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LITTLE WOMEN OF ORCHARD HOUSE

A Full-length Play
by
DAVID LONGEST

Based on the Book
“Little Women”
by
LOUISA MAY ALCOTT



Dramatic Publishing
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DAVID LONGEST

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INTRODUCTION

This play is based, in part, upon the writings, journals, and autobiographical accounts Louisa May Alcott provided in her published manuscripts. It is by no means all-inclusive of her life and the intention of the playwright is to give the audience member an impression of her life and the relationship of her most famous novel, *LITTLE WOMEN*, to actual reality. Certainly great liberties have been taken in scenes such as the one that places Louisa's parents, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and Elizabeth Peabody all in the same room at Orchard House one evening for a discussion, but this is not to say that it could not have happened since they were all either working or living in and around Concord as contemporaries. *LITTLE WOMEN OF ORCHARD HOUSE* is a playwright's attempt to bring the world of reality and the fictional world of one of America's greatest women writers of all time together in a single evening's theatrical entertainment.

The inclusion of three different sets of sisters may at first seem quite confusing. However, with proper staging, the audience is aware that each sister is circled and replaced by a new representative, the illusion should be clear and complete. Also, the strong symbol of the treasure boxes containing the treasures of the heart of each girl will aid in defining the characters of each of the daughters.

The scale model of Orchard House should not be overlooked as the most important element of scenery. The large ethereal palladian windows up right and left are optional, but the scale model of Orchard House is there to remind the audience of the importance of the dwelling itself in the story that is unfolding. During historical sections of the

play, the exterior of Orchard House is in view. During the *LITTLE WOMEN* fictional portions of the drama, the doll-house-like interior is rotated into the view of the audience. This use of the model can also greatly aid in establishing the looming presence of a fleeting childhood with the doll-house interior of Orchard House standing as a uniform backdrop to all the scenes.

In all scenes and monologues, the greatest care has been taken to use the exact words of either Louisa May Alcott from her journals or the text of *LITTLE WOMEN* as the basis for this adaptation. Certainly some events and transitions have been altered for the sake of dramatic clarity and flow, but the heart of this story, as ever, belongs to Louisa May. It is a play by the playwright, yes. But above all, this is Louisa May Alcott's story.

—David K. Longest
January, 1996

LITTLE WOMEN OF ORCHARD HOUSE

A Full-length Play

For 6 Men, 16 Women, 4 Girls

(expandable to 13 Men, 29 Women, 4 Girls)

Louisa May Alcott
George Bartlett
Thomas Niles
Bronson Alcott
Abba Alcott
Little Anna
Little Louy
Little Lizzie
Little Abby

Henry David Thoreau
Elizabeth Peabody
Margaret Fuller
Ralph Waldo Emerson
Anna Alcott
Young Louisa May Alcott
Elizabeth Alcott
Abba May Alcott

Marmee
Meg March
Jo March
Beth March
Amy March
Hannah
Theodore Laurence
Aunt March
John Brooke
Mr. Davis
Mr. Laurence
Mr. Moffat
Mrs. Moffat

Mr. Gardiner
Annie Moffat
Nan Moffat
Belle Gardiner
Sallie Gardiner
Daisy Gardiner
Clara Gardiner
Other Moffat Daughters
Other Gardiner Daughters
Captain March
Professor Friedrich Baehr
Freddy Vaughn

Approximate playing time: 2 hours (including intermission)

About the original production...

LITTLE WOMEN OF ORCHARD HOUSE was first produced as a season mainstage performance at New Albany High School, New Albany, Ind., in February 1996. With its huge cast of 42 characters, the production broke all school attendance and box office records for a regular season non-musical drama. In addition, the first original run of the show played to nearly 2000 elementary students in grades four through six during matinee performances.

The New Albany High School Theater Department is a nationally recognized program setting the highest standards in educational theatre. The school has been nationally recognized three out of the past six years with prestigious mainstage performances presented at the International Thespian Festival at both Ball State University in Indiana and the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, Neb. Graduates of the theatre program at New Albany High School include numerous theatre educators, regional theatre professionals and performers on Broadway and national tours. Heather Douglas, a recent graduate of the New Albany High School Theatre Department, has performed on Broadway in *Will Rogers' Follies*, *Crazy for You*, and in the national tour (Broadway opening in '96) of *Jekyll & Hyde*. Productions at the school have won acclaim from Jon Jory, the award-winning producer and director from the Tony Award-winning Actors Theatre of Louisville.

The original production utilized professional costuming from NORCOSTCO of Minneapolis and a large scale model of the actual Orchard House built by theatre students at the school. The staff and curators of the real Orchard House, in particular Ms. Heather Wagers of the Orchard House Mu-

seum in Concord, Mass., were most helpful in compiling background resources and information for audio-visual orientation to the production.

