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THEATER REVIEW

A musical with substance gets its due

By David C. Nichols
Special to The Times

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The origin of the word "amateur" essentially means "for the love." That describes Terrence McNally, Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty's "A Man of No Importance," which received its local premiere Monday at the Alex Theatre in Glendale.

Director Nick DeGruccio and his colleagues are all redoubtable pros. Yet this Musical Theatre Guild concert staging of the 2002 musical — in which a '60s-era Dublin bus conductor attempts to stage Oscar Wilde's "Salome" while suppressing his own true nature — is a labor of love across the board.

Based on the 1994 film starring Albert Finney, "Man's" chamber saga of Alfie Byrne (Reece Holland, never better), who recites Wilde to the passengers who populate his amateur church theatricals, is antithetical to the brass of, say, "Hairspray."

Librettist McNally, lyricist Ahrens and composer Flaherty (the Tony-winning team of "Ragtime") are more far more reflective. From the first Gaelic notes by musical director Steven Smith's stylish combo to the elegiac fade-out, "Man" prizes intimate substance over flashy uproar.

The title number surreally centers Alfie amid the St. Imelda's regulars. Widower Baldy (Steven Hack) and garrulous Grace (Carol Kline) are bastions of enthusiasm. Miss Crowe (Marcia Kramer), once a stellar Peter Pan, and Mrs. Curtain (Eydie Alyson), a former child star with a flock of kids, carry automatic satire, and Mrs. Patrick (Eileen Barnett) has an illicit secret. So does Dublin newcomer Adele (Maura M. Knowles), whom Alfie decides must play Salome.

Hambone butcher Carney (bravura Joe Hart) wants to marry self-sacrificing Lily (the superb Mary Van Arsdel), Alfie's sister, who mistakenly tries to set up Adele and Alfie. Fellow bus driver Robbie (Roger Befeler, ideal) has no interest in acting, nor does he suspect the depth of his co-worker's feelings. With the spirit of Wilde (Hart), seamy barfly Breton (Kevin McMahan) and church outrage over "a dirty play," everything comes to a touching, surprisingly relevant climax.

DeGruccio and choreographer Cheryl Baxter maneuver their cast — including Paul Keith's priest, Chuck Bergman's boss and Roy Leake Jr. and Randy Kravis as deliciously clueless thespians — seamlessly about, creating bus rides with chairs and rehearsal frenzy with clog dancing.

Standout numbers include the ensemble showstoppers "Going Up" and "Art," Robbie's soaring "The Streets of Dublin" and Alfie's "Love Who You Love," which Holland delivers from the bottom of his soul.

On Monday, such integrity offset an oversized venue and the highly specialized material. Easily the most individual musical since "James Joyce's The Dead," this "Man" should be of major importance to musical theater mavens and sensitive souls.

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'A Man of No Importance'

Where: Scherr Forum Theatre, 2100 E. Thousand Oaks Blvd., Thousand Oaks

When: 3 p.m. Sunday

Price: \$39

Contact: (805) 558-8700 or ticketmaster.com

Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes

Also

Where: Carpenter Performing Arts Center, 6200 Atherton St., Long Beach

When: 7:30 p.m. Feb. 27

Price: \$27.50

Contact: (562) 856-1999, Ext. 4

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