



MONDAY, MAY 07, 2018

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

## THEATER: "MY FAIR LADY" SAYS #METOO!

**MY FAIR LADY** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\***LINCOLN CENTER THEATER**

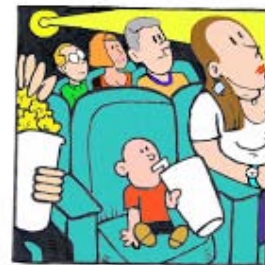
Is *My Fair Lady* sexist? To anyone with sense, of course it isn't. The show is based on George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* and in both cases the issue at hand is class, not gender. If anything, one might argue *My Fair Lady* is snobbish. You'd still be wrong but at least you'd be fighting the right battle.

Alan Jay Lerner's terrific book and lyrics pair with the sublime music of Frederick Loewe to tell a story so ingrained in our culture you know it even if you've never seen the show. The latest presentation of it has just opened at Lincoln Center, scored ten Tony nominations and is a shoe-in to win Best Revival Of A Musical.

In it, Henry Higgins is a distinguished phoneticist eavesdropping on the talk of lower class workers at Covent Garden. When a fellow enthusiast for languages greets him, Higgins boasts that in six months he could take even the most untutored peasant and pass her off as a lady. And then Higgins does it. Brilliant man that he is, Higgins relentlessly tutors a flower girl named Eliza, sculpting her into a woman of impeccable diction. She debuts at the Ascot Racecourse (with mixed success) and then attends a fancy ball where Eliza is a triumph. Just as *Pygmalion* fell in love with one of his own sculptures and brought it to life, Higgins falls for the newly confident Eliza. After the usual roadblocks, they fall happily into each other's arms. The end.

Well, not quite.

If you pay attention, the story of *My Fair Lady* is much richer and more complicated than that skewed description. And one of the gifts of director Bartlett Sher is to pay attention. He's delivered a string of



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successful revivals of classic shows, not by re-contextualizing them or imposing some radical concept but simply by listening to the dialogue being spoken, the lyrics being sung, the tale being unfolded. Pay attention and a classic will reward you with fresh insight and humor and drama.

Here *Sher* focuses like a laser on Eliza and it pays dividends. At Covent Garden our eye is always drawn to Eliza (Lauren Ambrose) even when she is lost in the crowd. We see Higgins and his new friend Col. Pickering (Alan Corduner) start to walk away, turning their backs on the unfortunate creature they were dissecting just a moment ago. It is Eliza who interrupts their departure to parse out exactly what Higgins was saying: with some lessons in diction, she could present herself as respectable and move up in the world. Her way of speaking has doomed Eliza to a life of menial servitude, but her way of speaking can be changed.

The next day, Eliza shows up at the home of Henry Higgins and asks to pay for lessons. She has agency, as someone criticizing the show's gender politics might have to admit. It's not the wealthy Higgins and his boast that put the plot into motion. It's not a genial taunt by Pickering. It's the bold gamble of a flower girl who offers up her worldly wealth to pay for tutoring on how to speak proper.

Now that you're paying attention, you realize even Higgins admits Eliza has a real gift for the task at hand. Once she's had a breakthrough, Eliza soaks up knowledge and works as hard as anyone. Indeed, when she reprises the song "I Could Have Danced All Night" after everyone has gone to bed, it's while grabbing some more books so she can study in bed; Eliza is besotted with learning more than the passing approval of her tutor. It's Eliza who charms and amuses the posh set at Ascot with her frank talk, not just the faux pas we all remember during a race but by calling out a young man she imagines laughing at her. Even under stress, Eliza won't be mocked.

It's Eliza who triumphs at a ball, proving such a perfection of precise English that a rival to Higgins concludes it's *too* perfect: she must be a foreign born aristocrat! It's Eliza who leaves Higgins of her own accord. And it is *Higgins* who comes running after her, begging Eliza to accept him as he is, flaws and all. If Eliza comes back at the end, it's clearly her choice to do so.

