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## A MAN OF NO IMPORTANCE

Sometimes wishes do come true.

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WOW!

Back in September of last year, following a superb concert staged reading of Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty's *A Man Of No Importance*, I ended my review with a wish: "Isn't it time that *A Man Of No Importance* got a fully-staged L.A. production?"

Now, a mere nine months later, that wish comes true as director-choreographer extraordinaire Janet Miller and her new Good People Theater Company offer Los Angeles audiences that fully-staged *A Man Of No Importance*, as all-around perfect a production as this or any musical theater lover could possibly have wished for.

Based on a 1994 film starring Albert Finney as the titular *Man Of No Importance*, the award-winning Lincoln Center musical adaptation transports us back to 1964 Dublin, where middle-aged bus conductor (and "confirmed bachelor") Alfie Byrne (Dominic McChesney) moonlights as the director of an amateur theater troop specializing in the works of his idol, Oscar Wilde (not coincidentally the author of a play entitled *A Woman Of No Importance*).

At lights up, Alfie has just learned that his latest project, Wilde's *Salome*, has been shut down by a disapproving Father Kenny (Terrence Evans), in whose church the St. Imelda's Players have been rehearsing and where the play was to be performed.

*A Man Of No Importance* then becomes the play-within-a-play (or musical-within-a-musical) which Alfie's company of actors put on to pay tribute to their leader's supposedly "unimportant" life, one which over the course of two acts proves quite important indeed, at least to those who love and respect him.

Though the reason for Alfie's singledom is one quickly divined by 21st Century audiences, his contemporaries in 1960s Dublin—including the older sister with whom he lives—assume simply that the 40something bachelor just hasn't "found the right girl."

In fact, Alfie has developed an impossible crush on a sexy, younger coworker, bus driver Robbie Fay (Keith Barletta), an attraction that "dare not speak its name," even in confession to Father Kenny.

As for the "right girl," Alfie has found *her* in lovely Adele Rice (Audrey Curd), though not in the way his sister Lily (Shirley Anne Hatton) might wish. No, Alfie's interest in Adele is a purely professional one, the Dublin newcomer being absolutely perfect for the role of *Salome*, if only Alfie can convince her to let go of her stage fright and join The St. Imelda's Players, made up of the following amateur thespians:

- William Carney (David Gilchrist), not at all pleased about having been reduced from lead actor in last year's *The Importance Of Being Ernest* to a supporting role in *Salome*;
- Mrs. Grace (Mary Chesterman), not only sinking her teeth into the role of *Salome's* mother but proposing that the show's poster feature none other than her imposing mom;
- Miss Crowe (Marci Richmond Herrera), the company's one-time Peter Pan, who as costume designer suggests that *Salome's* seven veils be replaced by seven zippers;
- Mother-of-seven Mrs. Curtin (Gail Matthius), St. Imelda's bubbly choreographer who re-imagines *Salome's* dance as a 42nd Street-style tap number;
- Resident stage manager Baldy O'Shea (Matt Stevens), still recovering from the death of a wife several times his size and missing the cuddles she no longer gives him;
- Big, booming baritone Rasher Flynn (Corky Loupé), former all-Ireland gymnast and one-time Colonel Pickering in St. Imelda's production of *Pygmalion*;
- Set designer Ernest Lally (Michael P. Wallot), remembered by St. Imelda's audiences for his self-described "stirring portrayal" of *Mustardseed*;
- Sully O'Hara (Bret Shefter), currently unemployed and making his theater debut in *Salome*;
- Youngest company member Peter (Matt Franta, who doubles as the dangerously seductive Breton Beret).

Completing the cast is Melina Kalomas as church employee Mrs. Patrick, a woman with a secret shame that dare not speak *its* name.

