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Gail Matthius, Dominic McChesney, Mary Chesterman, Marci Herrera, Audrey Curd, and Michael Wallot

A Man of No Importance

Good People Theater Company at Lillian Theatre

Reviewed by Bob Verini

The first extended run of the tuner *A Man of No Importance* is a matter of some importance, as it inaugurates—in this era of folding companies and theaters in transit—a new enterprise: the Good People Theater Company, under the direction of the gifted veteran stager-choreographer Janet Miller. Taking on the countervailing winds (money drying up, expenses mounting, uninterest in live performance growing) is a brave and noble thing, and one wishes Miller and company well.

The GPTC mission statement is a little vague at this point, the group's reason for being seemingly pegged to Miller's taste and enthusiasms. And one hopes the promised "focus on chamber musicals and small-cast plays" doesn't presage yet another moribund round of superfluous *The Last 5 Years* and *Frankie & Johnny* revivals. That being said, many a robust company first saw life as the brainchild of a single artist, and Miller has been kicking around long enough at the service of others to have earned the right to open her own shop. She and the cohorts of Good People are good people; there's plenty of reason to be optimistic about what lies ahead.

Indeed, the sheer selection of their inaugural work is evidence of interesting things ahead. *A Man* is a lovely, underappreciated 2002 effort from the creators of *Ragtime* (book by Terrence McNally, music by Stephen Flaherty, and lyrics by Lynn Ahrens), and it's one of the most distinctive and impressive musicals of recent years. This time, the team was inspired by a little-seen 1994 film top-lining Albert Finney as Alfie Byrne, a meek, repressed bus conductor (and when was the last time you saw Albert Finney as a meek, repressed anything?), who suffers under Catholic guilt and is driven by passion for the writing of Oscar Wilde and his vehicle's humpy driver Robbie, not necessarily in that order.

The story counterpoints Alfie's tentative efforts to don the green carnation and be true to himself (a common theme in McNally librettos) with the reactions of his friends and neighbors: many are shocked, a few supportive, and a surprising number ready to shrug off his "difference" in stride. All in all, this more or less event-less story is a far cry from natural tuner material, even given the affinity of Irish subjects to musicalization. A repressed mama's boy could be the definition of a character who "doesn't sing," and it would be very easy to reduce the neighborhood folks to types, even cruel caricatures.

Yet most of those pitfalls are avoided in the adaptation, which boasts wit and wisdom in the dialogue and bewitching balladry in the score. In the manner of *James Joyce's The Dead* (as adapted by Richard Nelson) *A Man* captures a cross-section of humanity at one distinct period of time with precision and grace.

It's hard to understand why this musical has gotten so little traction since its Lincoln Center premiere. In any case, there's no question the opening night audience at Lillian Theatre reacted with delight. Despite a last-minute cast change requiring an actor to carry a script, and the need to manage a cast of 15 through multiple short scenes, Miller's staging is as fluid as her handling of the actors is sensitive. Stealing a march on next year's

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touring production of *Once*, musical director Corey Hirsch superbly evokes small-town Irish life through a canny marshaling of violin, guitar, flute, and percussion. The Alfie of Dominic McChesney doesn't quite break the heart—his discomfort and later his joy at giving his suppressed desires rein, seem superficial rather than deeply felt—but the ensemble throws itself into the proceedings with appetite and integrity. Keith Barletta is a sterling Robbie, and there's strong support from Matt Stevens, Gail Matthius, and Audrey Curd, among others.

It was smart, if risky, of Miller to present this ambitious work as part of the Hollywood Fringe, where it should stand out as a major undertaking against all the two handers and monodramas that will grace the next few weeks. The show, like Miller's burgeoning endeavor, deserves encouragement and support.

June 11, 2013

June 7–30. 1076 Lillian Way, Hollywood. Fri-Sat 8pm, Sun 2pm. Running time 2 hours, 40 minutes, including intermission. \$20. Charity of Choice Show on June 29 (Sat) @ 2pm, 100 percent of sales donated to BookEnds.Org, creating readers and leaders. (323) 455-4585.

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