



Little Women

by Hal Cropp, Stef Dickens, and S.R. Dixon
adapted from the novel by Louisa May Alcott

Student Matinee Series underwritten by



Directed by Hal Cropp

Stage Manager	.....	Michael Van Schoick
Assistant Director/Dramaturg	.....	Daniel Louden Stock
Set Designer	.....	Stan Peal
Lighting Designer	.....	Jason Underferth
Costume Designer	.....	Jason Lee Resler
Sound Designer	.....	Stan Peal
Props Designer	.....	Daniel Louden Stock
ASL Interpreter (Dec 11th Performance)	.....	Melissa Almmont

Cast

Meg, eldest of the March daughters (also Susie, Doc Bangs)	.....	Irene ErkenBrack
Jo, second eldest, a tomboy (also Katy)	.....	Stef Dickens
Beth, third eldest (also Hannah, Old Man)	.....	Sarah Kathryn Hawkins
Amy, youngest daughter (also Lottchen)	.....	Jessie Sherman
Marmee, their mother (also Sallie Moffat, Mr. Davis)	.....	Laura Depta
John Brooke, Meg's husband, a schoolteacher (also Mary, Mrs. Hummel)	.....	Brennan Kelleher
Laurie, the March's neighbor and friend (also Jenny)	.....	Jerome Yorke, Jr.
Old Laurence, Laurie's grandfather (also Aunt March, Prof. Bhaer)	.....	Stan Peal

Setting

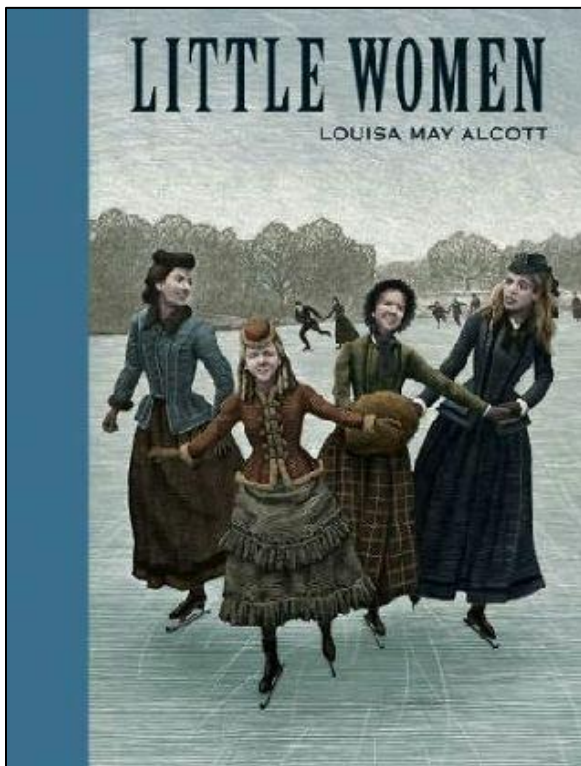
The March family home, and environs about town, Concord, Massachusetts
Christmas 1867 and the past

This play will be performed with one intermission

THE STORY

Act One

The play opens with **Meg**, the eldest of the March daughters, and her husband **John Brooke**, arriving at the March home on Christmas Eve. In a moment alone, they reminisce about the moment when John first proposed and how Meg's **Aunt March** arrived to disapprove of the match. **Marmee** then returns home from running an errand to find her daughter and son-in-law waiting for her, and together they share a memory of how Meg and her sisters – **Jo**, **Beth**, and **Amy** – would put on melodramas to entertain themselves and their mother for Christmas while their father was away serving as an Army chaplain. After the memory, the March's housekeeper **Hannah** enters, and she and Brooke go off in search of more holiday decorations. While they're gone, Meg and Marmee talk about the challenges of balancing the challenges of being a young wife and young mother, and Marmee advises her daughter to make Brooke more a part of raising his own children instead of Meg taking on all the work herself.



They go off to help Hannah and Brooke, leaving the house seemingly empty as Jo arrives, fresh off the train from New York. Left alone, her mind turns back through memories of meeting their neighbors, a young man named **Laurie** and his grandfather, **Mr. Laurence**. Although first appearing to be rather gruff, Mr. Laurence soon takes a liking to the March girls and their friendship with Laurie, and he even makes a gift of a grand piano to Beth in appreciation of her musical talents.

