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PHOTOS BY TRACY A. WOODWARD—THE WASHINGTON POST

Local historian and playwright Meredith Bean McMath is directing her two-act adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's "Little Women."

Raising a New Curtain On County Theater

Founder Decides to Go From Playwright to Director

By KIMBERLY HARRINGER
Special to The Washington Post

Local playwright and historian Meredith Bean McMath has been writing plays since she was in the fifth grade and watching other people direct them. When she recently felt a strong calling to direct plays herself, she founded Loudoun County's newest theater company, Aurora Studio Theatre.

The theater plans to produce plays to entertain the whole family.

"I saw a niche in the county's theater world for family entertainment and adult musicals," McMath said. "Loudoun needs more places to go as a family where everyone will have a good time."

The theater group's premiere performance,

McMath's original adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's "Little Women," was chosen because of the influence the book had on her life. The play opened Friday and runs through Nov. 28.

"It is a poignant and encapsulating story of an entire family where you come to care about each and every member," McMath said. "As a playwright, the storytelling is so beautiful, it makes you want to see those characters in real life. This play should make everyone go away feeling great about being human."

The theater at the circa 1874 Old Stone School in Hillsboro helps set the stage for the play, which takes place during the Civil War. It is a coming-of-age tale of the four March sisters, Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy, and their journey

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Mary Triplett, who plays Jo March, reads to Maxine Bean, who plays Aunt March.



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The Aurora Studio Theatre production features local actors, including, from left, Ernie Carnevale, Pam Oliver, Bob Rosenberg and Nancy Purcell.

Curtain Rises on New Theater

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from "little women" to grown women of courage and strength.

In her two-act adaptation, McMath uses one simple set consisting of a piano, antique tables and a quilt-draped chair. The old school building, with its worn hardwood floors, dark wainscoting and long, warped, glass windows, helps transport the audience back to the time period.

Cast members say the new theater will be an asset to the community.

"Theater always benefits a community because it is a form of expression, and you can reach out to your neighbors, have empathy and share emotions," said Mary Triplett, 17, a senior at Loudoun Valley High School who plays Jo March. "It's a great way to come together."

McMath said the goal of the new group is to educate and entertain. "It's great to know that you're a part of something that transports people for a while."

"This should teach kids something, because we dress and talk accurately for the time period," said Mandy Juraschek, 17, a junior at Loudoun Valley who plays Amy March. "It's fun for kids, too. We're doing things that will make them laugh."

McMath uses a cast and crew of youths and adults from Loudoun, offering a creative outlet for residents. She said the theater was also based on a philosophy of maintaining a cooperative spirit, rotating directorship and listening to actors' ideas.

"What actors bring to the process is sometimes more important than what is written on the page," she said.

What makes her group unique, McMath said, is the camaraderie among members. It is a group of people who share a similar vision and a deep enthusiasm. "We really appreciate each other's ideas and can brainstorm beautifully and then back it up with action."

The theater group includes a board of 15 veteran Loudoun playwrights, directors and actors, including Gale Waldron, chairman of the Loudoun Arts Council; Jeff Stern, head of the Franklin Park Performing and Visual Arts Center; and Ite Stoneberger, an

award-winning playwright and Loudoun Valley High School's drama teacher.

Behind the velvet curtain, the actors face the challenges of juggling school, work and play practice and memorizing their lines. Jenny Sudge, 19, a full-time student at Northern Virginia Community College who plays Meg March, also works 25 hours a week.

"If you really want this, you put your challenges aside to accomplish it," said Cate Oliver, 15, a Loudoun Valley sophomore who plays Beth March.

McMath said she is always amazed at the time actors will invest and the enthusiasm they will display just to entertain people for a few hours.

"If acting is your passion, then other people should really enjoy your play," said Christian Amonson, 17, a Loudoun Valley senior who plays Laurie, the March girls' neighbor and friend.

In the near future, the group hopes to offer acting classes and develop a high school playwriting contest—and produce the winning entry. In January, McMath plans to take her cast on tour to Loudoun libraries in a "Meet the Cast of 'Little Women'" program designed to further educate and inspire residents.

The group's next play, "The Pajama Game," scheduled to run April 1 through 17, will be directed by Diane El-Shafey, who plays Mrs. March in "Little Women."

At the end of the play, Prof. Bhaer, played by Phil Ericson, says he doesn't have anything to offer Jo but his full heart and his empty hands, and Jo places her hands in his and replies, "Not empty now."

As McMath said, "It's the kind of story that makes you feel good about the capabilities of the human spirit."

"Little Women" will be presented at 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 3 p.m. Sundays through Nov. 28 at the Old Stone School Theater, 37088 Charlestown Pike, Hillsboro. Tickets, \$12 for adults and \$10 for seniors and children, are available at www.storyroot.com or Final Draft Booksellers in Purcellville.

