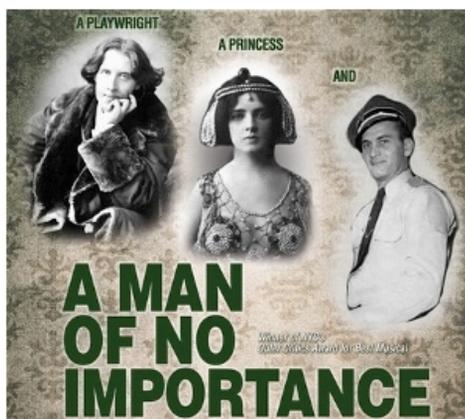




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Los Angeles Theater Review: A MAN OF NO IMPORTANCE (Elephant Stages / Hollywood Fringe)

by TONY FRANKEL on JUNE 17, 2013
 in THEATER-LOS ANGELES



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A SHOW OF GREAT IMPORTANCE

An anomaly of the Hollywood Fringe Festival has arrived. A gem which alone justifies the Fringe's existence. A nascent troupe named Good People Theater Company is using the Festival's built-in promotional tie-in and relative inexpensiveness to its advantage. They spent a bit more requesting a specific schedule to accommodate 15 (yes, fifteen) actors and a 150-minute running time, but this thoroughly charming production of *A Man of No Importance* clearly indicates that this group is up to something bigger than the Fringe's mostly self-promoting works involving artists who wish to further their career – but shouldn't. I attend theater hoping for one of three things to happen, and this does all three: It moved me, it touched me, and it inspired me. On top of it, this enthralling production will only cost you twenty bucks.

Unlike manipulative Broadway machines such as *Priscilla* and *Kinky Boots*, which shove issues down our throats, the societal consequences for a homosexual in *A Man of No Importance* resonate because the story follows a closeted man who compensates for his restrictive 1964 Dublin atmosphere by taking pride in other areas of his life – namely an amateur theater company and his job as a bus conductor. Terrence McNally's book for this chamber musical eschews his normally flamboyant and proud gay characters (*Love! Valor! Compassion!*, *Lips Together, Teeth Apart*, *The Lisbon Traviata*) for the soft-spoken Alfie Byrne, whose dream is to stage Oscar Wilde's *Salome* at a neighborhood church with his St. Imelda Players, most of whom ride his bus every day.

Middle-aged Alfie exhibits stereotyped qualities of a gay man – passivity, a passion for cooking and the arts, a fanaticism for Wilde – but this story, based on the 1994 Albert Finney film of the same name, is not about a gay man; it's about a man who happens to be gay. It's a powerful distinction

which allows composer Stephen Flaherty and lyricist Lynn Ahrens (Ragtime, Once on This Island) to concentrate on universal themes in songs such as “The Burden of Life,” “Man in the Mirror,” and “Love Who You Love.” To aid the universality of the show, the many well-rounded characters who may disapprove of Alfie’s orientation are never drawn as villainous. From Alfie’s sister, Lily – who has delayed her marriage with a church authority named Mr. Carney until her brother has married – to Father Kinney – who deems Salome blasphemous and cancels the play at the musical’s onset, they all also struggle with their own issues of morality, self-expression, and religious intolerance.

The low-budget trappings only serve to heighten the realities of a destitute group of citizen-thespians. Designer Katherine Barrett used simple floor strips to light the bare-brick back wall and effectively evoked time, place and emotion with a gentle fade from blue to magenta. Kathy Gillespie and Barbara Weisel’s costumes look as though they were purchased at the Lord & Taylor Country Clothes Shop circa the late 50s, which makes sense when most characters are no doubt too poor to buy anything but hand-me-downs.

Keith Barletta’s twinkly eyes, disarming manner, and lilting voice would have anyone fall in love with Alfie’s secret crush, the bus driver Robbie. Shirley Anne Hatton combines strength and vulnerability as sister Lily; her gorgeous character-driven legit voice is sorely missed in today’s Broadway shows. Matt Stevens is perfectly self-effacing in both voice and character as the Players’ member, Baldy; a ballad sung at his wife’s grave – “The Cuddles Mary Gave” – is perfectly bittersweet and enchanting at the same time. Lovely soprano Audrey Curd is captivatingly beautiful as Adele, the newcomer with a secret who Alfie knows in an instant must play Salome. David Gilchrist never plays the heavy as the ultra-religious Carney; because he is simply a man with staunch ethics – and not a meany – we never dislike him; as such, “Books,” the song in which he postulates with Lily as to why Alfie is single, is a hoot. And you won’t get a tearful, shame-filled performance from Dominic McChesney as Alfie; he satisfies not from hyper-theatrics, but a rich inner life that results in delicate but nonetheless stunning nuances.

Janet Miller is my kind of director who can use an empty space with some chairs and a table to create a church, a bus, a bar, an Irish hovel, and more, although some of the group scenes were a bit wonky and needed better focus. Michael P. Wallot is a magical casting director, as the stage is filled with distinctive personalities, all of whom perfectly execute a range of Irish dialects (coaching by Jill Massie). And wait until you hear the band, perfectly-suited for this Celtic brew and led by Music Director Corey Hirsch, whose conducting hands were as graceful as the show’s tuneful ballads.

The production isn’t flawless, but sound issues, actors not finding their light, and one last-minute replacement aside, it’s brimming over with love, and can’t possibly be a fluke for producing director Miller and her new board (which includes KPCC host Steve Julian). It’s been 11 years since the musical’s Off Broadway premiere in 2002, and this is the first fully-staged production in Los Angeles. Sure ‘n’ begorrah, Good People nailed it right out of the gate.