

theatre:
CALGARY



BY KATE HAMILL

ADAPTED FROM THE NOVEL BY LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Welcome educators!

Theatre Calgary's 2022-2023 Play Guides are intended to support your students' experience at Theatre Calgary this season. We encourage you to use some or all of these materials to provide context for your students before, during, and after their visit to Theatre Calgary. While not mandatory for students to enjoy the production, research shows that where young people are given opportunities to connect a work of art to their personal lives and experiences, the more deeply they are able to understand and appreciate the piece.

With that in mind, each guide provides you and your students with a range of contextual material. You will find background information on the play and playwright; social, linguistic, and historical context; expectations for the theatre; activities for you to lead in the classroom; and reflection questions to guide discussions. The activities connect to current events, are interdisciplinary, tie to your curriculum, and can be facilitated for various lengths of time. They can also be used before or after your viewing of the performance.

Pages marked with a  can be photocopied and distributed to students.

We hope that you and your students enjoy your experience at Theatre Calgary this year!

ABOUT THE PLAY

SUMMARY

Siblings Jo, Meg, Beth, and Amy March live with their mother while their father is serving in the American Civil War. The family struggles to keep their household after losing its fortune. Each family member faces their own personal and moral challenges.



Jo, the protagonist and an aspiring writer, is expected to become more 'ladylike.'

The oldest, **Meg**, has to decide to follow her heart.

Beth must overcome her crippling shyness.

And **Amy**, the youngest, wrestles with her dreams of wealth.

The children are guided in their personal growth by their mother, Marmee, who provides nursing care to families within their small New England community.

Kate Hamill's adaptation of this familiar story is unique in its focus on the story of the siblings and how they cope with the rapidly-changing world around them. We see their family struggles through the childrens' eyes as they create their annual holiday play, introduce their wealthy neighbor, Theodore "Laurie" Laurence, into their fold, and grow up before our eyes.

In the siblings' journey to find their respective places in society, Meg and Jo attend a high-society party where Jo proceeds to embarrass them both with her ill-manners and 'unladylike' behavior. It is here where Meg's future starts to take shape as she begins a courtship with Laurie's tutor, John Brooks.

Preparations for the Marches pared-down Christmas celebration continue with rehearsals for Jo's play and plans to spend what little money they have on gifts for Marmee. Laurie is included in the performance while internal spats cause Amy to be 'dismissed' from the cast. When Laurie is caught 'neglecting his studies' by his grandfather, Beth pays Mr. Laurence a visit in an attempt to save their family's Christmas tradition—sparking another unexpected friendship.

Christmas day brings surprises aplenty with a special gift for Beth, a return of Laurie to the cast, and a reunion of Meg and Mr. Brooks, solidifying their future together. Their holiday joy is cut short by a message calling Marmee to Washington to her injured husband's side. The family quickly concocts a plan to gather enough money for her to make the trip.

With Marmee gone, Laurie expresses his love for Jo—who denies him in pursuit of her dreams of becoming a writer. Beth takes over Marmee's visits to sick families, and, in doing so, contracts scarlet fever. It is then when Marmee and Father arrive from Washington and the end of the first act.

The second act picks up a year and a half later with a glimpse into Jo and Laurie's relationship. Amy has grown up quite a bit in the past year, and she has joined the fight to pressure Jo into giving up her adolescent fantasies and behave like a proper lady. Amy has taken up Jo's role in catering to their curmudgeonly Aunt March with promises of a trip to Europe.