The following is a list of the original cast of the first production at New Albany High School:

Louisa May Alcott	Christin Nance
George Bartlett	Chris Bryant
Thomas Niles	Jonathan Braden
Bronson Alcott	Kern McFadden
Abba Alcott	Katie McCarthy
Little Anna	Carly Stotts
Little Louy	Maria Altmann
Little Lizzie	Chelsea Pattison
Little Abby	Claire Anne Longest
Henry David Thoreau	Josh Newland
Elizabeth Peabody	Rosie Nakamura
Margaret Fuller	Annie Hocker
Ralph Waldo Emerson	Dan Himmelheber
Anna Alcott	Lindy Burton
Young Louisa May Alcott	Tracy Dubs
Elizabeth Alcott	Cynthia Mack
Abba May Alcott	Abby Latimer
Marmee	Andrea Crowley
Meg March	Natalie Barrett
Jo March	Elizabeth Bigler
Beth March	Stephanie Senn
Amy March	Emily Reidinger
Hannah	Pamela Weaver
Theodore Laurence	Joshua Dallas
Aunt March	Erica Scott
John Brooke	Brock McCooe
Mr. Davis	Matt Dobson
Mr. Laurence	Jason Potts

ACT ONE

AT CURTAIN: *LOUISA MAY ALCOTT sits at her writing desk on the DL platform. As she speaks, during the first verse of the poem, the four child sisters walk softly upon the stage and pick up their separate chests. They look into each and its childhood contents, and then one by one...leave. During the second verse, we see the four older sisters do a similar ritual, but this time they move the chests to UC just in front of the Orchard House model...a symbol that this house itself is directly related to their childhoods.*

LOUISA MAY.

Four little chests all in a row
Dim with dust and worn by time
All fashioned and filled, long ago
By children now in their prime
Four little keys hung side by side
With faded ribbons brave and gay
When fastened there with childish pride
Long ago on a rainy day.

Four little names, one on each lid
Carved out by a boyish hand
And underneath there lieth hid
Histories of the happy band

Once playing here, and pausing oft
 To hear the sweet refrain
That came and went on the roof aloft
 In the falling summer rain.

Four little chests all in a row
 Dim with dust and worn by time
Four women taught by weal and woe
 To love and labor in their prime.
Four sisters, parted for an hour
 None lost, one only gone before
Made by love's immortal power,
 Nearest and dearest evermore
Oh, when these hidden stores of ours
 Lie open to the Father's sight,
May they be rich in golden hours,
 Deeds that show fairer for the light
Lives whose brave music long shall ring
 Like a spirit-stirring strain
Souls that shall gladly soar and sing
 In the long sunshine after rain.

(By the poem's end, the older daughters have given a glance to the wooden chests, the house model, and then LOUISA, and they exit with a soft smile. LOUISA pauses a moment ...)

LOUISA MAY. It's very bad poetry, but I felt it in my heart one day and wrote it while I was very lonely. Those are my sisters, there, and the house that was dear to us all. Father once said that it's the family that makes the house a home, but there was more to it than that.

Orchard House was a special place, even more than the sum of all of its individual rooms and beams and shingles. It was where we lived our lives...and that was home. It's also where I set my story, soon to be served to the public reader. *Little Women*, I have called it...and these are the very last revisions.

(There is the sound of a knock on the door. THOMAS NILES, friend and editor of LOUISA, enters the L platform.)

LOUISA MAY. Thomas, my dear friend, you are two days early!

THOMAS. And your readers await, Louisa. Roberts Brothers Publishers sent me on the two-hour buggy ride up here to Concord just to make sure the work is finished.

(GEORGE BARTLETT, a Concord actor, friend, and suitor of LOUISA, enters with a flourish. He is charming, but genuine with a slight indulgence of ego.)

GEORGE. And finished it will be, my good man. All this little masterpiece needs is the scrutiny of an honest man with an honest pen, and the work is done.

THOMAS. Louisa, WHO is this gentleman?

GEORGE. Oh, don't mind me. Nobody else seems to.

LOUISA MAY. Thomas Niles, my editor with Roberts Brothers in Boston, meet George Bartlett. Resident Concord...resident!

THOMAS. Pleased to meet you, sir.

GEORGE. Likewise, I am sure. Louisa, you forgot to introduce...my art!

LOUISA MAY. Oh, how witless of me. George is also Concord's most famous actor.

THOMAS. An actor, you say? Well, I could tell there was something unusual about him the moment he whisked into the room. But how come I have never heard of you on the Boston or New York stage?

GEORGE. You misunderstood, good man. I am CONCORD'S most famous actor. I have not yet been discovered in Boston.

THOMAS. Their loss, I'm sure. (*Aside.*) So...Louisa. Why is HE here?

LOUISA MAY. George? Oh, don't worry about George, Thomas. He's an old friend...very old.

