



Be inspired by amateur theatre

Society	Cygnets Players
Production	Little Women
Date	9 September 2023
Venue	Putney Arts Theatre
Report by	Matt Bentley

Show Report

General

Little Women is a beloved novel that has been enjoyed and studied the world over for more than 150 years. Adaptations of the story for stage and screen have been numerous, particularly in the last decade. Any adaptation is benefitted by its richly drawn, iconic characters, but the public's love for them also means that deviations from the original can risk controversy.

Cygnets Players brought these characters to life through a series of delightful performances, within an ambitious production that kept the entertainment flowing on a swelteringly hot Friday night in September.

Direction

Director **Emily Mae Winters**, assisted by **Valerie Bureau**, did an excellent job of working with her cast to draw out those characters. Every person on stage knew who their character was and the function they served in the story, and as a result so did the audience. The storytelling was clear, and each scene was presented in a way that supported the narrative.

If there was one element that would have boosted this further, it is the clarity of the relationships between the characters. The decision to include the optional ensemble had the benefit of adding texture and giving more talented performers a chance to shine, but it took away from some key character moments in the script, such as Amy's bitterness at being cast as the troll and Jo's perception of Beth as the story's hero. As a result, there wasn't as much groundwork laid for the final scene between Jo and Beth as there could have been (particularly the "special bond" referred to in the dialogue), and Amy's behaviour was less obviously a result of her perceived mistreatment.

Visually, there was a lot going on in this production, with the inclusion of the ensemble, projected images and videos, added dance sequences, and the inclusion of quotes from the novel. These worked well when they were used to further the narrative or enhance the scenography, for example when we saw the kite flying during Jo and Beth's final scene together, or when the ensemble was added to the ball sequence to make it seem busier and more exciting.

However, there were times when these additions became a distraction. Often the projections occurred when there were ensemble moments happening on stage, so the audience had to choose to focus on one or the other. A key example of this was in the Act 1 closing number, *Astonishing*, where **Heidi Delve** as Jo gave a terrific performance. It was a shame this was detracted from through the inclusion of so many additional elements, though, such as a movement sequence from the ensemble,

costumes that involved flapping streamers of paper book pages, and a video projection of a suffragette rally. While these things tied-in to the themes of the song, the song by itself does a great job of getting those themes across, and although in theory these were intended to help, in practice they inadvertently diminished the song's power.

Despite the need to tone down some of the scenic elements, this was an entertaining production which never lost its sense of fun. The team had clearly focused on ensuring the idea of family group that enjoyed each other's company was never lost and, as a result, the audience was swept up in that enjoyment.

Musical Direction

As Musical Director, **Gareth Alber** clearly had an excellent rapport with his cast, producing some very nice vocal performances and tight harmonies. Work from the band was also good overall, although there seemed to be some players who weren't as comfortable with the music as others, perhaps needing additional coaching. Perhaps a factor of the heat, but the band should generally be discouraged from walking across the stage during the interval, instead using backstage exits.

Cast

The cast and their performances were the highlights of this production. As Jo, **Heidi Delve** gave an excellent, impassioned performance. Her vocal quality was superb, and she engaged with every moment on the stage. The sequence where she realised Amy and Laurie were married was a masterclass in controlled expression. There were moments where she could have internalised some of Jo's responses a bit more rather than letting her get too angry, but overall this was a delight to watch.

Heather Daniel also shone in a difficult role, clearly relishing all her comedic lines. Amy is set up to antagonise Jo, but by creating such a stark contrast between the young and adult versions of the character, Heather found a way to make Amy's marriage to Laurie feel like less of a betrayal and more the result of an extended period of growth away from home by both characters. Like Jo, the audience was encouraged to stop living in the past and accept these two new adults, and Heather's performance made that work.

Meg and Beth are interesting roles because, while Amy's escapades fuel Jo's ambitions, the other two provide her ties to home. While they are smaller character arcs, they are no less challenging and both **Ellie McWilliam** and **Izzi Richardson** did excellent work finding the truth in those roles and giving reasons as to why family was ultimately such a driving force for Jo. Both have lovely vocal qualities and gave very strong performances. Beth's very sweet relationship with Mr Laurence was moving, as was Izzi's performance with Heidi of *Some Things Are Meant to Be*. Ellie's portrayal of the only "easy" romance in the show was clearly shown to develop over time, with *More Than I Am* being a highlight.

Those relationships were also successful due to the efforts of **Mark Hunter**, who played Mr Laurence as an ultimate softy, transitioning from grinch to grandfather in a heartbeat, and **Will Roberts**, whose Mr Brooke visibly matured over the course of the show, as did his relatively stable relationship with Meg.

As Marmee, **Nicola Cane** did some wonderful work portraying a woman desperately trying to keep her household together while being battered on all sides by historical circumstances. A stand out moment was when her daughters chose to include her in their fun, and the look of relief and gratefulness on her face was very telling. As a result of this lovely piece of character development, the songs *Here Alone* and *Days of Plenty* were made all the more poignant, as well as being beautifully delivered.

Jack Kenny gave a flashy and sardonic Laurie, who was highly invested in becoming part of the March family, while very much playing up the humour of the role to great effect. Meanwhile, **Jacob Botha** as Professor Bhaer brought the audience firmly on side with his limited stage time, with some audience members gasping in excitement when he arrived unexpectedly at the March house. **Victoria Waddington** provided some lovely, warm but pragmatic moments as his landlady Mrs Kirk.

Overseeing all this with a steely gaze was **Annie Houseago** as the formidable Aunt March. Annie approached the role with an imperiousness and a wry humour that balanced against each other well. The amount of expression in the raising of a single eyebrow spoke volumes. A very enjoyable performance and a lovely counterpoint to the remainder of the family.