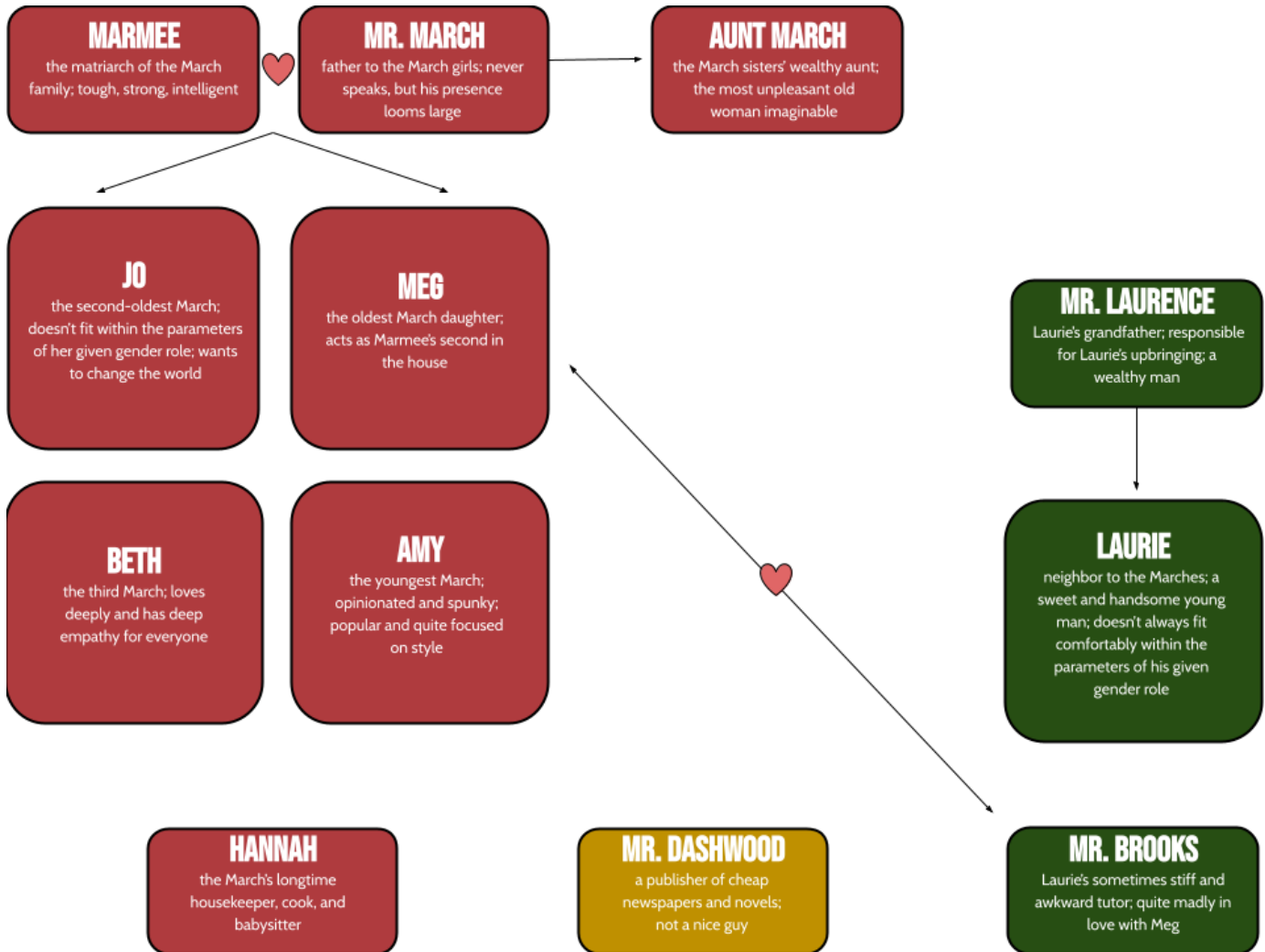
In the meantime, Meg has married Mr. Brooks and given birth to twins while Laurie goes off to college. Jo finds herself completing her first novel and bringing it to a publisher, who further reinforces society's views and limitations on women. When Laurie returns from college, he proposes to Jo, promising to let her follow her dreams—despite what the world says her role as a wife must be. Staying true to herself, she denies him again, driving a further wedge between her and Amy. But when Beth falls ill again, Jo's humanity and future is called into question once again.

STORY WHOOSH

is an interactive storytelling technique that enables any kind of plot to come alive, even without participants having prior knowledge.

- The teacher facilitates the shared storytelling by bringing individuals and groups in and out of the action.
- As soon as characters, objects, places, or events in the story (i.e., servants, bad thoughts, ships, etc.) are mentioned, the first students step into the circle and make a shape or pose that represents what has been narrated.
- At any time the teacher can say "Whoosh!" and students quickly return to their 'places' in a circle.
- Continue the story around the group, so that different students get to play various characters and everyone gets a chance to try several roles, regardless of gender.

