

LITTLE WOMEN

By Matt Buchanan

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CHARACTERS

Young Jo*
Young Beth*
Marmee
Mrs. Gardiner**
Boy Guest**
Servant**
Jenny Snow**
John Brooke
Mr. March
Older Meg*
Older Jo*
Older Beth*
Lotty**
Professor Bhaer

Young Amy*
Young Meg*
Hannah
Sally**
Young Laurie*
Mr. Laurence
Mr. Davis**
Aunt March
Older Amy*
Older Laurie*
Lad**
Mr. Scott**
Mr. Dashwood**

*The roles of Amy, Beth, Jo, Meg and Laurie may be divided at intermission so that one actor plays the character as a child and another as an adult, or they may be played by the same five actors throughout.

**Indicates ensemble role that may be doubled.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

This play is written so that the roles of the four March girls and Laurie can be played either by five actors throughout, or by five younger actors in Act One and five older actors in Act Two. Particularly if you are working with student actors, I strongly urge you to consider the second option. Apart from the difficulty of playing a fifteen-year-old girl and a married adult in the same play (let alone a twelve-year-old and a very glamorous adult), some of these roles, if played by a single actor throughout, are simply enormous. The role of Jo, in particular, is a powerhouse of a role even if it's divided. (Plus, of course, dividing the roles allows you to give twice as many performers the chance to play really plum parts.) There is, however, one thing to keep in mind if you decide to cast the play this way. Except for Jo, the older roles—particularly Meg—are actually smaller roles than the younger ones. In terms of props and scenery, your watchword should be “simplicity.” The play must flow smoothly. Many props can be mimed. Others can be carried in pockets in the actors’ costumes from the beginning of the play, so that they are there when you need them. In the original production we discovered that the best way to handle the myriad letters, notes, and clippings that are written, read, or otherwise manipulated throughout the play was to simply store a supply of paper and quills on the mantelpiece,

to be grabbed as needed. Slates and other small props were hidden in various spots around the stage as needed so that they could be picked up without exiting. Anything you can do to facilitate the smooth flow of the storytelling should be done. There is only one scene of violence in the play—the schoolroom scene in which Amy is beaten with a switch on her hand. This scene is most effective if the switch really sounds painful, but obviously you can't beat a child for real. In the original production we solved this problem by making a "slapstick." Two wooden rulers (or similar) are taped tightly together at one end, but with a small shim—no thicker than good card stock—inserted between them a few inches from the taped end, so that they are not quite parallel, and there is a small space between them at the untaped end. This will make a quite satisfyingly loud snap even when struck very lightly against Amy's hand. (The sound comes from the two rulers striking against each other, rather than from them striking her hand.)

COSTUMES

Because the original novel is so well known, this play really must be set in its proper historical period. Audiences who thrill to see Shakespeare set in the Jazz age or Sophocles set in a post-apocalyptic future will not tolerate *Little Women* in any other period than its own—the mid-nineteenth century. That said, however, the costumes need not be elaborate. The March girls are not wealthy, so their clothes are simple, and the narrative structure of the play means that multiple costume changes are not only unnecessary but practically impossible. The same is true for Hannah and Marmee. (Aunt March should be more elegant.) The four girls should have different, more grown-up costumes for Act II even if the same performers are playing the roles, and all but Beth should have some kind of outdoor coat or wrap that can be added for outdoor scenes. Young Jo and Meg must each have something that can be added to the basic costume to make it dressier for the dance scene. The men can also wear the same costumes throughout, except that Laurie should have a younger and an older costume. Laurie and Mr. Laurence are more elegant than the rest, and Professor Bhaer is perhaps more rumpled. Laurie needs a graduation cap and gown, and all of the men need outdoor things. The ensemble roles can be costumed by having a sort of generic female and a generic male costume, to which small elements can be added to indicate character. Just as the set is mostly suggested, so can the costumes be, provided the overall effect of period is maintained.

