

Holiday Film Lost in 1994 Deluge

Powerhouse Cast Spun Classic Novel into Gold

December 1, 2006

It doesn't feel like Christmas without presents," a demure Trini Alvarado sighs in the attic of a 19th century Victorian. It's Christmas eve, 1863, and Trini's three sisters – Winona Ryder, Clare Danes and Kirsten Dunst – are all in a twit. They're staring out the window at the well-to-do estate next door, where a dashing young man has recently moved in with his grandfather. Their mother, Susan Sarandon, is off volunteering at a local charity that helps people who are even more destitute than them.

Does this plot sound familiar? If not, you probably missed a shockingly good film released by Columbia Pictures exactly 12 years

ago this month. The movie brings to life Louisa May Alcott's classic novel, *Little Women*, in a big way.

"Gillian Armstrong's enchantingly pretty film is so potent that it prompts a rush of recognition from the opening frame."

That's the verdict of Janet Maslin, top film reviewer for the *New York Times*. Armstrong, of course, is the director who gave us *My Brilliant Career* and *Mrs. Soffel*.

Despite a slough of sterling reviews, few Americans caught *Little Women* during its theatrical run. That's because *Forrest Gump*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Quiz Show*, *The Shawshank Redemption* and *Four Weddings and a Funeral* were all busy hogging the box office that year.

However, as they say, there's no time like the present.

"There in Concord, Massa-



Sarandon's agent advised her against playing the role of Winona Ryder's mother. Meanwhile, Colleen Atwood earned an Oscar nomination for her costume design.

chusetts," Maslin writes, "are the March girls and their noble Marmee, gathered around the hearth for a heart-rendingly quaint Christmas Eve. Stirring up a flurry of familial warmth, Ms. Armstrong instantly demonstrates that she has caught the essence of this book's sweetness and cast her film uncannily well, finding sparkling young actresses who are exactly right for their famous roles. The effect is magical."

The review goes on. "Remember that these are fresh-faced teenagers who wassail and embroider. They put on little plays for at-home entertainment; they live out the pieties of 'Pilgrim's Progress'; they talk passionately about music and literature."

Like the book on which it's based, the film recounts the lives of Louisa May Alcott's own family. It was one that followed the beat of a much different drum than we would hear a half century later in the writings of Edith Wharton. Whereas both Wharton and England's Jane Austen seemed fixated on the lives of the rich, Alcott and some of her contemporaries dabbled in a much



Ryder goes head to head with the dashing young British actor Christian Bale.

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wider social sphere.

In fact, the Alcotts were related by both blood and conviction to the abolitionist Mays, who were in turn related by marriage to the Adamses, the same family that gave us our second and fourth Presidents.