CHARACTER BREAKDOWN

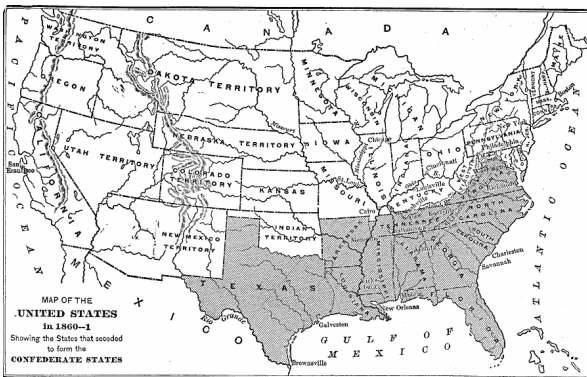


HISTORICAL + SOCIAL CONTEXT



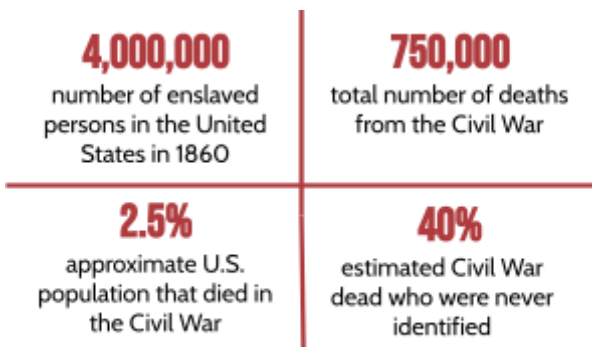
THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR in a nutshell

The American Civil War was fought from 1861 to 1865 between the states in the northern United States and those in the south. The war began when 11 southern states threatened to secede (or withdraw) from the country.



Northerners wanted to stop the spread of slavery, and Southerners believed that the government should not have the right to decide whether or not they could enslave people. The Civil War is often referred to as a “moral war.”

Because the war took place within the same country, many families saw members fighting on either side of the war.



Excerpted from *Civil War by the Numbers* on pbs.org



5 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

- 1 Louisa May Alcott served as a nurse for the Northern Army during the American Civil War.
- 2 She was a suffragette, fighting for the rights of women to vote in the United States. While she campaigned for this right in the 1870's, women were not granted the right to vote until 1920.
- 3 *Little Women* was published in two parts (in 1868 & 1869) as a negotiation with a publisher on behalf of her father. Alcott went on to write two sequels, *Little Men* (1871) and *Jo's Boys* (1886).
- 4 The story is a fictionalized autobiography of Alcott's own life growing up as a “tomboy” in a house of girls.
- 5 Alcott's father founded an abolitionist society in 1850 to help end African slavery in the United States. Her childhood home in Massachusetts was a stop for fugitive enslaved people on the Underground Railroad.

ASK THE PLAYWRIGHT QUESTIONS FOR KATE HAMILL



Why adapt *Little Women*?

"I'm really interested in creating radical feminist reclamations of the classics. How do you deal with becoming a woman in both Louisa May Alcott's society and today's society when the world kind of wants you to fit in this teeny tiny box?"

What is unique about your adaptation?

"A lot of people really want to sort of be very faithful to the original. I believe in creating something that's much more surprising and theatrical. It doesn't have to...live in this cold marble altar and be a dead thing. It could be living."

How does your version address gender roles?

"Alcott was writing for her day, and she was a genius... But I thought... if I'm writing a play that young people are coming to today, I want them to look on the stage and go... I don't have to fit into my gender role."

What do you want young people to take away from this play?

"I really wanted to create a story that's about, it is not wrong to be who you are. You can be who you are, and you may get pushback for it but things are going to turn out for you."

*excerpted from [PBS's Amanpour & Co.](#)

HOW THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR SHAPED THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY

- The Civil War challenged the concept of Victorian domesticity, where men and women existed in separate spheres.
- The 'home' became a new kind of domestic sphere when men left to serve in the war, and women took over the operation of the home.
- Women (and sometimes children) had to take men's places in factory jobs, office work, and for the United States government.
- Women played a significant role in the war effort, for the first time in American history.

WHAT TO EXPECT AT THE THEATRE



An open mind

Let the performance surprise you! Stay open to what can happen. Look for moments of theatre magic (how did they change that costume so quickly?) and unexpected dialogue.

Assigned seats

Every seat in the theatre offers a unique perspective on the action. Appreciate what you can see from your seat that someone else might not.

Live actors

The folk on stage can see you, hear you, and feel your energy. And actors love student audiences! Laugh when something is funny! Gasp when you're surprised! Applaud when you're impressed! The actors thrive on audience reactions.