Like composer Stephen Flaherty's and lyricist Lynn Ahrens' *Ragtime*, *Once On This Island*, *Seussical*, *My Favorite Year*, and *Lucky Stiff*, *A Man Of No Importance* is filled with one hummable song after another, this time with a decidedly Irish lilt. Ensemble numbers "Going Up," "First Rehearsal," and "Art" celebrate the joys of a life in the theater. Lily's "The Burden Of Life" and "Books" (which has Lily and Carney lamenting Alfie's inexplicable love of reading) are comic gems. There's not a more thrilling showstopper than Robbie's rousing "The Streets Of Dublin." "Princess," "The Cuddles Mary Gave," and "Confusing Times" are exquisite solo vehicles for Adele, Baldy, and Carney respectively. As for "Love Who You Love," imagine the following lyrics set to one of Flaherty's most gorgeous melodies and try not to shed a tear: "There's no fault in lovin'. No call for shame. Everyone's heart does exactly the same. And once ya believe that, you'll learn how to say, 'I love who I love who I love.' So just go and love who ya love."

Four-time Tony-winning playwright Terrence McNally has adapted Barry Devlin's screenplay with delicacy, power, and grace, and though Alfie may have come of age at a time when homosexuality could send a man to prison in the UK, his struggles with shame, repression, and unrequited love still resonate in these more liberated times.

Bringing Alfie to indelible life on the Lillian Theatre stage, McChesney gives a performance of aching beauty and heartbreakingly repressed desire, his velvet pipes lending themselves to a gut-wrenching "Man In The Mirror" and a soaring "Welcome To The World." Without the right Alfie, there would be no *Man Of No Importance*. With McChesney in the lead, we are in a master conductor's hands from start to finish.

Best Lead Actress Scenie winner Hatton, so memorable as *Sweeney Todd's* Mrs. Lovett a few years back, is wonderful once again as Alfie's devoted, loving, well-meaning sister, making Lily's "Tell Me Why" every bit the tour-de-force it is meant to be.

Miller couldn't have found a better or more charismatic Robbie Fay than Barletta, who earns deserved cheers for a thrillingly sung "The Streets Of Dublin." Brand new Cal State Fullerton grad Curd combines talent, beauty, and an exquisite soprano as Adele following a string of terrific CSUF performances. Gilchrist scores at bringing to life both morality judge Carney *and* the spirit of the man who first spoke of "the love that dare not speak its name."

Only the highest of praise can suffice to describe the rest of Miller's dream cast, each one giving a multifaceted gem of a performance, with special mention due Stevens for his touching "The Cuddles Mary Gave." Together, Miller's ensemble sing in harmonies glorious enough to raise the roof of St. Imelda's ... and then some ...with snaps for the above shared by music director Corey Hirsch.

Backing up these phenomenal actor-singers is one of the finest live four-piece orchestras I've heard in an intimate theater production, sparked by an anonymous fiddler who seems to have arrived direct from Dublin to the Lillian Theatre stage.

Director Miller and her design team keep frills to a minimum, the better to focus on the personal stories being told. With scarcely more than a dozen straight-backed chairs and a table or two, scenic and props designer Kevin Williams lets the audience's imaginations conjure up a bus, a meeting hall, a church, a Dublin home, and the musical's various other locales. Katherine Barrett's lighting design couldn't be more gorgeous, nor could Kathy Gillespie and Barbara Weisel's costume choices be any more character-and-era-perfect. Chris A. Flores sound design and Jill Massie's dialect coaching are both deserving of mention as well. Miller is producer for Good People Theater Company. Barrett is stage manager.

I fell in love with A Man Of No Importance upon my first listen to the Original Cast CD and even more so when seeing it in a pair of concert staged readings, the first in 2006, the second this past September. Now, at long last, this dream-come-true production gives Angelinos the chance to discover A Man Of No Importance in all its beauty, its power and, indeed, its importance.

Lillian Theatre, 6322 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood. Through June 30. Fridays and Saturdays at 8:00. Sundays at 2:00. Reservations: 323 455-4585

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