

by **TRAVIS MICHAEL HOLDER**

## **A Noise Within**

There are no rapidly falling chandeliers, no giant Dementors hovering above the ANW stage, no rocking score of Michael Jackson music sending patrons into the aisles to rock out.

In the seldom produced turn-of-*this*-century musical version of the 1994 Albert Finney film *A Man of No Importance*, there's only the heartstring-twanging story of Alfie Byrne, an unmarried London bus conductor who idolizes Oscar Wilde, produces amateur productions of the great one's classic plays in his church's basement, and secretly deep in his down-dirties wishes he could plant a big wet one on the lips of his bluecollar swashbuckler of a bus driver coworker.

With a lovely, sweet and pizzazz-unadorned book by Terrence McNally, patron saintly champion of unfulfilled urban dwellers, and a charmingly non-blockbuster score by *Ragtime*'s Tony-winning composer and lyricist Stephen Flaherty and Lynn Ahrens, why *No Importance* isn't more important is a struggle for me to understand.

First produced at Lincoln Center in 2002 starring the lategreat Roger Rees and most recently mounted off-Broadway in 2022 featuring Jim Parsons as Alfie, McNally, Flaherty, and Ahrens' simple little masterpiece should be a contemporary favorite in my mind, something director and ANW's co-artistic director Julia Rodriguez-Elliott has obviously recognized and embraced bigtime.

The simplicity is welcomed here, leaving room for pure theatrical ambrosia and some inventive creating. Having never been a fan of plays—and especially musicals—where the action is interrupted every few minutes by the distracting wheeling out and wheeling in of various set pieces, here Rodriguez-Elliott has shrewdly made the device part of the tale with the oddly graceful and highly choreographed set changes “performed” by the actors becoming an almost integral element of the storytelling.

Her delightfully eclectic ensemble cast, with every offbeat yet socially recognizable character given his or her own moment to shine by the veteran bookwriter and at least one solo each assigned to them by the show's savvy composers, is something to behold, introducing a stage full of otherwise nondescript townsfolk with whom to fall in love.

A special nod is deserved for the admirable individual performances contributed by Analisa Idalia as Alfie's reluctant leading lady in his upcoming—and eventually thwarted—production of Wilde's *Salome*, Juliana Sloan as his well-meaning busybody sister Lily, and particularly the dashing John Raitt-voiced CJ Eldred as Robbie, his unsuspecting love interest.

Perhaps the most memorable supporting performance comes from Ed F. Martin, who as *Salome*'s woebegone stage manager and Alfie's longtime friend Baldy, offers a quietly showstopping turn as the widower visits his beloved wife's gravesite and delivers the haunting ballad "The Cuddles Mary Gave," which left my eyes blurred with tears and my hand hurting for the rest of the evening by ferociously grabbing my partner's hand in the darkened theatre.

Still, the fulcrum that makes this production swing perilously from high comedy to intense pathos is Kasey Mahaffy as Alfie, who is literally never offstage and delivers a brilliantly dear, quietly dynamic *tour-de-force* performance sure to both tickle your long-dormant music theatre funnybone and subsequently tear your heart out.

ANW's *A Man of No Importance* is sadly only playing one more week, closing June 1. It's no doubt one of the most satisfying and special productions mounted on LA stages this season and you'd be remiss not to do everything in your power to try to catch it. It doesn't have a score you'll necessarily be humming as you walk back to your car or any grand theatrical razzle-dazzle that makes it the kind of musical that will ever be tapped to move on into a years-long residency at a flashy Vegas casino. It is instead the kind of scrappy, endearing underachiever that lingers on in your memory banks long after it's over.

**THROUGH JUNE 1: A Noise Within, 3352 E. Foothill Blvd., Pasadena. 626.356.3100 or [anoisewithin.org](http://anoisewithin.org)**