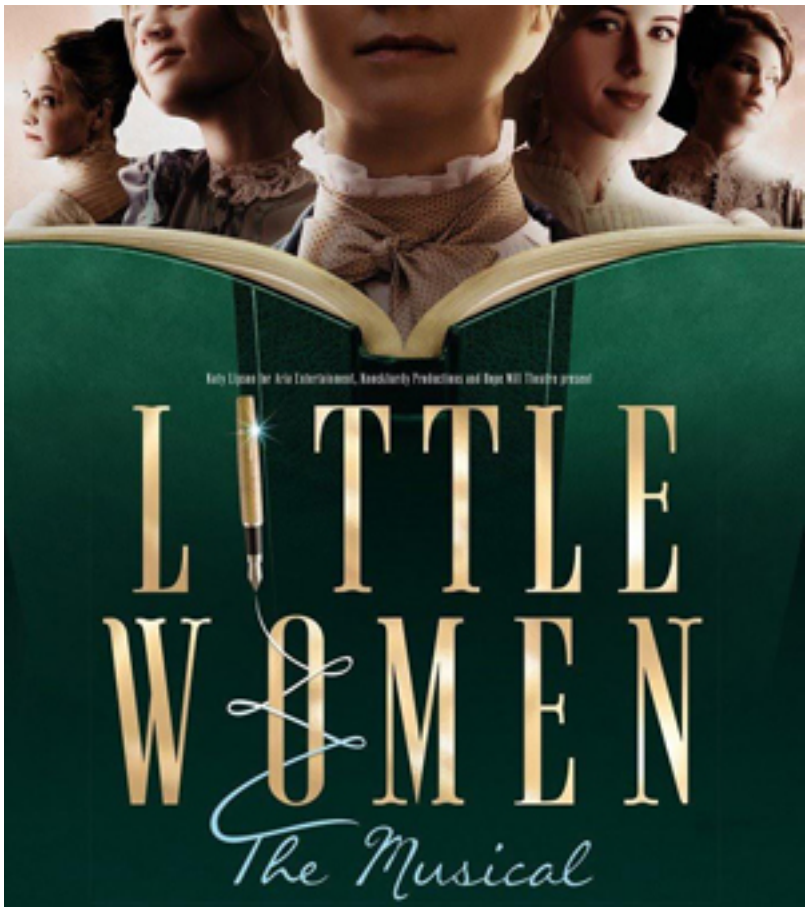

Little Women

at Hope Mill Theatre

Reviewed by Katie Leicester December 2017

Hope Mill Theatre in Manchester was originally an empty listed Victorian warehouse, that two actors spotted on Gumtree and have transformed into Manchester's newest theatre, hosting smash hits such as 'Hair', 'Yanks' and 'Parade'.

It is the brainchild of married couple Joseph Houston and William Whelton, who wanted to bring the magic of musicals to Manchester's fringe scene. The pair opened the 120-150 seater theatre and large cafe bar. The former engine room of the huge mill is now a 50-seater licensed cafe serving food and drink daily until 6pm, and until late during show nights.

This beautiful and versatile theatre space hosted, for the first time out of Broadway, **Little Women** , the musical adaptation of the adored semi-autobiographical novel by Louisa May Alcott, which tells the story of the four March sisters growing up in Concord, Massachusetts, during the American Civil War. Their father, a pastor, is away with the Union troops. Their mother, or Marmee as they call her, must do her best with very little money.

The staging is simplistic but very effective as the actors utilised the space well throughout their storytelling.

Jo the second eldest daughter of the March's daughters wishes to write books and travel – she longs to become a woman of the world as an aspiring writer who in the first scene is seen rejection from yet another publisher. Her friend, Professor Bhaer, tells Jo she can do better by making her stories more personal as they are filled with blood, guts and tragedy. Begrudgingly, Jo weaves the story of how she and her sisters grew up in Civil War America – a tale of self discovery, heartache, hope and everlasting love.

Her sisters, Meg (**Jemima Watling**) who doubts her ability to fit in at the ball but longs to be invited, Beth (**Cathy Read**) the ill fated sister who yearns to play Mr Laurence's beautiful piano is the peace maker of the family, and Amy (
Katie Marie-Carter
) who wants her own things and is the most ego centric of the four joins in with Jo's imaginary games, and recites extracts of her original stories.

Mr Laurence (**Tony Stansfield**) portrayed his character with ease and elegance, and his grandson Laurie (**Connor Hughes**) was convincing as the love struck young man who falls in love with the feisty Jo. Laurie ends up marrying Amy after Jo rejects his proposal, and Laurie's tutor, Mr Brooke (
Joel Harper-Jackson
) who joins up for the forces but proposes to Meg whom he meets at the Valentines Ball before he leaves. Their mother, 'Marmie' is left to bring the girls up alone, played by the elegant and talented
Anna Stolli
, who has to go to her sick husband as he has pneumonia. To fund her mother's trip Jo sells her hair rather than ask her aunt for the money who, seeing the girls left behind, takes Amy to Europe whilst the remaining three are left alone to become little women.

Amie Giselle-Ward gives an energetic and compelling performance as Jo. She brings a distinct energy to the stage that has you exhausted just watching. Her delivery of Mindi Dickstein's lyrics, in numbers such as 'Astonishing' and 'The Fire Within Me', were heartfelt and convincing. Her determination to write and travel found herself doing anything in her power to do, even trying to become a lady for her rich aunt who promises to take her to Europe if she behaves. Amie (Jo) held the stage throughout the performance and portrayed a dazzling array of emotions that had you on a rollercoaster of laughter and tears.

After a death, four proposals and a wedding all ends with the March girls finding their men and destinies.

A small unseen band comprising of a piano and string quartet provide perfect accompaniment and fill the Hope Mill Theatre with a marvellously rich, lush and vibrant sound.

The overall production is a huge credit to all involved, it’s the type of show whereby one visit just isn’t enough and you will want to book again.

The talented strong cast of 10 were all captivating and enchanting in their own way but the stand out performer has to be Amie who portrayed Jo March. Her boundless energy, vocal and immense acting talent would have any leading lady quaking in their boots, as this lady is one to watch for the future West End and Broadway productions.

Well done to all involved in this 5 star musical show.

Book: Alan Knee
Lyrics: Mindi Dickstein

Music: Jason Howland
Director: Bronagh Lagan