



“Little Women Debuts!”

Images & Recollections from 1912 Broadway

A Special Exhibit at Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House
399 Lexington Road Concord, Massachusetts

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1912 ...

... in retrospect, it must have seemed that the Earth was rotating a bit faster than it normally did, there was so much change afoot. China had become a Republic on the first of the year; two new states were admitted in America; a woman flew alone across the English Channel for the first time; striking workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts effected the most substantial labor changes the world had ever seen through powerful grass roots efforts; the Balkan War began; and man's image of his infallibility was forever challenged on the morning of April 15th as news of the Titanic disaster spread.

There were more astonishing events. Teddy Roosevelt was shot while campaigning in Wisconsin during what had become one of the most hotly contested political races of the century. His saving grace? A thick, tightly rolled manuscript stuffed into his breast pocket. This "Bull Moose" even had the gumption to keep making his speech for nearly an hour before being removed to the hospital. In the end, however, Woodrow Wilson would win the election and usher in a new era of American politics. The self-same women who flew solo across the English Channel? Harriet Quimby came to Boston a mere two and one-half months after her incredible feat to participate in an air show at Boston Harbor. Something went horribly wrong, and Miss Quimby and her co-pilot were killed on July 1st. A short distance away, Fenway Park crowds were enjoying the success of their team, the Boston Red Sox, in the new stadium which had opened on April 20th. Later in the year, fans would be further rewarded by the second World Series win (in 10 innings) over the New York Highlanders, or who we now call the Yankees.

Closer to home (and, as Bronson Alcott once said, "Wise men and excellent women have no right to live elsewhere" than in Concord), change was also the watchword. The gulf between residents steeped in the tradition of agrarian domesticity and those who were benefiting from a shift to the commercialism of the Industrial Age was growing. Farmlands that had passed from generation to generation since 1635 were now being purchased by new immigrant families. Stately Colonial homes in the center of Concord were being torn down to make way for business blocks, while sprawling "country estates" overlooking

the waterfront kept developers and carpenters quite busy. Streets were being macadamized to accommodate increasing numbers of automobiles, an electric streetcar shuttled people across the broad expanse of the old cow pastures, and expanded train lines were connecting man, woman, and child to farther-flung areas of the state and the country.

But some things were far slower to change than some people liked. Despite the existence of Women's Rights forums for more than a half century, women were still struggling to gain the right to vote in anything other than local elections. For all its progressivism -- being the seat of the New England Renaissance and home to such enlightened thinkers and writers as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and A. Bronson Alcott -- Concord itself had only 1.5% of the female population of age registered to vote in 1912. The anti-suffrage movement was gaining strength from unlikely allies, too. Alcohol producers and distributors worried that if women got the right to vote, Prohibition would not be too far behind, while ne'er-do-well industrial barons feared they might have to implement fair labor practices in their burgeoning factories and "sweat shops." No, they politely persuaded, most women didn't really *want* the vote ... and even if they had it, most wouldn't *use* it. Best not to try to get it. It would be another eight years before the 19th Amendment would be ratified.



On October 14th, as Teddy Roosevelt recuperated from his wounds and Red Sox fans were unwittingly only two days away from enjoying their second World Series win, a far different kind of excitement was in the air on 48th Street in New York City. At 8:15 that evening, the curtain rose on a much-anticipated Broadway show that was not revolutionary, not controversial, and not the least bit disappointing. The first professional theater production of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, approved by her descendants, was debuting on the newly-built theater of William A. Brady, a former prizefight promoter turned Broadway producer extraordinaire. The play, the first adaptation ever written by Marian deForest, and staged

by Jessie Bonstelle, was heralded by *The New York Times* as a “new old story” that was “as fresh and wholesome as a drink from the old spring. And just as healthy.”

The play had done a preliminary run at the Teck Theatre in Buffalo, New York, Miss deForest’s hometown, where she had excelled as a journalist to become drama critic and editor of *The Buffalo Express* (now *The Buffalo News*). In “At the Theatre with ‘Little Women,’” a May 1912 article in the *Woman’s Home Companion*, the reviewers note that they were “frankly worried” about the play not meeting their expectations: “Really, it was quite harrowing. You do not mind if a modern play is a bit inconsistent, but to see the ideals of your girlhood, womanhood, and motherhood massacred by a Broadway stage manager who never, never kept a dog-eared and tear-stained copy of ‘Little Women’ on the bedroom stand ... seems more than you can endure!”



Jessie Bonstelle

But precisely because of these fears, the play had experienced a long birth process. By 1900, *Little Women* was still copyright-protected. Bonstelle worked on securing special permission for over eight years from descendants Frederick Alcott Pratt, John Sewall Pratt Alcott (Anna Alcott Pratt’s other son who was legally adopted by Louisa May Alcott shortly before her death), and Louisa May Nieriker (May’s daughter) for a professional theatre production of the beloved book. The family’s intense hesitation understandably sprang from concern over “the taint of theatricality” making “a sacrilege of our home. To us, ‘Little Women’ was the story of our home and family, a theme too intimate for the publicity to which the stage might subject it.”



