

**LITTLE WOMEN.** Book by Allan Knee, lyrics by Mindi Dickstein, music by Jason Howland. Directed by Joey Banks. Jesse H. and Mary Gibbs Jones Theatre, Southwestern University, Georgetown, TX. 28 February 2020.

Southwestern University's Theatre Department is well-versed in its use of intimate spaces for all kinds of productions, ranging from their more minimalist productions such as *You're a Good Man Charlie Brown*, to more extravagant productions like *Heathers: the Musical*. Knowing Southwestern University's history, the choice to stage *Little Women* in a thrust space was both an expected move and a welcome surprise. Past productions of *Little Women* have been directed in predominantly proscenium spaces (as many musicals are), making Southwestern University's production a stand-out, though the venue certainly wasn't the only reason.

*Little Women* primarily follows Jo March, a young woman in the 1860s who is fighting to become a famous author. Over the course of the musical, Jo faces many struggles, including the struggle to keep her sisters together and their relationships fully intact, the overbearing (and unrequited) affections from her best friend Laurie, and the pressures of society – personified by the unrelenting opposition of her Aunt March – to be a “proper woman”. As a whole, the story places a great deal of focus on themes of female empowerment, tradition versus change, love and loss, sisterhood and relationships, and memories of the past.

For this particular production of *Little Women*, director Joey Banks' concept was based around a central question: “How do our relationships form us?” In essence, Banks wanted to explore both the relationships between the characters, and the ways those relationships impacted

each character. Regarding his overall vision, it seemed Banks wanted to maintain some of the more traditional elements of the musical while still exploring more modern ideas, in terms of both the societal standards expressed within the plot and the types of design media used to enhance the show. Through the use of powerful stage pictures, lively musical numbers, captivating movements and visuals, stunning performances from the full ensemble, and an intimate venue perfectly suited for the deeply emotional nature of the production, Banks was able to bring his concept to life in a truly spectacular way.

Regarding performances, the actors did an excellent job of maintaining a mostly-realistic style (as realistic as a musical can be, of course), while occasionally pulling in some anachronistic choices that – while a bit jarring at first – helped many younger audience members connect to the characters more effectively. As mentioned previously, the cast brought an assortment of incredible performances, though there were certainly some stand-outs. Trinity Denson, as Jo March, was one such performer. She delivered a stunning vocal performance – a very high compliment considering the challenging range the score presents. More so, Trinity captured the fiery, explosive defiance that Jo March is known for – her performance was full of love and passion, making Trinity Denson one of the musical's stars for more reasons than the script simply dictating such. Daniel Winkler as Professor Bhaer, Campbell Duffy as Aunt March, and Jana Steen as Amy March gave similarly delightful performances. Although their characters had fewer opportunities to shine than others, both made the most of their opportunities on-stage, and it doesn't seem to be much of a stretch to say that the performances of these three received

the most laughs. Among all of these show-stoppers, Carson Petocz performance as Laurie was somewhat out of place – not due to a lack of talent, but due to an inconsistency in style. Whereas many of the other characters fit into the classical style of the music and embrace the mannerisms of the time period, Petocz portrayal appeared very modern and only seemed accurate to the time period in lines spoken, not behavior or vocal style.

As a whole, the production's design elements did an excellent job of supporting both the production's themes and the central concept of relationships.

In regards to the set, Desidario Roybal's design did an excellent job of reinforcing the play's themes. The design involved two major playing spaces: the lower level, which housed the living room, the ball, the boarding house, and various locations from Jo's book, and the upper level, which primarily depicted the attic of the March house, as well as the beach during Beth's final scene. Throughout the performance, the ensemble characters created set transitions by adding, removing, and rearranging various props and furniture pieces, though these changes were almost entirely done on the lower level, leaving the attic virtually untouched throughout the show. By making the attic from the March girls' childhood home a permanent fixture – one that is constant and always visible – Roybal's design helped reinforce the idea that Jo's memories of the attic – and, in turn, her sisters – are always with her, in the back of her mind, and that everything that she has in the present time is thanks to her days spent in the attic with her sisters.

In terms of costumes, designer Kerry Bechtel's choice to build an abundance of costumes differentiated by season did an excellent job of communicating the theme of memory through

passage of time. The many costume changes were a primary communicator of each character's arc – at the act, Jo trades her feminine dress for a blouse, vest, and skirt, showing her growth in both maturity and professionalism. She still has her old, defiant fire, but that fire is more controlled and focused.

Lighting, designed by Andrew Snyder, and sound, designed by Jaden Williams, were the main design elements that complicated things. As with all good lighting and sound, if your full attention is not drawn to it, then the designers have – generally – done a good job. After all, designers want their lights to enhance and compliment the piece, not detract or distract from it. For the most part, this rang true for the production. The lighting changes were subtle enough that they weren't usually distracting while still being prominent enough to convey meaning and mood. In particular, the use of spotlights and other centralized lighting to either isolate a character or connect two characters were very effective in communicating the production's concept. However, some choices contradicted the relative consistency of this production, such as the rain projections – composed of small, vertically-moving lines of light that fell down upon the umbrella and, occasionally, the actors – used toward the end of the show. Yet, while this particular design choice was somewhat distracting, it by no means ruined the production and its impact.

The sound design suffered from a similar problem to the lights: whereas the majority of the production used only live sounds and orchestration, the final scene made use of a very prominent thunder sound effect. Once again, this somewhat inconsistent choice was jarring to an

audience that had become accustomed to a specific style of design, but went mostly unnoticed after the fact. Regarding the production's music, musical director Dr. Beth Everett did a magnificent job of conducting both the actors on-stage and the orchestra back-stage. The music was performed beautifully - no doubt as a result of her direction - and the vocal performances largely maintained the classical style, while still providing some room for individuality among the actors. The music, underscore and accompaniment alike, never detracted from the experience of the show, but rather dramatically enhanced the performance. Of the production's many musical numbers, the stand-out was certainly "Weekly Volcano Press," which called back to the lyrics and melodies of "Operatic Tragedy," "Our Finest Dreams," and "Astonishing," culminating in a passionate and highly emotional representation of Jo's success and pride at having finally published her works.

As a whole, the production communicated the target concept very well. The relationships between characters were clear, the impact these relationships had on each character was evident. As surprising as it may be for a story that dates back to the 1800s, the audience was able to connect to the ensemble and story in incredible ways, and the cast was beyond successful in helping this story to withstand the test of time.