SET

It is important that the set for this play be very simple. Even if you have the resources to build multiple, fully realized sets, resist the impulse. The narrative structure of the play is such that it can only work if scenes are allowed to flow freely into one another with no breaks. The basic setting is the living room and hearth of the March house. All that is needed is a fireplace, a rocking chair or two, a hearthrug, and a couch that can be set up when Beth is ill. This same hearth becomes the living room of Aunt March, of the Laurences, and of the John Brookes after Meg's marriage, with no physical alteration required. Various chairs or stools can be moved on and off for such scenes as the schoolroom and the lecture hall, and a few small tables can become the Brooke kitchen table, Professor Bhaer's desk, etc. The rowboat can be improvised using two low stools or one low bench. In general, the dialogue contains all of the information the audience will need to locate the various scenes. As a matter of fact, the play can work with an even simpler set. I have seen it done quite successfully with nothing but a few chairs and the fireplace that was a built-in feature of the performance space.

PROP LIST

Blue knitted sock	Pair of slippers
Tea table with tea things	Firewood
Various letters, notes and quills	Basket of Christmas gifts
Baskets of food	Wooden toy sword
Cauldron	Medicine bottles
Laden banquet table	Tea cup
Plate of ice	Basket of gifts and kittens
Small cabinet piano	Bag of limes
Switch	Bandages
Various newspapers	Telegram
Various trunks and cases	Purse of money
Lock of hair	Turkey
Handful of newspaper clippings	Jelly jars
Hand sewing	Twin baby dolls
Newspaper hat	Large sketchbook
Writing book	Umbrella
Magazine clipping	

Little Women was premiered at The Montgomery Academy, Montgomery, AL, in 2003 with the following cast and crew:

Younger Meg.....	Beth Brantley
Younger Jo.....	Lillian Wilson
Younger Beth.....	Sarah Wool
Younger Amy.....	Parker Garrett
Marmee.....	Pam Froese
Hannah.....	Lauren Sublett
Mrs. Gardiner.....	Caitlin Ackerman
Sally Gardiner.....	Katherine Jones
Man at ball.....	Forrest Flemming
Younger Laurie.....	Bill Butler
Old Mr. Laurence.....	Michael Reilly
Mr. Davis.....	Forrest Flemming
Jenny Snow.....	Caitlin Ackerman
Classmates.....	Marcie Hobbs, Mary Patton Kyser
John Brooke.....	Jackson McLendon
Aunt March.....	Blake Coleman
Mr. March.....	John Burns Paterson
Older Meg.....	Jessie vanDyke
Older Jo.....	Mary Patton Kyser
Older Beth.....	Katherine Jones
Older Amy.....	Marcie Hobbs
Older Laurie.....	Tazewell Jones
Lad.....	Mike Hollabaugh
Lotty.....	Caitlin Ackerman
Mr. Scott.....	Forrest Flemming
Aunt Carroll.....	Beth Brantley
Mr. Dashwood.....	Mike Hollabaugh
Prof. Friedrich Bhaer.....	R. B. Walker
Director.....	Matt Buchanan
Stage Manager.....	Payne Curlin
Props.....	Julie Garrett, Gay Curlin, Nan Barginier
Costumes.....	Gay Curlin
Makeup.....	Mary Margaret Kyser
Hair.....	Mary Margaret Kyser, Gay Curlin

LITTLE WOMEN

Adapted by
Matt Buchanan

ACT I

AT RISE: The March hearth. JO enters carrying a blue army sock SHE is knitting. SHE addresses the audience. As SHE speaks, MEG, BETH and AMY enter and sit by the fire.

JO: It was cold that December evening, but it was warm beside the fire in the little house. The four girls who sat around that cheerful blaze knitting socks for the Soldiers' Aid should have been content, but the prospect of the holiday about to take place seemed dismal. Jo was fifteen, and she was the tomboy and the tartar of the family. As usual she was the first to say what everyone was thinking. (**joins the others by the fire**) Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents.

AMY: I don't think it's fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things, and other girls nothing at all.

BETH: We've got Father and Mother, and each other.

JO: We haven't got Father, and we won't have him for a long time.

MEG: You know the reason Mother proposed not having any presents this Christmas was because it's going to be a hard winter for everyone. We ought not to spend money for pleasure, when our men are suffering so in the army. We can't do much, but we can make our little sacrifices.

JO: But I don't think the little we'd spend would do any good. We've each got a dollar, and the army wouldn't be much helped by that. I agree not to expect anything from Mother or you, but I did want to buy a book for myself.