A break from reality

Theatre-makers ask the audience to "suspend their disbelief." If someone on stage says the red ribbon is blood, then it is! If an actor takes flight, then imagine you can't see the strings. This is what the actors ask of the audience. Embrace the magic of theatre.

Questions

Listen carefully to the story being told. If you have a question, keep your voice to a whisper so it doesn't disturb others. (See the call out on Q + As to help you form great questions for the team behind the show.) Let yourself be challenged by the content. What new ideas or perspectives are you hearing?

Disconnection

Put your phone away and immerse yourself in the technology of the theatre. The sounds and lights from your device are distracting to the actors, fellow audience members, and you! Plus, the law says that photos and videos aren't allowed, anyway.

PREPARING QS FOR A Q + A

While you watch the show, consider how the creative team (see pg. X) brings the story to life on stage for you.

Consider questions about the process:

- How did the lighting / set / costume / sound designer...
- What made the director choose to...
- How did the playwright decide to...

Ask questions about the story:

- Why did [character] make the decision to...
- Can you explain how...
- Why didn't _____ happen?

Learn more about each job:

- Why did you decide to become a...
- What do I need to do to become a...
- What has been your favorite...



THEATRE TEAM TALKBACK

Theatre is a 'team sport,' and it's not the actors alone who bring a production to life. After your show, you'll have a chance to ask questions of the creative team. Here are some of the folks you might expect to speak with:

The Playwright writes the script—sometimes from an original idea, and sometimes adapted from a book or story; decides what the characters say and gives the designers guidelines on how the play should look.

The Director creates the vision for the production, how it will look on stage, and works closely with the actors, costume, set, and lighting designers to make sure everyone tells the same story.

The Actors use their bodies and voices to bring the playwright's words and the director's ideas to life on the stage.

The Designers imagine and create the lights, scenery, props, costumes, and sound that will compliment and tell the playwright's story in a way that matches the director's vision.

The Stage Manager assists the director during rehearsals by taking detailed notes and making sure the actors and designers understand these ideas. They run the show during each performance by making sure the actors' entrances and exits and the lights and sound all run smoothly.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

IF YOU HAVE 15 MINUTES...

Circles of Myself

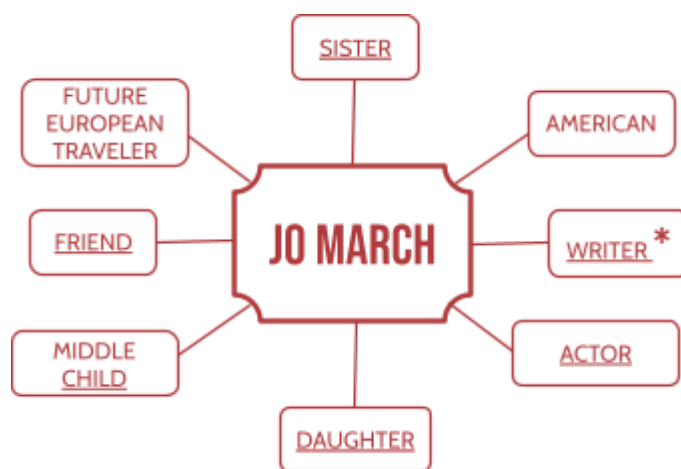
Little Women tells the story of young people trying to find their way in the world—trying to find themselves and where they fit. In this activity, students will name the various identities they carry within themselves (child, sibling, student, etc.) and reflect on how these identities are present in their daily lives.

Focus Question. How can reflecting on the many identities we carry help us tell our own stories?

Objective. Students will be able to name identities they carry, identify which are outward-presenting or inward-presenting, and reflect on a part of themselves in which they feel pride.

Procedure.

- 1 On a blank sheet of paper, have students write their name in the middle of the page, and draw a circle around it.
- 2 Next, have them create several 'satellites,' each containing a different identity. Encourage them to add as many as they can. Feel free to model this with your own identity circles to help guide students toward a wide variety of responses.
- 3 Have students underline any identities that can be seen by the outside world.
- 4 Have students put a star (*) next to the identity they feel most proud of.
- 5 Using the sharing method that works best for your students, have them share a story about a time they felt exceptionally proud to carry that identity.



IF YOU HAVE 30 MINUTES...

Costume Design

Kate Hamill's adaptation of Little Women emphasizes the sisters' roles in female society—including what was appropriate attire for a female. This activity will challenge students to create a costume for a character that matches the description of Jo March.

