

The Odes of March: "Little Women," at the Prospect Park Auditorium through July 20

Written by Mike Schulz

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In Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, the storytelling and language are already so musical that the decision to adapt the author's tale *into* a musical

seems a little redundant. But as redundancies go, the musical version of *Little Women*

is actually pretty good, and under the direction of Bob Williams, Quad City Music Guild's take on the show is pretty

darned

good - marvelously designed, staged, sung, and (apart from two glaringly inappropriate performances) acted. Alcott purists may gripe, and not without cause, but it'd be hard to gripe about Music Guild's presentation of the material, and, I think, impossible to gripe about the portrayal of Erin O'Shea, whose stunningly radiant turn as Jo March seems reason

enough

for the existence of a

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Jo, the fledgling author at the heart of this beloved Civil War-era tale, is such an iconic figure of headstrong, independent-minded young-womanhood that she could easily come off as a cliché. (When the character launches into a Broadway power ballad here, not much separates her from *The Little Mermaid's* Ariel or *Beauty & the Beast's* Belle.) Yet there's nothing clichéd about O'Shea, who acts and sings Jo's tomboy exuberance with sensational gusto, but who is also several shades subtler than you'd have any right to expect.

For a performer with such thrilling stage presence, she delivers deadpan comedy like a master; her handling of the tentative advances of Danny White's Laurie, and the unanticipated arrival of J. Adam Lounsberry's Professor Bhaer at her sister's nuptials ("It's just a *wedding*," says O'Shea with perfectly dry nonchalance), don't suggest an ounce of calculation on the actress' part - this Jo is just naturally, offhandedly hilarious. And in sequences in which O'Shea easily *could* hog the spotlight, as when Jo discovers the burned remains of her manuscript, the performer's reactions are life-sized and specific, revealing worlds of emotion with poise and economy. There isn't a moment here when you don't fully *believe* in O'Shea's Jo; Hepburn herself would be proud.

No doubt the actress' challenge was made easier through the rather extraordinary collection of talents she's surrounded by, and I could hardly imagine a more winning trio in the roles of the March sisters. Laurel Williams is lovely and understated as Meg, bringing an apologetic grace to her character's undemanding desires, while Abbey Donohoe is a spectacularly vibrant and frequently riotous Amy, exuding the ingratiating pluck of a young Kristen Chenoweth.

And Sarah Walker, as Beth, gives the absolute finest of the many excellent Music Guild portrayals I've yet seen from her. She's both effortlessly touching and unexpectedly funny - at Thursday's preview, Beth's explosive delight upon being asked to play the piano felt completely spontaneous, and yielded an enormous laugh - and the scene in which Beth and Jo (in an unbelievably clever effect) fly a kite on Cape Cod is a truly magical piece of theatre; with their voices blending in gorgeous harmony, the sisters' bond is palpable, and Walker's acceptance of Beth's mortality is devastatingly sincere and moving.

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With a price tag of \$1.2 million, the production is the most expensive ever mounted at the Prospect Park Auditorium, and it's a record that will be hard to break.