Marion deForest

After Fred Pratt’s death in 1910, Bonstelle’s palpable love of “Little Women” and Louisa May Alcott, her willingness to submit the script to the family for approval, and her sheer persistence (a trait John Alcott noted with admiration in a 1913 *Good Housekeeping* article) finally triumphed. “And we have not once had cause to regret it ... We have come to realize, too, that instead of hurting the book, as



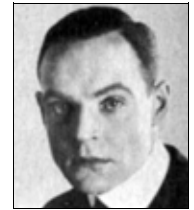
Alice Brady

we had feared it would do, the dramatization is helping it by bringing its story into the lives of people who have never read it, but would go to see the play." The family even went so far as to loan the production costumes, props, and furnishings from Orchard House: "... in these Alcott heirlooms were real inspiration," the Misses Bonstelle and deForest noted, "as if it were a labor of love from Louisa M. Alcott."



Gertrude Berkeley

Descendants of "Miss Olcott" (as the *Times* misspelled it) sat in The Playhouse on opening night, their lives and times as recalled in *Little Women* played out with a sweet reverence: "It is really exquisite," the *Times* notes, "without mawkishness, without too much sentimentality, and with just enough delicate humor to suggest



Howard Estabrook



Gladys Hulette

the truthful, homelike thing." The reviewer went on to say that, "The make-up, the costumes, and general color throughout are exactly right, and the production on the whole visualizes the book, the characters, and the period, as well as these things can ever be done on the stage. That, in the modern theatre, is very well indeed."

The play ran for over 200 performances, and was revived in 1916 and again in 1931. Productions based on this script were performed throughout the country, and such notable theatre troupes as The Concord Players, Berkshire Theatre Festival, and Historic Dorset Theatre in Vermont also used the deForest adaptation, the last as late as 2003. In 1918, William A. Brady was diversifying his focus to silent films and re-united some of the original cast for a "Little Women" movie which was filmed in part at Orchard House and the Emerson House in Concord.



Louisa May Alcott and Theatricals

"It wasn't that we thought Aunt Louisa wouldn't like it," John Alcott began when writing of the objections to dramatizations of *Little Women*, "-- on the contrary, we had every reason to believe that she would, since she was always keenly interested in the stage, even to the extent of wanting to make it her own profession at one point." Indeed, Louisa May Alcott "carried the theater wherever she went," as foremost Alcott scholar Madeleine B. Stern once wrote.

Louisa's first stage appearance was at age three -- in fact, on her third birthday -- during the course of a "Festival of Accomplishments" at her father's Temple Street school in Boston. More "formal" thespian ambitions were realized by the age of eight in the "Louy Alcott Troupe" when the family lived for the first time in Concord in 1840, and five years later, again in Concord at "Hillside" (now The Wayside) with dramatizations of one of the family's most beloved books, *Pilgrim's Progress*. In her twenties, Louisa founded the Walpole Amateur Dramatic Company in New Hampshire, and the Concord Dramatic Union during the early years of her family's residence at Orchard House. Louisa's older sister Anna, considered by many -- including Louisa -- to have had true dramatic genius, actually met and fell in love with her future husband, John Bridge Pratt, during rehearsals for the Concord Dramatic Union's romantic comedy, "The Loan of A Lover."

Theatricals -- plays, tableaux, monologues -- were a staple in the early years at Orchard House. They cost little or no money to perform, challenged the imaginations of the talented Alcott sisters, and brought immense joy to the neighbors and friends who gathered in the Parlor



Anna Alcott

each Monday evening for the famous Alcott "Open House." In between their "public" performances, the Alcott sisters madly sewed costumes, painted props, assembled musical accompaniment, and practiced, practiced, practiced. They were all proud of their ability to "mine gold out of mud,"



John Pratt

and thrilled to see the audience's response to their very clever ideas. Louisa would also use many of these inventive play elements in her "blood-and-thunder" tales. We are privileged to exhibit -- many for the first time -- the unique costumes, props, and scripts used by the Alcotts.

By this time, with the experiences of working with other talented and enthusiastic amateur actors and a growing stockpile of used theater tickets, Louisa gained a good deal of theatrical professionalism and was sought after not only as playwright, but stage manager as well. Her farce, "Nat Bachelor's Pleasure Trip," was performed at Boston's Howard Athenaeum in 1860, and she received a bouquet of flowers in her private parlor box. With the onset of the Civil War, Louisa began using her family's long-standing love of Dickens for the benefit of charity by performing various "Scenes from Dickens," most particularly calling upon the characters of Sairy Gamp, Betsey Prig, and Mrs. Jarley.

