, the musical stage production based on Louisa May Alcott's enduring novel about the March sisters and their intrepid mother Marmee that has just opened at Syracuse Stage, raises the question of whether there can be too much of a good thing.

There is so much about this production that is good and generous that one feels a tad like Scrooge to mention this at all.

Set in the 1860s at the March's sturdy clapboard home in Concord, Massachusetts – with brief excursions to New York City, Paris and the Atlantic shore – *Little Women* begins in the attic with the oldest daughter Jo (the gifted Sarah Shahinian) rummaging in the four tin keepsake chests that hold mementos of a past shared with her sisters Meg (Mary Kate Morrissey), Beth (Jenaha McLearn) and Amy (Aisling Halpin). Shortly Beth joins Jo – so powerful are such memories that they can raise those who are lost – and the two embark on an extended flashback that begins four days before a long-ago Christmas. Having provided the script for a Christmas melodrama – she plays the dashing hero Rodrigo – young Jo is whipping her reluctant sisters into shape for rehearsal.

It's war-time and there's barely money for essentials, never mind presents – which greatly pains Amy. Their father (Joe Whelan) is away in the South with the Union Army serving as a chaplain. A genteel intellectual – later he remarks about an on-going argument with the philosopher Emerson – who's preached against slavery for twenty years, he's insisted on going to war over the strenuous objec-

choreographer and director; the performances are crisp, graceful, physically detailed and emotionally satisfying. Troy Hourie's set design of the March house provides perspectives both inside the attic's great peaked rafters and from a distance, mirroring the ways that our relation to home billows and contracts over the years. Tracy Dorman's rich costuming even extends to whole-ensemble wardrobes for such brief scenes as a single busy Manhattan street. Kim Oler and Alison Hubbard, who produced the show's 20 wonderful songs, personally participated in final adjustments for this production.

And – in a season when the Everson's *Turner to Cezanne* is setting the bar high indeed for multi-venue collaborations – the March story plays out in parallel local events such as the recent Gifford Series talk by Geraldine Brooks (her novel *March* tells the story of the chaplain's war-time experiences, far too brutal to include in his letters home, and is this year's choice for the CNY Reads project). One of the most moving parts of this production relates to what that time shares with our own, as many of us worry too over the safety of loved ones away at another war.

Still, even Louisa May Alcott published this novel in two volumes a year apart. An hour and 45 minutes into this play, just as my internal clock turned into the home stretch, the lights went up for intermission instead. Not everyone shares this opinion – Sunday's matinee ended with a standing ovation and some exiting patrons dabbing wet eyes; the first half of this run is mostly sold out. But three hours is a long time. Do go, but go prepared.

tions of his imperious sister, Aunt March (Sandra Karas). It's her project to make young ladies of the March sisters. Their mother Marmee (Marie Kemp, who has indeed mothered the entire production from a 2007 student workshop reading) holds the family together with good-natured patience, the example of good works and forward-looking wisdom. And so the sisters emerge, three to find partners who suit them; considerable time is devoted to how this occurs with each. (Dominique Stasiulis as Laurie and David Studwell as Fritz are especially well cast and excellent.) Beth catches scarlet fever while nursing the sick infant of a poor family and, already frail, dies young – Jo's first experience with the limits of her own force of will.

So much care has been lavished on this production that it really does seem like the best kind of homemade gift. The casting is uniformly excellent; our drama students hold their own with out-of-town Equity members. Our own Tony Salatino does double duty as

The skinny:

Little Women, a joint production by Syracuse Stage and the Syracuse University Department of Drama, runs through December 27 at Syracuse Stage, 820 E. Genesee St., Syracuse.

Full schedule and tickets online at syracusestage.org or call 315.443.3275.

Special events include a Sign Interpreted Performance at the 3:00 PM matinee on Dec. 5 and a talk at 1:00 PM on Dec. 9, before the matinee, about Louisa May Alcott's 19th century connections to Syracuse by Dennis J. Connors of the Onondaga Historical Association. OHA has organized an exhibit on Alcott's Syracuse family ties that remains on view in the theater lobby through the end of the play's run.

Broadway Cares Equity Fights AIDS (BCEFA): Holiday productions at Syracuse Stage traditionally ask audiences to contribute toward AIDS research after each performance. Funds raised this year will also benefit local services for persons with HIV/AIDS through DePalmer House and at Upstate's pediatric center.

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