BETH: (**quietly**) I planned to spend mine on new music.

AMY: I shall get a nice box of drawing pencils.

JO: Mother didn't say anything about our money, and she won't want us to give up everything. Let's each buy what we want, and have a little fun. I'm sure we work hard enough to earn it.

MEG: I know I do—teaching those tiresome children nearly all day. (**to audience**) Meg, who was sixteen, sometimes wished she could be a “real lady,” and spend her days “taking tea,” and “paying calls.” But with Mr. March far away in the army, all the girls had to make sacrifices. Meg worked as a Governess, and Jo spent her days as paid companion to their cantankerous Aunt March.

JO: How would you like to be shut up for hours with a fussy old lady?

BETH: It's naughty to fret, but I think washing dishes and keeping things tidy is the worst work in the world. My hands get so stiff, I can't practice well at all. **(to audience)** Beth was the musician of the family. She was too shy to thrive at school, and did her studies at home as best she could. With her two older sisters away at their jobs and little Amy off at school, it fell to Beth to be the homemaker of the family, but if she complained this once, it was a rarity.

AMY: At least you don't have to go to school with impertinent girls, who plague you if you don't know your lessons, and laugh at your dresses, and label your father if he isn't rich.

JO: **(laughing)** If you mean libel, I'd say so, and not talk about labels as if Papa was a pickle bottle.

AMY: I know what I mean, and you needn't be satirical about it! **(to audience)** Twelve-year-old Amy was the baby of the family, and she really did her best at school, but she was better at drawing than at vocabulary, and her schoolmasters always complained that she filled her primers with pictures of clouds and rabbits.

BETH: **(to audience, suiting her actions to her words)** The clock struck six and, having swept up the hearth, Beth put a pair of slippers down to warm before the fire. Somehow the sight of the old shoes had a good effect on the girls. Mother was coming, and everyone brightened to welcome her.

JO: **(picks up the slippers and holds them before the fire)** These are quite worn out. Marmee must have a new pair.

BETH: I thought I'd get her some with my dollar.

AMY: No, I shall!

MEG: I'm the oldest—

JO: I'm the man of the family now that Papa is away, and I shall provide the slippers.

BETH: Let's each get her something, and not get anything for ourselves.

(They pause in thought.)

MEG: I shall give her a nice pair of gloves.

JO: Army shoes, best to be had!

BETH: Some handkerchiefs, all hemmed.

AMY: I'll get a little bottle of cologne. She likes it, and it won't cost much, so I'll have some left to buy my pencils.

JO: Let's let Marmee think we are getting things for ourselves, and then surprise her. We must go shopping tomorrow afternoon. There's so much to do about the play for Christmas night.

MEG: I'm not acting any more after this time. I'm getting too old for such things.

JO: Ha! You won't stop acting as long as you can trail round in a white gown with your hair down, and wear gold-paper jewelry. (**stalks around in a parody of elegance and they all laugh**) You are the best actress we've got, and there'll be an end of everything if you quit.

MARMEE: (**entering**) Glad to find you so merry, my girls. There was so much to do, getting the boxes ready to go tomorrow, that I didn't come home to dinner. Has anyone called, Beth? How is your cold, Meg? Jo, you look tired to death. Come and kiss me, baby. (**The girls rush to hug and kiss MARMEE. SHE addresses the audience as SHE sits by the fire. The girls scurry around, then join her. MEG brings on a little tea table.**) While making these maternal inquiries, Mrs. March got her wet things off and her warm slippers on, and settled down to enjoy the happiest hour of her busy day. The girls flew about, trying to make things comfortable, each in her own way. Meg arranged the tea table. Jo brought wood and set chairs, dropping, over-turning, and clattering everything she touched. Beth trotted to and fro between parlor and kitchen, quiet and busy, while Amy gave directions to everyone. (**to the girls**) I've got a treat for you.

(BETH and AMY clap their hands.)

JO: A letter! A letter! Three cheers for Father!

MARMEE: Yes, a nice long letter. He is well, and he sends all sorts of loving wishes for Christmas, and a special message to you girls.