Focus Question. How do we tell a character's story through their clothing?

Objective. Students will be introduced to costume design by choosing colors, textures, patterns, and style elements based on the playwright's character description.

Procedure.

- 1 Share the following character description of Jo March from Kate Hamill's *Little Women*.

"Does not fit comfortably within the parameters of her given gender role. A deep fire within her. Extremely ambitious and frustrated by the distance between where she is and where she wants to be. Impatient. Wants to change the world. Very smart and knows it. A mix of insecurity and aspiration. Boyish and rough-and-tumble. Sometimes antagonistic. Not the most tolerant of differing viewpoints. Can be quite awkward or abrupt; bad temper when riled. A great sense of humor. Passionate. Ahead of her time. A warrior."

- 2 Prompt students to consider the following:

- What **colors** does this description make you think of?
- What are the **textures** that reflect this character?
- What **patterns** do you see when you envision this character?
- What **items of clothing** would this character wear?

- 3 Show [these examples](#) of costume design renderings that demonstrate a variety of styles and layers in clothing selection. Discuss what students notice in the examples.

- 4 Hand out the [costume figure drawing](#), and encourage students to use pencil first, then add color and text, where needed.

* Extensions:

- Introduce magazines to find images of clothing items that reflect the character design
- Add fabric into the mix to inspire the use of swatches to represent texture

IF YOU HAVE AN HOUR...

Adapting a Story

Adapting a story requires a reimagining of familiar characters in an unfamiliar way. Kate Hamill chose the theme of gender politics in the original *Little Women* to guide her adaptation. (See the Q & A with Kate Hamill on pg. 8.) For this activity, students will choose a favorite story and reimagine one of its characteristics to create their own adaptation.

Focus Question. How can changing one element of a story help an audience see a new perspective?

Objective. Students will create a storyboard (beginning, middle, and end) or plot diagram for a reimagined familiar story by changing one element of storytelling.

Procedure.

- 1 Have students make a list of their favorite stories. These can be novels, poems, songs, video game plots, or childhood fairy tales.
- 2 Model the process of choosing a single story element to adapt a story by using a story that is familiar to all students in your classroom. Walk through each option identified [here](#).

For example: If you were to change the setting of *Little Women* by adjusting *when* the story takes place, you might set this story in the current day. What are the pieces of the story that would need to change as a result of modernizing this story?

WAYS TO ADAPT A STORY

SETTING

Change where the story takes place

OR

Change when the story takes place

CHARACTERS

Change a character's personality

OR

Change a character's objectives (what they want)

PERSPECTIVE

Change whose side of the story the audience hears

CONFLICT

Change the story's central problem

EXPOSITION

Change what happened before the story starts

OR

Write what happens before this story starts

ENDING

Change how the story ends

OR

Write what happens next

- 3 Return students' attention to the lists they created at the top of the activity. Have them select one story they are excited to adapt based on this criteria.
- 4 Give students time to think or talk through their ideas to adapt. Remind them to focus on changing a single element so as not to overwhelm or muddy the story. There will always be a ripple effect—by changing the time period, the character objective or major conflict will also change.
- 5 Distribute one of the following worksheets to your students to help them map their adaptation:
 - A [storyboard worksheet](#) for visual learners or early storytellers
 - A [plot diagram worksheet](#) for more advanced storytellers
- 6 Encourage students to share their ideas with the class or even start writing!

Plot diagram for a story

STORYBOARD

DRAW THE ARC OF YOUR STORY.

BEGINNING	MIDDLE	END
Write a caption describing the action for each part of your story.		

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION + DISCUSSION

A theatre experience is not complete without reflection. What is the audience talking about when they leave the theatre? Here are some questions to pose to your students following their experience with *Little Women* at Theatre Calgary.

- 1 What would life be like for the March sisters if they lived here in Calgary in 2022?
- 2 Which character in this adaptation of *Little Women* were you best able to connect with? What drew you to them?
- 3 How might this story be different if it *weren't* set during the American Civil War? How does this time period pave the way for this story?
- 4 It is no accident that Jo and Laurie have 'gender-bending' names. In what other ways does *Little Women* address gender dynamics?
- 5 Who do you think the audience is for this story? What makes you think that?
- 6 If you've read the novel, *Little Women*, how is this stage adaptation similar or different? What did you see in this production that you didn't see when you read the book?

THEATRE CALGARY PLAY GUIDES DEVELOPED BY

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