

## BACKSTAGE

A Man Of No Importance

February 16, 2006

By Wenzel Jones

The company's book-in-hand, staged concert reading style may have found its perfect subject in this sweet, heartfelt tale (book by Terrence McNally, music by Stephen Flaherty, lyrics by Lynn Ahrens) based on the film of the same name. Set in 1960s Dublin, the play centers on Alphie (Reece Holland, subdued and touching), an unmarried, no longer boyish bus conductor who lives with his sister and has a love of amateur theatricals and Oscar Wilde. His determination to produce Wilde's church basement-inappropriate *Salome*, along with a previously unmanifested penchant for the lads, leads to all manner of problems.

The production is commendable on so many levels. The music, while lovely, is rather tricky, but under Steven Smith's musical direction the able orchestra neither runs over nor leaves straggling the singers, even if on occasion their cue is off by a fraction. Shon LeBlanc's costuming is a subtle palette of Gaelic shades like peat and oatmeal, simple yet evocative of a damp land and a somewhat distant time. Each of the considerable talents in this ensemble gets at least one chance to shine under the deft and unassuming hand of director Nick DeGruccio. Notice, too, must be taken of the contributions of dialect coach Larry Moss, as there's not a clunker of a brogue in the bunch.

As Alphie's sister, Mary Van Arsdell's sly way of layering in the humor is masterful, and the songs sit so comfortably in her voice it's as if they were written for her. Alphie's secret crush and co-worker is played, most effectively, by Roger Befeler, while Maura M. Knowles is simply lovely as the young lady Alphie spots as his *Salome*. Joe Hart has a nice turn as the local butcher whom Lily would like to marry once her brother takes a wife. In the smaller roles, Eydie Alyson delights as the former child performer who suggests a tap number might work for *Salome*, Carol Kline is just about perfect as the self-appointed company muse, and Kevin McMahon ably provides the shows darker shadings as the sort of young man one meets in low bars, generally just before closing. Steven Hack, Marsha Kramer, Eileen Barnett, Paul Keith, Chuck Bergman, Roy Leake Jr., and Randy Kravis complete the cast of this "chamber musical" that hits not a single false note.

Presented by Musical Theatre Guild at the Alex Theatre, 216 N. Brand Blvd., Glendale. Mon. 7:30 p.m. Feb. 6. (818) 243-2539. Also at the Janet and Ray Scherr Forum Theatre, Thousand Oak's Civic Arts Plaza's Countrywide Performing Arts Center, 2100 Thousand Oaks Blvd., Thousand Oaks. Sun. 3 p.m. Feb. 12. (805) 583-8700. And at the Carpenter Performing Arts Center, 6200 Atherton St., Long Beach. Mon. 7:30 p.m. Feb. 27. (562) 856-1999, ext. 4.