JO: (**to audience**) Letters were all the March women had of their father that hard winter, but as hard as his absence was to bear, they knew his trials were much worse. Yet this was a cheerful, hopeful letter, full of lively descriptions of camp life, marches, and military news, and only at the end did the writer's heart over-flow with fatherly love and longing for the little girls at home.

MARMEE: (**reading**) Give them all my dear love and a kiss. Tell them I think of them by day, pray for them by night, and find my best comfort in their affection at all times. A year seems very long to wait before I see them, but I know they will remember all I said to them, that they will be loving children to you, do their duty faithfully, and conquer themselves so beautifully that when I come back to them I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women.

AMY: I am a selfish girl! But I'll truly try to be better, so he won't be disappointed in me.

MEG: I think too much of my looks and hate to work, but I won't any more.

JO: I'll try and be what he loves to call me—a “little woman”—and not be rough and wild, but do my duty here instead of wanting to be somewhere else.

BETH: **(to audience)** Beth said nothing, but wiped away her tears with the blue army sock and began to knit with all her might.

(The girls hug MARMEE, yawning, and exit. MARMEE pauses for a second, reading over some part of the letter to herself, then smiles and exits, taking the tea table with her. Lighting signals the passage of time. After a pause, HANNAH enters the kitchen.)

HANNAH: When the four girls came downstairs that Christmas morning they found only old Hannah. She had lived with the family since Meg was born, and was considered, by them all, more as a friend than a servant.

(The girls enter. MEG carries a basket of gifts.)

MEG: Where's Mother?

HANNAH: Goodness only knows. Some poor creature came a-beggin', and your Ma went straight off to see what was needed. There never was a woman like her for giving.

JO: Here she comes! Hide the basket, quick!

(MARMEE enters in her outdoor things.)

GIRLS: Merry Christmas, Marmee! Many of them! ***(Etc.)***

MARMEE: Merry Christmas, little daughters. Come, gather close. I want to say a word before we sit down. Not far away from here lies a poor woman with a little newborn baby. Six children are huddled into one bed to keep from freezing, because they have no fire. There is nothing to eat over there. My girls, will you give them your breakfasts as a Christmas present?

(Pause, as they contemplate going hungry.)

JO: I'm so glad you came before we started to eat!

BETH: May I go and help carry the things to the poor little children?

AMY: I shall take the cream and the muffins.

MARMEE: ***(pleased)*** I thought you'd do it! You shall all go and help me. ***(During the following, the girls scramble around putting together baskets of food, and carry them off. MARMEE addresses the audience.)*** It was a very happy breakfast, and when they went away, leaving comfort behind, I think there were not, in all

the city, four merrier people than the hungry little girls who gave away their breakfast on Christmas morning.

(MARMEE exits as JO enters and addresses the audience as the girls set up for the “performance.” Additional girls may enter and sit in the “audience.”)

JO: The morning charities took so much time that the rest of the day was devoted to preparations for the evening. Being still too young to go often to the theater, the girls put their wits to work, and, necessity being the mother of invention, made whatever they needed. On Christmas night, a dozen girls piled onto the bed, which was the dress circle, and the *Operatic Tragedy* began.

(JO runs off and almost immediately re-enters as HUGO, the villain. After sawing the air with her wooden sword for a moment or two, SHE strikes a pose.)

JO/HUGO: What ho, minion! I need thee!

MEG/HAGAR: **(enters as HAGAR, the witch, with a “cauldron”)** My lord Hugo! What can’st old Hagar, thy miserable servant, do for thee?

JO/HUGO: Ah, Hagar, my faithful minion. Hear me well, for I have need of thee. Can’st thou brew a potion that wilt make the fair Zara adore me?

MEG/HAGAR: With the greatest ease, master.

(chanting) Hither, hither, from thy home,
Airy sprite, I bid thee come!
Bring me here, with elfin speed,
The fragrant philter which I need.

(BETH appears as a lovely FAIRY. SHE is obviously nervous, and speaks (or sings) quietly.)

BETH/FAIRY: Hither I come,
From my airy home,
Afar in the silver moon.
Take the magic spell,
And use it well,
Or its power will vanish soon! **(drops a bottle at MEG’s feet and vanishes)**

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