GEORGE. Now watch it, Louisa, I can hear you!

LOUISA MAY. He's going to help me edit the text. George is very good with words, and he reads constantly.

THOMAS. Yes, you told me.

GEORGE. So I did.

LOUISA MAY. And I invited him to have a last look at these galley proofs just to make sure I haven't missed anything.

THOMAS. Oh, very well, Louisa. I don't approve, but it looks as if he has already moved in for the afternoon.

GEORGE. Most assuredly. Louisa, your tea is splendid. Keep this cup filled and I'll stay half the night!

LOUISA MAY. No, you won't. But you'll stay until we are done.

GEORGE. Whatever you say, my dear.

LOUISA MAY. Good-bye, Thomas. The final proofs will be edited by morning.

THOMAS. They had better be. All of Boston is anxious for your story.

GEORGE. Then Boston will just have to wait one more day, won't they? Good afternoon, Mr. Niles.

THOMAS. Good afternoon. I suppose I could spend my time more wisely with some other Concord author. I'm sure the Emersons will receive me.

LOUISA MAY. I am certain they will, Thomas. I promise the book will be in your hands by morning. You have my word.

THOMAS. That is satisfactory. Good day to you, Louisa. Mr. Bartlett... (*THOMAS exits. LOUISA grins.*)

LOUISA MAY. A little rough on the old fellow, weren't you?

GEORGE. I was only teasing the old gent. Besides, I AM here to help you, Louisa. Honest I am. It was you who invited me.

LOUISA MAY. I know. I know. So let's get on with it. (*GEORGE reads on silently for a moment along with LOUISA. Both are proofing different pages of the novel galleys.*)

GEORGE. This is good, Louisa. It is very good, but then I suppose you already know that. That's why it's being published.

LOUISA MAY. It reads better than I expected, George. We really lived most of it...you know that. The names are changed, of course, but the book is ours. We lived it. And if it succeeds, that will be the reason of it. If my life here in Concord was changed—even in the smallest way—the book would not be what it is. Without Mother and Father and my sisters, there could have been no *Little Women*. And without the warmth of Orchard House

and all its treasures, there might have been a house, but not a home ...

(The lights dim from LOUISA L to the C platform where we find BRONSON and ABBA ALCOTT gathered with the children. They are walking through the woods on their way to Orchard House with some wrestling and horseplay among the four little girls, but it is noisy and all in fun. ANNA is the oldest daughter, followed in age by LOUISA [LOUY], ELIZABETH [LIZZIE], and finally ABBY [MAY].)

YOUNG ANNA. Father, I don't see a house anywhere. Are you sure there's a house in this woods?

BRONSON. The house isn't in the woods, Anna. It sits next to an orchard. The woods rises behind it.

YOUNG LOUISA. Then if the house isn't in the woods, why are we in the woods?

ABBA. That's an honest question, Louy. And a good one. So Mr. Alcott, if the house isn't in the woods and we're on our way to look at it, why ARE we in the woods?

BRONSON. Patience, family. Patience. Have I ever gotten us lost before?

FAMILY *(in unison)*. Yes!

BRONSON. You're right. Well, then, maybe we're lost again!

YOUNG LIZZIE. But, Father, you said the house faced the main road on the way to the village. Shouldn't we be looking for carriage tracks or something?

BRONSON. Faith, children. Where is your faith?

YOUNG ABBY. Give me a map and I'll get us out of here. Or a compass ... anything!

YOUNG ANNA. Abby, you're too little. You can hardly read.

YOUNG ABBY. I can read a map.

YOUNG LIZZIE. But you'd rather draw pictures on it, wouldn't you?

YOUNG ABBY. Sure I would. So what? What's that got to do with father getting us lost?

ABBA. You're right, Abby. It has nothing at all to do with the problem at hand. Your father's gotten us lost once again and we'll just have to wander about this woods until he finds his way out.

BRONSON. We are not lost. Disoriented maybe, but not lost. Let's see, if the sun is over there, then west must be that way. That's our problem. We've been heading east. We need to go west.

(HENRY DAVID THOREAU enters walking across the front of the stage.)

HENRY. No, I think you really want to head South, actually. And what you have been doing for the past fifteen minutes is making a circle.

BRONSON *(after a thought)*. Have not!

HENRY. Have too!

YOUNG ABBY. Excuse me, sir, but how do you know that?

YOUNG ANNA. Abby, please, let Father...

HENRY. No, really, it's all right. I know you're lost and traveling in circles because I've been trailing you for the past half hour. Where are you headed?

BRONSON. To the village road, young man. The name is Bronson Alcott. I'm a teacher.

HENRY. And mine is just Henry.

YOUNG LOUISA. Just Henry is a funny name. Don't you have a last name?

HENRY. Yes, I do. That would be Thoreau. Henry David Thoreau. But, honest, everyone in Concord just calls me Henry.

