

UWM REPORT

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Older and 'slightly bigger women' are still looking for the keys to unlock their 'castles in the air'

By Rebecca Ottman



"I feel like I know those girls, and they know me," said Doris Cummins, a retired writer and Eastcastle Place resident.

The title refers in part to the rise in gender equality since the novel's 1868 publication. According to critic Barbara Sicherman, during the 19th century there was a "scarcity of models for nontraditional womanhood." "Little Women" created an opportunity for the female protagonist to evolve.

To read "Little Women" today is "to engage with contemporary ideas about female authority," wrote Elaine Showalter, American literary critic and feminist. As director, Anne Basting agreed. "Our department was producing the musical of 'Little Women' (staged in March), and I thought, what a great time to really engage audiences in the issues this novel brings up – it was so prescient for its time."

Basting engaged several partners to fuel her exploration, including lecturer Casey O'Brien's Intro to Women's Studies class. They set up a letter exchange between the largely female-populated UWM class and older Milwaukeeans. The young letter writers shared their dreams, and the elders, who live at care communities participating in the Creative Trust, responded with theirs, commenting on historical changes that made those dreams possible.

"Slightly Bigger Women" looks back on the

opportunities awarded but also forward, acknowledging equality is not yet a reality. In the novel, the young characters had shared their dreams of whom they hope to become – wistfully calling them their "castles in the air."

Laura Wengler, director of Community Life Services at Eastcastle Place, praised the Creative Trust and the project. "Our Eastcastle Place residents greatly enjoyed sharing their personal stories with UWM students. They were also challenged to reflect back on their unique life experiences and communicate a message that would contribute to the project."

Basting, who facilitates the Creative Trust, connects Peck School of the Arts' students and faculty with older adults in the greater Milwaukee area to foster lifelong learning through the arts. Last fall, Basting held workshops in the Creative Trust sites, introducing the idea for the play. Those who joined the letter exchange returned letters reassuring the students that opportunities are everywhere; that life is what you make of it.

"I have the keys to my castle in the air," ruminates Jo in "Little Women." "but whether I can unlock it remains to be seen."

A new play by UWM student Tina Binns and professor Anne Basting asks whether and how things might be different for Jo today. "Slightly Bigger Women," a UWM Department of Theatre production, is a performance/dialogue and collaboration with the Creative Trust that engages the Milwaukee community as well.

WHERE AND WHEN

"Slightly Bigger Women" runs at Kenilworth's Five-O-Eight Studio, April 22-26.

Visit arts.uwm.edu/tickets for more information.