Time passed and Louisa's physical ailments and the demands of a successful writing career impinged on her ability to participate in and receive much joy from theatricals. "My acting days are over," she wrote in 1874, "but I still prance now and then with my boys [nephews Fred and John Pratt], for in spite of age, much work, and the proprieties, an occasional fit of old jollity comes over me, and I find I have not forgotten how to romp as in my 'Jo-ian' days." In 1879, for what would prove to be her last public acting appearance, Louisa participated in a hospital benefit and was noted by her father to have delivered a "brilliant" performance characterized by its "wit, sentiment, and drollery." *The Boston Daily Advertiser* commented that Louisa was "the typical show-woman," with a bonnet "which was enough to throw a modern milliner into convulsions."



Louisa with actor James Murdoch

In the 1880s, while attempting to relieve her aches and pains, Louisa frequented the restful seaside village of Nonquitt, Massachusetts. Fred and John Pratt, now in their twenties, would accompany her there along

with the newest member of the family, Louisa May ("Lulu") Nieriker, who became Louisa's ward after sister May's death in 1879. The Nonquitt "Ice Cream Committee" amateur drama club was comprised of a half dozen or so young people, with Fred and John Pratt among the principals and Louisa their coach and stage manager. Decades later, when The Concord Players (formerly the Concord Dramatic Union) would honor their founder with performances of "Little Women," it was Anna and John Pratt's descendants -- Bronson Alcott Pratt, Louisa Alcott Kussin, and William F. "Fritz" Kussin, who carried the mantle.

Now, the world once again re-visits *Little Women* on Broadway, as a new musical based on the book premieres on January 23, 2005. When a writer for *Harper's Bazaar* visited Concord in 1913, she sat under Louisa's portrait interviewing John Alcott and later wrote: "As we looked at the beautiful spirit pictured above us ... I thought of how wide that little Old Orchard circle had now grown ..." *Little Women*, never out of print since its publication in 1868, still draws readers into its pages to connect with its timeless messages and emotions, still beckons playwrights to interpret it anew for "people who have never read it, but would go to see the play," and still finds pilgrims at the door of Orchard House, ever curious to discover the roots of their own *Little Women*.

The Louisa May Alcott Memorial Association

In 1911, Mrs. Harriet Lothrop (author Margaret Sidney) decided to sell the venerable Alcott home for \$3,000. Members of the Woman's Club of Concord voluntarily banded together to raise funds from all corners of the globe for its purchase, along with an additional \$5,000 for preservation, landscaping, and furnishings. On April 15, 1911, Orchard House opened to the public as a memorial site, dedicated to preservation of the house and grounds and promotion of the life and legacy of Louisa May Alcott and her family. Archival photographs show that the Orchard House of 1912 also celebrated the Broadway play by proudly displaying in Miss Alcott's bedroom six of the same photographs currently in this exhibit.

1912 Broadway Cast List

Gertrude Berkeley - Marmee
Lynn Hammond - Mr. March
Alice Brady - Meg
Marie Pavey - Jo
Gladys Hulette - Beth
Beverly West - Amy

John Cromwell - Laurie
Carson Davenport - Mr. Laurence
Howard Estabrook - John Brooke
Carl Sauerman - Professor Bhaer
Mrs. E. A. Eberle - Aunt March
Lillian Dix - Hannah

Did you know that in 1912 ...

Vitamins were discovered? Hamburger buns, Lorna Doones, Life Savers, Morton Salt, Ocean Spray Cranberry Sauce, and Whitman's Chocolate Samplers all "debuted," too? Elevators, escalators, toilet paper, vacuum cleaners, Crayola crayons, Dixie cups, drip coffeemakers, pay telephones, and contact lenses were *already* available? The Girl Scouts were founded? Songs like "The Titanic," "I Am A Suffragette," and "Hymn to the Statehood of New Mexico" were written? The South Pole was explored? The first parachute jump took place? Cracker Jack started having prizes?

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~ The continued support of the heirs of Louisa May Alcott is particularly appreciated at this time ~

NOTES

LITTLE
WOMEN



See *"Little Women - The Musical"*
and
help save Orchard House!

This is the event Broadway -- and you -- have been waiting for! Join us as one of the most beloved books ever written comes to spectacular musical life. Be there as Tony Award winner **Sutton Foster** stars with Broadway and recording sensation **Maureen McGovern** in *"Little Women - The Musical!"*

Capturing the hearts of Broadway and the world, *"Little Women - The Musical"* follows the funny, touching, and altogether inspiring saga of the March family. From innocent adolescence to sage adulthood, with all the joy and sorrow of life in between, theirs is a story for all time and this is the musical for ours! Get your tickets today for *"Little Women - The Musical!"* You're sure to find it *astounding!*

Now, you can see this terrific new musical *and* help save the home where *Little Women* was written!!

For every ticket to "Little Women - The Musical"
purchased using code LWORCH4,
\$5.00 will be donated to Orchard House!

This costs you nothing extra, and gives you the satisfaction of knowing that you'll be helping the "Home of *Little Women*" survive for generations to come!

To purchase tickets and support Orchard House, use code **LWORCH4** when you call Telecharge at **800.432.7250** or visit the Virginia Theatre box office, 245 West 52nd Street, New York, NY.

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