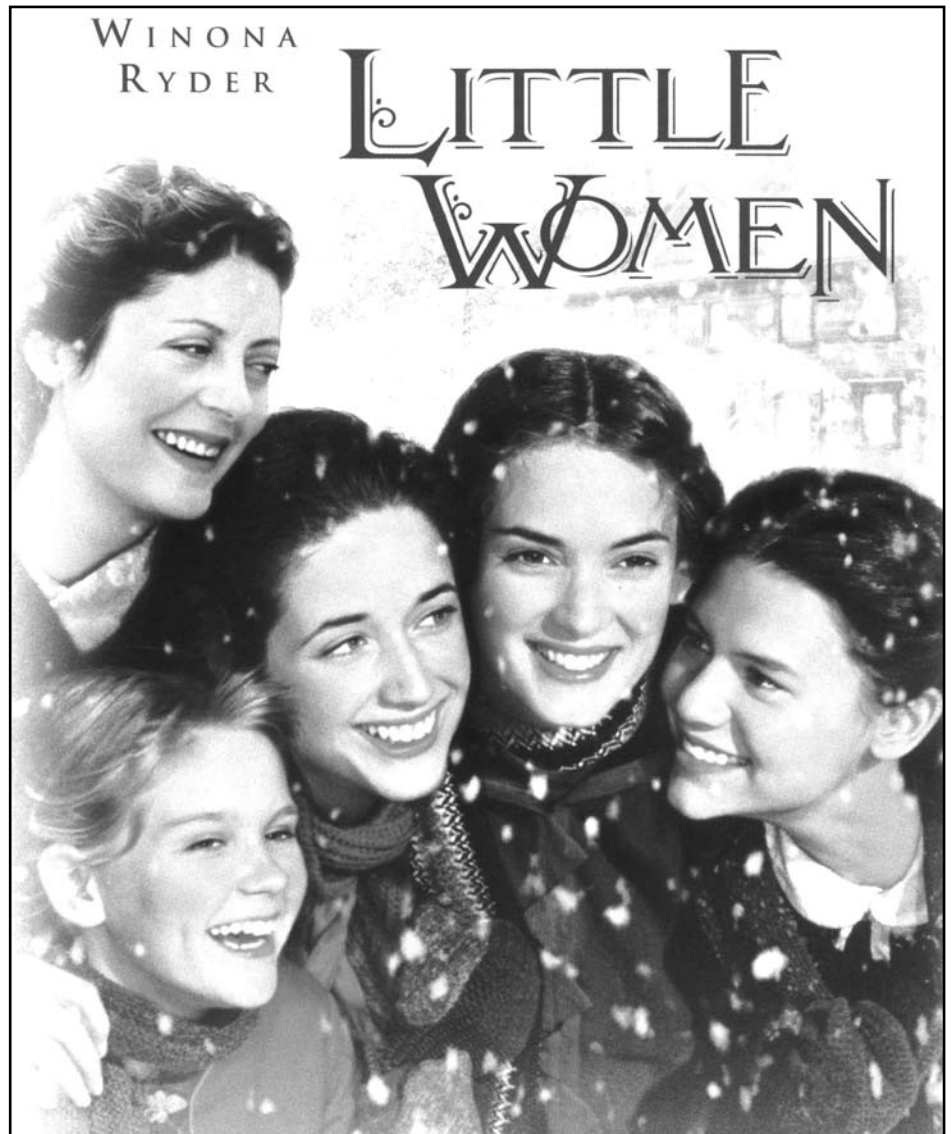
Significantly, Louisa's cousin, Annie May Holland Adams, married James Fields, the man who would eventually publish Alcott's novel. Mrs. Fields may not be well known in the annals of history, but her contributions include the development of the modern social work profession in Boston, as well as playing a key role in getting the works of Henry James, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Alcott published. (James Russell Lowell used to refer to her as the silent-partner in the legendary publishing firm of Ticknor and Fields.)

Yet critics of the movie say screenwriter Robin Swicord strayed from her assignment by imposing a nineties feminist agenda on her adaptation of Alcott's novel. The accusation comes up again and again in articles and reviews – even Maslin's.

Which brings us back to Edith Wharton and Jane Austen. It's their archetype of the Victorian feminine, those couch potatoes gathered in the drawing room debating the marriage market, that seems to have stuck in the public conscience.

If anything, nineties feminism pales in comparison to the more informal women's rights movement of the 1800's.

Massachusetts, in particular, was teeming with feminine ways and means shortly after the textile industry launched its first manufacturing plants in the towns of Lowell and Lawrence. Both employed predominantly female workforces. By mid-century, the suffragette movement was spawned and women had secured



Director Gillian Armstrong counted her lucky stars with the cast she drew for *Little Women* (1994). In this promotional poster, we find the film's major players. At top is Susan Sarandon. Below her, clockwise from left: Kirsten Dunst, Trini Alvarado, Winona Ryder and Clare Danes. (All photos here are reprinted with permission from Columbia Pictures /Sony Entertainment.)

the right to open bank accounts and inherit estates. They also formed trade unions, prevailed in the great Bread and Roses strike in 1912, and needled their way into Harvard and other universities.