The rest of the household discover Jo in the midst of her reverie and caught up on Jo's life in New York – the state of her writing and her new friendship with a fellow boarder, **Professor Bhaer** – before indulging in another memory of a picnic the girls once took with their friends where Brooke first began sparking to Meg, and Jo confided in Laurie about her literary ambitions. The girls also remember a time when Meg and Jo went to take in a play with Laurie, and Amy, enraged at having been left behind, burned a book that Jo had been writing. As the flashback concludes, Marmee runs on with an exciting announcement.

Act Two

The March household is a flurry to discover a special surprise. Amy has returned early from her travels abroad in time to celebrate Christmas with the family. And she's brought with her another familiar face – Laurie, who has also (until recently) been traveling in Europe. Once Laurie and Jo are alone, he announces that he and Amy have married. Although she tries to be happy for the couple, Jo is troubled and remembers some of the more unpleasant moments of their youth together, such as when Laurie originally proposed to her and she had to refuse him, and the time that Amy fell through a patch of thin ice. In the present day, Jo quarrels with Meg and Amy, accusing them of having forgotten about Beth whose recent passing seems to be a topic everyone devotes themselves to avoiding.

Having driven everyone else from the room, Jo is left alone with a memory of when Beth spent time caring for a poor family in town by herself because her sisters were too busy to help, and contracted scarlet fever because of it. Marmee comes in to try and comfort Jo, who is struggling with her own overwhelming sense of grief. She worries that the family has forgotten about Beth when, in contrast, that's all that Jo can think about. Marmee suggests that Jo is holding on to one more painful memory, and says that sharing it might be the key to letting it go. With the family watching, Jo relives a memory of nursing Beth toward the very end of her illness. Together, Jo and her sisters find a way to both acknowledge and release their grief.

The family heads in to the next room for dinner, leaving Jo alone a moment to compose herself, when a strange man arrives at the door. It is Professor Bhaer, who has come looking to call on Jo at her family's house, and his arrival gives her a sense of comfort she never even knew she was missing. Everyone returns from the dining room to meet the Professor and sing carols and celebrate the simple joy of friends and family.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Little Women is one of the most beloved classics in American literature. Written by Louisa May Alcott and published originally in two volumes (1868 & 1869), the novel tells the story of the daughters of the March family – Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy – and their experiences growing up during the time of the American Civil War and several years after. The story has been adapted many times as plays, films, a musical, an opera, and a Japanese anime series.

Alcott's novel is loosely based on her own experience growing up with three sisters of her own. She was the daughter of educator and noted transcendentalist Amos Alcott and counted celebrated figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau as family friends. The philosophy of a spiritual enlightenment that "transcended" traditional faith models pervades her writing and fueled her work as early abolitionist and feminist. To help support her family, she worked as a



seamstress, teacher, and governess and volunteered as a nurse during the Civil War. The widespread success and popularity of *Little Women* allowed Alcott to work as a writer full-time and she produced two more novels of the March family – *Little Men* in 1871 and *Jo's Boys* in 1886.

In her later years, Alcott suffered from chronic health problems thought to have sprung from a bout with typhoid fever that she contracted during her war service. She died in Boston in 1886 and is buried in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord on “Author’s Ridge” near the final resting places of her parents, Emerson, Thoreau, and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

NOTES FROM THE DIRECTOR

We have wanted to bring this timeless classic to our stage for some time but have been stymied by the lack of a stage adaptation that encompasses the scope and fun of the novel. What better way to solve the challenge than to place the story on the backs of our company—as we have done for *A Christmas Carol* and *Peer Gynt*—and give it our own spin? I believe firmly that whether this is your favorite story of all time, or if you haven’t even a passing awareness of the March sisters and their adventures, you will delight in this telling of the tale. The story is filled with joy, heartache, sorrows, and thrills and brings home to me the terrific bonding that sisters have enjoyed throughout time. You will see that we have taken a little liberty in setting the story at Christmas time, but, as in *A Christmas Carol*, this holiday brings about a tremendous feeling of hope, joy, and rebirth, something we all need in times which feel especially dark. I hope that your experience with this story will bring these feelings to you and your loved ones as we celebrate the holidays together with this terrific story.

