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'Little Wars' is Low Profile but Exceptional in Every Way

BY JEAN-GABRIEL FERNANDEZ MAR. 25, 2019 1:35 P.M.

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Rarely does a play touch so many chords, leaving you an emotional mess, and rarely does a play make a critic want to come out and take a stand by endorsing it. *Little Wars* is such a play, and here is my stand: You must watch *Little Wars*, no matter what it takes. You will laugh, you will learn, and you will leave the room on the verge of tears, deeply touched by the exceedingly human display you had the privilege to witness. This is a low-profile play in an intimate venue, but excellence erupts where you expect it least.

Little Wars tells the story of six exceptional women meeting for dinner in the French Alps during World War II. Famous writer and poet Gertrude Stein (Maggie Wirth), along with her girlfriend Alice Toklas (Donna Daniels), invited some of their famous author friends over for the occasion; they are joined by Dorothy Parker (Cara Johnston), Lillian Hellman (Carrie Gray) and Agatha Christie (Victoria Hudziak). Another woman unexpectedly joins them, Muriel Gardiner, an anti-fascist freedom fighter who smuggled money and passports to save German Jews, and who is played here by the exceptional Ruth Arnell. Molly Corkins completes the all-female cast as Bernadette, the maid. In any average play, each would be the acting highlight, but this is an all-star cast where each actress reinforces an already fantastic script.

The story is fictional, but barely so. All of these women are real, all of their feats presented in the play are historical, and they were all part of the same social circles. We do not know if they were ever all in the same room, but playwright Steven Carl McCasland offers us the most perfect what-if dinner party imaginable.

Within this living room's walls, these giants of literature clash violently, pitting scalding wit against fiery repartee. Gertrude Stein is made to be a ferocious woman, yet her

retorts are always hilarious. Her distaste for Lillian Hellman makes for a light-hearted first act, which is spent bent in half in laughter. Then, when the radio announces France's surrender to Hitler, the ambiance darkens, hearts open and secrets are revealed.

This exceptional story is delivered in an ideal location, the Brumder Mansion, an elegant Victorian mansion—complete with ghosts, if the rumors are to be believed—which feels perfectly appropriate for the setting. Between the colorful tapestries and beautiful artwork, the tiny theater in the basement plunges the audience in 1940 France. By weaving amazing writing with flawless acting and a gorgeous set, *Little Wars* bring the audience even farther than that, in the middle of a literary salon when history was made.

Through April 6 at the Brumder Mansion, 3046 W. Wisconsin Ave. For tickets, call 414-388-9104 or visit milwaukeeentertainmentgroup.com.

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