

*A Man of No Importance*

BY CHRISTOPHER HOILE March 12, 2008 12:03

EDITORIAL RATING: 4 out of 5 stars

Featuring Kyle Blair, Douglas E Hughes. Music by Stephen Flaherty. Lyrics by Lynn Ahrens. Book by Terrence McNally. Directed by Lezlie Wade. Presented by Acting Up Stage Theatre Company. To Mar 22. Wed-Fri 8pm; Sat 2pm, 8pm; Sun 7pm. \$25-\$35; \$21 students/arts workers. Berkeley Street Theatre (Upstairs), 26 Berkeley. 416-368-3110. [www.manofnoimportance.com](http://www.manofnoimportance.com).

If you're tired of musicals based on the back catalogs of pop/rock groups or ones that depend on computer-generated imagery or litres of fake blood to create an effect, then hurry to the Berkeley Street Theatre to see *A Man of No Importance*, a soul-restoring musical that will renew your faith that people can still tell a deeply moving story simply through beautifully crafted words and music.

The team of Stephen Flaherty, Lynn Ahrens and Terrence McNally is probably best known for their musical *Ragtime* (1996). *A Man of No Importance* (2002), a more intimate work requiring only a four-piece orchestra, is based on a little-known 1994 film of the same name not yet on DVD. The man of "no importance" referenced in the title is Alfie Byrne (Douglas E. Hughes), a middle-aged bus conductor in 1964 Dublin, in all ways unremarkable except for his passion for literature especially by Dublin-born author Oscar Wilde. He reads Wilde's stories to passengers on the bus and is the director of an amateur theatre group that stages plays in a church basement. His latest project is mounting what he considers Wilde's masterpiece, his 1894 tragedy *Salomé*. To Alfie the work is high art, but to church authorities it is blasphemous filth. As they move to stop the play, the virginal, unworldly Alfie begins to wonder if his love of Wilde has anything to do with his unrequited love for the handsome bus driver Robbie (Kyle Blair). Alfie's inherent shyness aside, Catholic 1960s Dublin is not an easy place to find an answer.

The twelve-person cast, many playing multiple characters, is uniformly excellent. Primarily they represent the ordinary folk who comprise Alfie's acting troupe and the warm humour of their enthusiasms and pretensions counterbalances Alfie's growing personal dilemma. Book author Terrence McNally's conceit is that the members of Alfie's troupe proceed to act out his story for us, but the conceit is unnecessary since we enter so fully into the story. Under Lezlie's Wade's imaginative direction actors with only the simple props of a few chairs and a board or two, conjure up the whole of Alfie's world from the bus, to the church, his home and Robbie's local pub. Unlike too many musicals today, the production is elegantly simply and places the emphasis on Flaherty's memorable, wistful Irish-influenced melodies and Ahrens perceptive lyrics.

Hughes, a stalwart of the Shaw Festival, gives what is perhaps his best-ever performance. He makes this good-hearted 40-year-old naïf thoroughly believable. Alfie's a man for whom literature is more real than life and serves as his retreat from a world that pays him no regard. Hughes gives cherishable portrayal of a man who comes to yearn for someone else to cherish. He makes Alfie's humility and pain so real your eyes constantly well up

in sympathy for him. Another Shaw regular, Patty Jamieson, brings out the humour in Alfie's philistine sister Lily, foolishly waiting for Alfie to marry before she does. Ian Deakin and Susan Henley are wonderful as ordinary townspeople whom amateur theatrics give delusions of grandeur. Bethany Jillard is the lovely mysterious Adele, Alfie's Salomé, who has a dark secret of her own. The good-looking, golden-voiced Blair is an ideal Robbie.

In short, if you are looking for a sensitive, bittersweet musical driven by a subtle, melancholy score bursting with good humour and aching pent-up emotions, look no further than this lovingly produced show that by the final curtain will revive your faith in the modern musical.