BRONSON. Well, it is fine to meet you, Henry. Do you have any idea where we are?

HENRY. Besides lost, you mean?

BRONSON (*laughing*). Yes.

HENRY. Well, the Concord village green is about a half mile west, and Hawthorne's Wayside is about an equal distance east. Orchard House is right in the middle. You're almost there.

YOUNG LIZZIE. And where do you live, Henry?

HENRY. Good question. My family lives just off the village green. It's a big white house with a green roof. We make pencils in a little factory, just behind it.

BRONSON. Thoreau pencils. I have heard of them.

HENRY. But right now, I live here.

YOUNG ANNA. Here?

YOUNG ABBY. In the woods?

YOUNG LIZZIE. Are you a hermit or something?

ABBA. Lizzie! Please.

HENRY. No, I teach. I write. Poetry... sometimes, most of the time, just my thoughts.

YOUNG LOUISA. He sounds like a philosopher. Father is a philosopher, too.

BRONSON (*shyly*). I like to think that I am.

HENRY. Well, anyway... Orchard House is just over there. You'll like it. It's a very nice house. But it looks rather lonely. It needs a family in it... like you.

YOUNG ABBY. Nice to meet you, Henry. Where are you headed?

HENRY. Back to tend my bean garden, unless I want to eat cold fish all winter. Come visit me. My cabin is along the shore of Walden Pond. Fishing is great this time of year!

YOUNG ANNA. We'll do that, won't we, Mother?

ABBA. We'll see. Good day to you, Mr. Thoreau.

HENRY. Please... Henry.

BRONSON. Good day to you, Henry.

HENRY. Yes, it is a good day, isn't it? Just right for hoeing beans. I expect you young ladies to take me up on that invitation, right?

THE GIRLS. Right, Henry.

(The lights come up dimly on LOUISA L for a moment.)

LOUISA MAY. And then we came up over the ridge, and Father had us all close our eyes as we walked around front...

(The lights fade quickly down and the family stands before the model of Orchard House.)

BRONSON. One, two, three... open!

YOUNG LOUISA. Oh, Father, it's splendid! Just like a storybook house!

YOUNG LIZZIE. And it's so big! Is there a room for each one of those windows?

BRONSON. I think so! And better yet...there's a library! A place for every one of our books.

ABBA. Bronson, it is a magnificent house!

BRONSON. And, Louy, just for you...there's a wonderful old attic to explore. Children, it's yours. It's ours. Welcome home.

YOUNG LOUISA. Oh, thank you, Father!

OTHER DAUGHTERS. Yes, thank you, Father...

(The lights fade on the family in front of the Orchard House. Full light returns to LOUISA sitting at her desk with GEORGE looking on.)

LOUISA MAY. And so it began...our love affair with the old house. It had its own history before we arrived there, and we were just another chapter in its story.

GEORGE. And that is the house in *Little Women*?

LOUISA MAY. Orchard House is where I wrote this book, and Orchard House is where we lived the story.

GEORGE. It has a warmth...

LOUISA MAY. ...that I found nowhere else on earth. But it wasn't just the house itself, it was the village of Concord, the hills, the valleys, the people. I can't think of a better place for four little girls to grow. Father chose wisely in bringing us here. We almost stayed in Boston. You see, George, his teaching kept us moving. One school to another, one village to the next. Father had a way of fascinating people...and then wearing out his welcome.

GEORGE. You mean with his views against slavery?

LOUISA MAY. With his views on everything. I believe people will look back on the days of Bronson Alcott one day and say he was far too many years ahead of his time. He was a teacher at heart, and a philosopher by

trade. People used to pay to hear what he called his “conversations.”

(The lights come up C on BRONSON seated upon a stool. Seated around him are the two famous educators MARGARET FULLER and ELIZABETH PEABODY, along with HENRY and RALPH WALDO EMERSON. The conversation is carried out with the group drinking tea. The mood is serious but relaxed. ABBA serves as the hostess and listens quietly but intently upon the conversation.)

BRONSON. My dream is for a school. Not any ordinary school, mind you. A very special place where learning comes first, and the content comes later. Education is the process, not the facts and figures. Build the mind and the soul as the pitcher and the facts and figures are the milk you can pour into it.

MARGARET. Certainly you are not saying that your school will not teach the basics, are you, Mr. Alcott?

ELIZABETH. It is a known fact that from the very earliest age the children must learn by the doing. You don't mean to say that you will teach philosophy first to even the smallest children.

BRONSON. If that is what their minds and souls crave, then I will teach it. Above all else, my pupils will learn to think.

MARGARET. You know, Bronson, education is of grandest importance to me. The exploration of ideas among our young children today is my driving passion.

BRONSON. That I know, Margaret. Your name as an educator is already known far and wide. And Elizabeth Peabody, your reputation goes unequaled.