On the intellectual front, the discovery by Sir Charles Newton of three hefty goddess statues in Asia Minor prompted an outpouring of scholarly speculation about a matriarchal tradition that predated both Christianity and the Greek gods. Many of the articles on this subject were published by none other than James Fields, who had founded his fledgling maga-

zine, the *Atlantic Monthly*, in 1857.

For once, the pendulum of revisionist history had swung in a positive direction, as American women found themselves enjoying a higher standing in society than they had ever known.

(Naturally, not everyone was happy with the new trend in gender relations. Henry James was so put off by the renaissance of the feminine that he left Boston and moved to England.)

But getting back to the film, it's neither politics nor pedigree

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that drive Armstrong's "little quantum of achievement", to borrow a phrase from this last mentioned author. It's the familiar bond between the sisters, with all its bickering and petty jealousies, that resonates for two cozy hours, never missing a beat in its delivery of unaffected humor and emotional catharsis.

Winona Ryder gives a benchmark performance, reincarnating both Alcott and the main character of her novel, Jo March. Jo is a Victorian with a chip on her shoulder and a reluctance about exploring her own sexuality.

"Her spirited presence gives the film an appealing linchpin," Maslin wrote, "and she plays the self-proclaimed "man of the family" with just the right staunchness."

Australian-born director Armstrong turned down the job to direct *Little Women* three times before meeting Ryder for lunch in Los Angeles. Ryder would claim afterwards that Armstrong's change of heart came after the actress spent the lunch date buttering her up. However, the director cites a different reason in a voice-over commentary that's included on the 2002 DVD re-issue of the film.

She says she was moved by Ryder's depth of character .

"I felt that she had a lot more humor and passion, and in some ways I suppose the intelligence than had been shown in her other films. I think because she has a haunting beauty that she had played much more held-back characters."

The only thing that needed to be held back while shooting *Little Women* was the frequent tears generated by the depth of emotion stirred by many of its scenes. Acclaimed playwright Swicord developed the script with the help of her friend Amy Pascal, then a

Columbia Pictures studio executive.

Swicord, of course, would go on to write *Practical Magic* and *Memoirs of a Geisha*. Pascal, meanwhile has spent the last several years in the chairman's seat at Sony Pictures Entertainment.

But back in the spring of '94, incredibly, Swicord's finished screenplay was going nowhere. Only when Ryder became attached did the picture get greenlit by the studio. The actress is credited with recruiting much of the cast and the crew of *Little Women*.

Ryder's commitment to the film also led to her lobbying Columbia to include a tribute to twelve-year-old Polly Klaas in the movie's closing credits. Klaas was murdered in October of 1993 in Ryder's hometown of Petaluma, in Sonoma County. Richard Allen Davis abducted Klaas at knife-point from a slumber party, then killed her after a sexual assault. He was later convicted and sentenced to death.

Worried that the dedication would be seen as depressing and chase away sales at the box office, the studio balked at Ryder's suggestion. The actress persisted, however, and the dedication was included.

Jo's 11-year-old sister Amy was played by Kirsten Dunst. Dunst hijacked many of the scenes from her elders, displaying a quality that Maslin characterizes as "twinkling mischief". Those antics snared her an acting award from the Society of Boston Critics.

Susan Sarandon played the epitome of an earthy New England eccentric, otherwise known as "Marmee", while handsome Gabriel Byrne filled the shoes of Professor Baer, Ryder's romantic interest.

Mary Wickes, cast as the bungling choir director in *Sister Act* just a year earlier, nailed the

role of crabby Aunt March in *Little Women*. The movie veteran passed away in 1995, as did Canadian actress Florence Peterson, who plays the March family maid.

Ryder earned an Oscar nomination for her performance. Costume designer Colleen Atwood was also nominated, as was Thomas Newman for his score.

The 2002 collector's edition DVD is still available for about ten dollars online and through some retailers. Log onto pricegrabbers.com and enter "Little Women DVD" to get a list. (Beware - the 1933 film version with Katherine Hepburn is also in circulation.)

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