~ Hal Cropp



From the 1994 film with Susan Sarandon as Marmee March

NOTES ON THE PLAY

Transcendence

By Scott Dixon

It can be decidedly risky when one decides to re-imagine a story so beloved by so many people as it is with *Little Women*. Generations of readers hold the story of the March family as one of their favorite literary experiences, and the girls are as real to their admirers as if they were members of the family. That can carry with it a natural protectiveness of the story when these characters make the leap from page to stage (or screen) and perhaps there are already conversations happening in the theatre tonight about the merits of the 2005 musical adaptation versus the 1994 movie versus the 1978 movie versus the 1949 movie, and so on. It seems that each generation has felt a new call to bring the story to life in a way never done before. And so to, as we have done with classic stories before, the creative team at the Commonwealth offers its own adaptation.

There is no denying that the act of making a novel or novella work for the stage is an inherently destructive one. The same structures and techniques that can work so well in a book can come across as clumsy or tiring or simply unworkable in the theatre. Therefore, one has to accept going in that some changes will need to be made, and it could be argued that Louis May Alcott herself would not have minded. Ms. Alcott was part of the Transcendentalist movement in New England in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and the transcendentalists believed (in a nutshell) that higher truths exist beyond the morass of rules and rituals, forms and doctrines. They felt more beholden to the spirit of the law, as the saying goes, than to the letter of the law.

And that's precisely what an adaptation tries to do - transcend the structure of the original in order to capture the magic and wonder that lies beyond. This is also, perhaps, a dynamic at work in many people's lives at this time of year. For some, it might be working to transcend the commercialism of the holiday season to embrace its true purpose, or perhaps seeking the sense of celebration that is supposed to be the reason for the traditions that can suddenly seem burdensome. Or, perhaps, like the March family in this incarnation of the story, it's about trying to get past a sense of grief and loss when everyone else is so joyful and carefree.



From the 1933 film with Katharine Hepburn as Jo

The March family, in this stage version and in the novel, certainly are not without their own challenges and obstacles to happiness. Ms. Alcott purposefully worked against common romantic traditions to make Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy more real to her readers, and the resounding popularity of her work is a testament to her success. These characters resonate all that much more because we see where they have been bruised and banged up, but if the story of *Little Women* can be said to offer inspiration, then perhaps it comes to us as this: the path to happiness lies in friends, and family, and opening our hearts to all the love that is around us even if (and especially if) we don't even realize it's there.



The Alcotts lived in his house in Historic Concord, Massachusetts, where Louisa May Alcott wrote *Little Women*.

Things to Look for / Discussion Topics

1. The four sisters in *Little Women* are famous for having their own distinct personalities while also clearly being part of the same family. How would you describe the differences between Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy? In what ways are they alike?
2. Meg, Jo, Beth, and Laurie all share dreams with one another – what they call their “castles in the air.” By the end of the story, have they achieved their dreams or not? How do you feel about whether or not they’ve achieved their dreams?
3. In contrast to the characters and settings of most of the romantic novels of the 19th century, the March family in *Little Women* are neither wealthy nor glamorous. What qualities would you use to describe this family, how they treat one another and how they treat others?
4. One of the remarkable things about the story of *Little Women* is the way in which some of the characters defy gender stereotypes (particularly those of the 19th century). Which character most defies a gender stereotype, and in what ways?

5. While the women remember moments from their past, they go back to their childhood during the American Civil War. What are five things you know about the Civil War? How do you think the March family feels about the war?
6. Adapting a play for the stage means having to make many changes from the original material. How is Commonwealth's play different from Louisa May Alcott's novel? How is it different from other stage or film adaptations you may have seen?
7. The play takes place indoors and outdoors, with the actors all playing many roles. How are these scenes staged so that you know what characters the actors are supposed to be? How are lights or set pieces used to create these different places on one stage? What other ways can you think of to achieve this effect?



Little Women at the Commonwealth runs from November 20 through December 21, 2010

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