

# A sweet yet tragic tale

Alec Clayton for The Olympian  
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Director Adam Michael Lewis wrote of "Little Women," playing at Capital Playhouse: "A musical? Well, why not? It's been a movie (three times), an opera (two times)..."

Actually, according to a news release I received, there have been more than a dozen movie versions and even a Japanese animé production. The musical, which premiered on Broadway in 2005, is only the latest in a never-ending parade of "Little Women," all based on Louisa May Alcott's classic and timeless 1869 novel.



This latest version is a sweet play that is tragic in part, with some wonderfully outlandish comic relief. That relief comes in the form of the characters acting out scenes from Jo March's "blood and guts" stories and from some amusing songs with operatic flair from Holly Harmon, who is entertaining in the dual roles of the social climbing Aunt March and the boarding house proprietor Mrs. Kirk.

Christie Murphy, in a commanding performance as Jo, stands on a riser and dictates her melodramatic short story in song early in the first act (and again in the second act). Bruce Haasl and Stephen Anastasia mime the actions of two swashbuckling rivals who fight for the love of the heroine, Clarissa, played by Carolyn Willems Van Dijk, who is also delightful as Jo's romantic sister Meg. Played out in an exaggerated pantomime of bad acting, these mini-plays are hilarious.

Not all of the singing is as entertaining. Some of the songs are overly long, and Steven Wells as Professor Bhaer strains to hit some of the notes in his solos. He does, however, act the part of the sweet German professor very convincingly.

The most outstanding songs are the sad and lovely "Here Alone" sung by Marmee (Jana Tyrell) and Beth's (Alisa Tobin) tragic swan song, "Some Things Are Meant to Be," performed as a duet with Jo.

There are a lot of strong performances, but the actors who carry this production are Anastasia, whose sweetness in the role of Laurie is infectious, and Murphy, whose smile

lights up the set. He reminds me of Matthew Broderick, and like Broderick, he makes you want to root for him.

The set designed by Haasl is marvelous. It is the parlor of the March home, with lovely windows and big beams that make the stage look much larger than its actual size. With a few projected images and by moving a few pieces of furniture around, it is transposed into Mrs. Kirk's boarding house, the attic of the March home, and other settings. The projected images are scenic photographs manipulated by Haasl to look like Impressionist paintings. The only downside to the set is that the constant moving of benches and chairs between scenes is terribly distracting. It would have been better if they had left the scene changes to our imagination.

The enjoyable choreography by Danny Boman effortlessly moves the action, and the costumes by Audra Merritt are a joy to see, from the plain Civil War-era house dresses the sisters wear, to the elaborate ball gowns, to the bustle worn by Amy (Bailey Boyd), who transforms herself believably from a bratty teenager to a sophisticated young woman.

"Little Women" is a period romance, a tearjerker, and ultimately, an uplifting story.