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'Little Women' musical delivers big doses of humor and heart

By Rita Moran (Contact)
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Courtesy photo "Little Women: The Musical" stars, from left, Elizabeth Stockton as Meg, Anna Graves as Jo, Christine Zirbel as Marmee, Tessa Grady as Beth and Dawn Notagiacommo as Amy.

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Anyone who has enjoyed Louisa May Alcott's "Little Women," in print or on film, may find the opening of the 2005 musical version of the tale surprising. Fledgling writer and inchoate feminist Jo March is already in a New York rooming house discussing her flamboyant writing style with Professor Bhaer, a gentle German teacher who finds the wild and bloody melodrama of one of her early stories too much to stomach.

What follows immediately is Jo's enactment of the fantasy for Bhaer, re-created behind a scrim by other characters in the play to comic effect, especially so in the Actors' Repertory Theatre of Simi production running through Sept. 7 at the Simi Valley Cultural Arts Center. The extravagant gestures of Jo at the front of the stage are mirrored perfectly by the actors at the back. The synchronization heightens the laugh potential exponentially and is carried through in the singing, with Jo delivering, or mouthing, the words of her story while the singing is tossed back and forth.

All of the precision timing is a sign of the skilled direction by David Ralphe and the supportive musical direction by Gary Poirot, as well as the talent of the adept cast, particularly Anna Graves as Jo March.

The cart-before-the-horse opening devised by Allan Knee (who wrote the book), Mindi Dickstein (lyrics) and Jason Howland (music) serves to get the vivid re-enactment scene up front to rouse audience interest. It may confound those who've never dipped into the Civil War-era novel even more than those who have. At least the latter will know the family background that led to Jo's taking off for the big city publishing center to try her luck, and be aware of the strong ties that she left behind in Concord, Mass. Alcott's novel, published in 1868, was loosely based on her own life.

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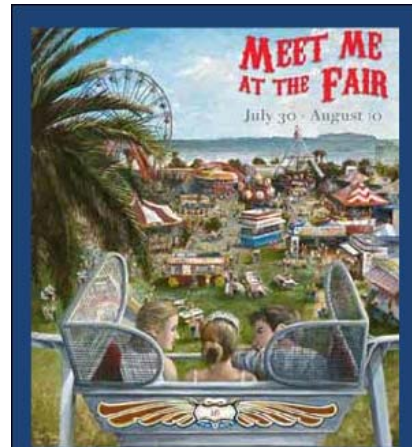
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The home scenes are much more memorable from the book and the movie, and they get ample coverage as the musical adaptation unfolds. The March family consists of Marmee (Christine Zirbel), a mother holding her daughters close while their father is involved in the war; Jo, the dominant daughter; Meg (Elizabeth Stockton), the romantic of the family; Amy (Dawn Notagiacommo), the spoiled one; and Beth (Tessa Grady), the frail one. Marmee in her quiet, dignified manner and Jo in her exuberant style work to keep the bond tight as the family weathers



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war, death and sibling rivalry.

Simi's production is blessed with five strong women actors and singers who do justice to the show's many songs in many moods. Only a few numbers leave a strong impression, but the performances are rewarding. One of the most touching moments comes when Jo and Beth sing "Some Things Are Meant to Be" while they reminisce at the beach, Beth fading fast and Jo buoying her with a gift of a kite. Theater magic takes place as they sing and the kite actually "flies" out over the audience and eventually lifts off into the "sky."

The men also exhibit voices that can reach exquisite moments, although as a group they seemed not quite as vocally developed as their female counterparts. Still, fine singing is done by them all: Timothy Hearl as Laurie, the boy next door who almost wins Jo's hand; David Daniels, who co-produced with Jan Glasband, as Bhaer; Kristan Cleto as John Brooke, Meg's successful suitor; and David Burr as Laurie's father, who transforms from stiff to marshmallow soft when his heart goes out to the unfortunate Beth.

Adding a bit of zest to the stew is Kim Blake in the dual roles of the rigid Aunt March and the jolly Irish Mrs. Kirk.

Adventurous stagecraft elements make the three-hour show move smoothly, especially during the second act, with evocative swaths of material providing a mood-setting backdrop in several scenes, and screened visuals that help establish the out-of-sequence time elements.

"Little Women," musical or not, is a show that audiences of any age can enjoy, with warmth and humor to spare.

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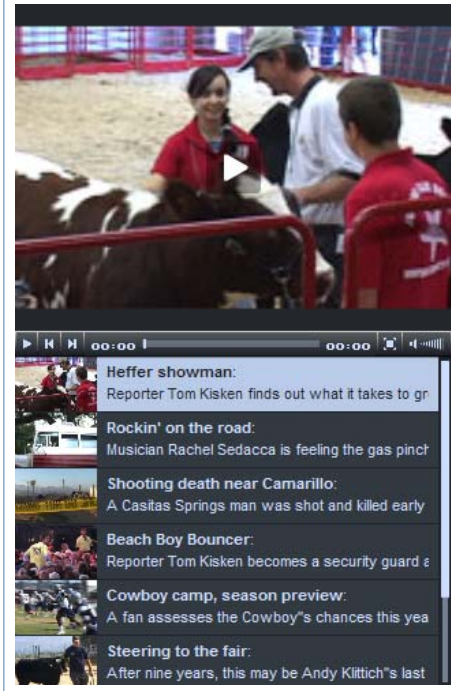
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