As mentioned above, the ensemble comprised several talented performers, who approached each role with enthusiasm and gusto. All brought significant levels of stage presence and worked well as a team, while also standing out in their individual roles.

Production

This was a production with a lot of moving parts, with additional features, such as projections, that aren't always standard in *Little Women*. Cygnet Players, led by Producer **Tara Rogerson**, pulled together a large number of elements well, fulfilling the creative vision and ensuring a slick show from start to finish.

Costumes

This was a well thought-out, cohesive costume design by **Kathryn Felton**. The colour pallet of purple and sepia worked well and flowed through from the publicity material, and the pieces were all in period. The characters within Jo's story were particular highlights. As mentioned above, the paper streamers made of novel pages stuck together distracted from the overall design and, while the idea made sense in the context of highlighting Jo's perspective, printed fabric may have been more effective to reduce the rustling and to appear more structurally sound.

No makeup designer is credited in the programme, but a general word of advice is that in a theatre with modern lighting and an intimate audience, a lighter touch would give a more natural look, in keeping with the rest of the show.

Set & Props

This was a simple set, designed by **Rebecca Haywood**, which worked well to depict the multiple locations of the story. The structure on stage right served as the iconic attic for most of the show, branching out to become a refuge for Meg, Jo and Laurie during the ball sequence. The remainder of the stage hosted the other locales. A more flexible set may have allowed the audience to focus on the

attic scenes more when they were taking place, perhaps becoming larger and more central when needed, and for that space to be used more during the other scenes rather than dead space, but as it was this was functional and neat. Decoration was added on each side through banners depicting text from the novel, and this was a nice touch.

Each scene was enhanced through the use of period furniture, which visually signposted the era and location well. The amount of furniture disrupted the flow of the show at times, though, with the rug in the Marches' house in particular taking a lot of additional time to lay out and requiring extra vamping. The choice to use the back of the theatre as the entry point to the living room gave the audience the impression of being closer to the action, but also made the March house feel bigger than is indicated by the script, particularly in relation to their financial situation.

The set was also augmented by projections on a screen which dominated the back wall of the stage, designed by **Richard Cain**. At times this was used well to represent the set, for example projecting the exterior of the March house during the outdoor scenes, or enhancing the narrative by showing Jo and Beth's kite in flight. At other times the projections didn't feel necessary, such as when the furniture in the Marches' living room was duplicated on the screen at a greater size and an unusual angle. The decision to project extracts from the novel also had mixed success, often not staying up long enough to be read properly, particularly with ensemble movement in front of it. When it was used in the final scene, the cast blocked the last line or two, so this was missed. A more consistent use of projection and a more considered approach as to when and how it is used could resolve these issues.

The wide array of detailed props was well-curated by **Valerie Bureau**. One unusual element was the tea-staining of many of the letters and papers. Usually this is done to make paper look old, but in this case all the documents were newly-written on fresh paper. It may have been to tie in with the colour pallet, but this wasn't consistent.

Stage Management

This was generally a well-run, slick show, as Stage Managed by **Kay Rose** and **Lucy Boardman**, with a large team of crew. This was a long show at just under 3 hours, but it ran to good time and the coordination between the various teams was apparent.

Set changes were clearly a challenge here and, as suggested above, a few items of furniture could have been removed to make these flow better. There were also times when the main playing space was cleared and reset either side of a scene in the attic, which could have been more efficiently managed with a lighting change. Although these were design and directorial decisions, some push-back may have assisted here.

A few things to watch out for in future are backstage noise, particularly in the quiet scenes, keeping tabs closed during scenes, and ensuring crew and band use the stage doors during interval rather than walking across the stage. Movement of the projection cloth from backstage passers-by was also clearly a challenge, and one for which there isn't an easy solution, unfortunately.

Sound

Sound Design by **Stuart Vaughan** was excellent, with a good balance throughout the performance between vocalists and band. Either there was an investment in good quality equipment for this production or there was a lot of luck involved, as there were no significant issues apparent.

Lighting

The Lighting Design featured a lot of interesting choices by **Emily-Mae Winters** (with operation by **Richard Pike**). The natural light for the majority of the scenes worked very well, and tied in nicely with the set. However, the frequent switching to dramatic colour during many of the musical numbers was jarring at times, and wasn't used consistently. This colouring was often purple and, while this matches the colour pallet of the wardrobe, some complementary colours could have been effective here.

Programme & Publicity

The design items for this show were uniformly excellent, with congratulations to **Evie Smyth** and **Ruth Furber**. The programme was well laid-out and easy to read, although could have included character names alongside actor bios to avoid flicking back and forth (a very minor issue). The inclusion of the About NODA wording means it is eligible for the NODA Programme Competition.

These designs flowed through to a fantastic publicity campaign, which was unmissable on many social media platforms. This featured a range of engaging content and was wise to focus on the bond between the actors, to mirror the bond between the characters. As much as at times it could feel like an overpowering volume of content, a potential audience member couldn't help but feel they wanted to be a part of all that.

Front of House

The Front of House team, as managed by **Gemma Miles** was welcoming and friendly. As is often the case at Putney Arts Theatre, some audience members seemed unsure of whether they needed to check in at the box office – a very minor point, but some wording on the ticket may clarify the process. There also seemed to be a lot of yelled instructions from the team during the interval – this is clearly due to a need to keep the show to time, but in many theatres a bell has the same effect without stressing the audience out quite as much.

Summary

This production treated its audience to some fantastic performances by its top-notch cast. It told the story simply and well and, while some of the scenic elements could have been toned back for clarity, the audience was entertained throughout.



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