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Playwright Nancy Early describes ?the thrill of the show?

Written By CONSTANCE SCRAFIELD

?The response for this musical has been just overwhelming,? declared Nancy Early, playwright of Little Women, the musical currently running at Theatre Orangeville until Sunday, December 22. Music and lyrics are by Jim Betts.

She said, ?A teacher got in touch with me and told me they had groups [totalling] ?almost 200 kids to your show. It was a huge hit with them. It really was amazing how they loved the musical and it looks like we're going to start doing more musicals.'

?It really matters; it's important,? she said. ?People of all ages are enjoying this show. People call me and say, ?We're going to the show with group of [seniors or other clubs] and we hope you'll come over and say hi.' So, I go and meet them and talk a bit about it.

?I'm really pleased and proud of the response I'm getting from the community. It's just wonderful.?

Talking about the framework of Little Women, ?Our particular adaptation is a good mix of feelings: it made the audiences laugh and cry and there are really great messages. We saw it more than once and we hope to see it next year in another theatre. It did really well here last time [in its World Premiere, 2001]. For this [production], ticket sales for the matinees have done especially well.

?I have to say too that Jim Betts and I, our adaptation is unique; even the other musical in the States follows the young women to when they're married but our keeping it to one year gave us the chance to have a good story for all of the girls, for all of them to grow in a year and they're not the same in the end. One of the reasons Jim and I chose Little Women was because we wanted to write a story with strong roles for women. They're a variety of ages and we managed to do that for each of them.?

Ms. Early is so thrilled to comment, ?It's a real honour to have Theatre Orangeville to produce this play again and to have David direct this tremendous cast, how he brings everything together with the cast, the creative team ? lights.

?I used to work for Theatre Orangeville. When the theatre was established, I wanted to write and there was a play-writing course being offered by Theatre Orangeville for free. As a group, we each wrote a section for a production, Into the Wild ? something like that.

?Then, instead of going off to write more plays, I did the marketing for the theatre for four years. When I was there, it was summer theatre. At the end of the four years, Jim Betts was leaving the theatre [as Artistic Director] and he came to me and said, ?I'm writing the music for Little Women, would you like to write the [script]?'

?Most musicals have huge sponsors. This little musical is on the backs of a theatre with the help of David Nairn.

?After 2001, it played across the country and around the Ontario and all the way to Vancouver, down to Orange County, California. I went to see the B.C. production and it was well received and, in Persephone Theatre in Saskatoon, they had to add performances.

?It was funny,? said she, reminiscing about writing the script, ?When I was writing the play, people would come up to me and say. ?You'd better include this bit about Amy falling in the ice and that bit about something else. They all knew the story so well, they wanted to be sure I included the parts they loved.?

The original book written by Louisa May Alcott in 1869 ?has never been out of print in all these years,? Ms. Early said. ?It has inspired many young female writers. Jo is very inspiring because she wants to be a writer and not necessarily be a wife and mother.?

For Ms. Early and Mr. Betts, in the first place, this is a story ? a collection of stories about each of the girls, really. ?I think I loved the book and Jo wanting to be a writer and all the women in the story; I'd never seen the play and I'd never seen another musical; so,

I thought it's time to make this musical.?

She has a life as well, as she elaborated, ?Now, I have a great gig, working for Caledon Public Libraries in the Alton branch and I work sometimes at a couple of other branches. I live in Alton and I don't usually come home exhausted, so I have the time and energy for other projects.

?For the library, I organize the programs and the circulations. The Alton branch is very active. There are two book clubs and several other groups. These libraries are the hubs of their communities. We have story time for kids, knitting groups, chess ? we hear the stories. It's a small library but very busy.?

Her list of writing is long. ?I was a travel journalist for a TV travel show: to Israel, England, France, New Zealand for the Harry Potter tour. I wrote for In the Hills magazine and other travel magazines.

?I wrote for Care Bears, that TV show. I've always had my hand in something.?

In fact, she made the remark, ?Getting Little Women up on its legs, with new workshops, this has been a resurgence for me, to quote Amy's line, ?I feel like I'm at the pineapple (sic) of my artistic career.'

?My dream is to have my children's story The Sister Riddle published. One sister has to take care of her younger sister and they wind up in another world. They have to solve three riddles to get out of it. To get it published ? and make a musical of it too. I can see it so clearly in my head..?

In addition, ?I'm looking forward to finishing a couple of projects that I've started ? finish up Sister Riddle, which is with an editor at the moment and then, work on promoting it to potential publishers.?

As to her future in theatre, ?Jim and I are thinking about another musical about the farmer near Shelburne, Elwood Hill, who called his place in Mulmur Rock Hill Park. Elwood and his wife had a hard time growing anything on the land, so, he ended up having a Grand Ol' Oprey-style season in June 1969. He decided to have his own version of Woodstock [over the Labour Day weekend] and he brought in The Guess Who and Lighthouse [many other bands]. Stomping Tom mentioned Rock Hill in his memoirs.?

That is all to come, however, ?One of my main goals in the next couple of years is to find a way to place Little Women in other theatres. When you write a musical, all the negotiations have to be done by us. David Nairn was interested in it. We did a workshop and he commissioned it from there ? that was the beginning. Now, to put a package together and interest Artistic Directors of other theatres.?

She summed it up, ?I can't help saying it again ? it really is a gift to have the musical up again on stage.?

Her comment, ?David Nairn says that people in the theatre are collaborative artists and I feel that this is an outstanding example of that. This cast and crew has given me memories to last a long time.?

Little Women ends this weekend on the Sunday matinee, December 22. For tickets and information, as usual, at the Box Office at 87 Broadway and the Information Centre on Buena Vista Drive at Highway 10; by telephone on 519-942-3423 or online at www.theatreorangeville.ca