[In a rare missed opportunity, *Sher* could have underlined Eliza's independence even more. At the ball, she is the talk of the evening. But a suspicious rival phoneticist -- Professor Zoltan Karpthy -- is circling, waiting for his chance to linguistically pin her down. It's an acid test Eliza shouldn't have to face. Both Col. Pickering and Higgins' mother tell him to avoid the man at all cost. Why risk it? But Higgins and Eliza are dancing, the rival asks to cut in, Higgins hesitates...and then hands Eliza over for the moment of truth. Yet how much better if he hesitated...and *Eliza* stepped forward of her own accord, ready to

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THEATER: BROADWAY BY  
THE YEAR -- 1956 AND 1975

THEATER: "MY FAIR LADY"  
SAYS #METOO!

THEATER: TENNESSEE  
WILLIAMS ON SIMMER  
WITH "SUMMER...

THEATER: "TRAVESTIES" IS  
NOT

THEATER: "SAINT JOAN"  
LACKS FIRE

► [April](#) (6)

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meet this final challenge when Higgins had doubt.]



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So if Eliza as written is her own, steadfast self, why would anyone think *My Fair Lady* is sexist? The answer surely lies with Henry Higgins, who can be smug, condescending and silly. It's probably more accurate to say Higgins is a self-satisfied misanthrope, but let's assume he is sexist. Clearly depicting a sexist man doesn't mean the show *itself* is sexist, any more than *South Pacific* is racist simply because it holds up a mirror to such ugliness.

Does anyone take his battle-of-the-sexes number "I'm An Ordinary Man" seriously? Higgins offers up a string of stereotypes about women, albeit after acknowledging that when two people begin to care for each other she may become tiresome but he becomes jealous and tyrannical. So romance makes both sexes rather irritating. Higgins presents himself in such exaggerated terms (he's got "the milk of human kindness by the quart in every vein," etc.) that you can play it as gently self-mocking or foolishly boastful but you can't play it seriously. If anything, the joke is on him.

Besides, Higgins is delivering a classic opening gambit for a romantic comedy. He's the character who insists at the top of the show that they will never, *ever* fall in love. The audience smiles because of course they know -- sure as the sun will rise in the morning -- that this character will fall head over heels in love by the end of the show, if not the end of act one.

Higgins says with some fairness that he's not rude to Eliza in particular -- he's rude to everyone! That's not quite true: he is indeed rude to many people but Higgins is polite to his mother and Pickering, at least. A confirmed bachelor, stuck in his ways, Higgins can be insufferable. So one of the cleverest ideas of Sher was to cast Harry Hadden-Paton in the role. Higgins is usually played by an actor quite a bit older than the one playing Eliza. (Julie Andrews was 20 and Rex Harrison was 48 years old on opening night in 1956. ) With a much older Higgins, his ideas about women can seem...encrusted. He and Pickering become an old boy's club, congratulating each other and

ignoring her after the success of the ball.

Here Hadden-Paton is actually three years younger than Ambrose, though he "reads" a little older on stage. Turning Higgins into a younger man than usual and making them contemporaries changes the dynamics considerably. Now his pronouncements seem foolish and silly, more akin to a boy who puts up a "no girlz allowed" sign on his tree fort than a misogynist manifesto. Pickering becomes less of an ally and more of a guilty conscience. And the blooming romance between Higgins and Eliza feels more natural rather than paternal. An elderly Higgins might just want an unpaid servant. A younger Higgins offers the possibility of change and growth and genuine love.

But does he deserve her? In one of the trickiest songs in the canon, Higgins has pleaded his case to Eliza and heads home in frustration, singing "I've Grown Accustomed To Her Face." Even when his happiness is at stake, Higgins struggles to admit -- even to himself -- that he loves her. Ironically, he can't speak the words.

SPOILER ALERT -- THE SHOW'S CLOSING SCENE IS DETAILED

In the show's boldest stroke, Eliza does indeed return to Higgins, finding him alone in his library, listening to the voice of Eliza he recorded on the day of her very first lesson. He's a man hopelessly in love, but perhaps hopeless *at* love, as well. She stands face to face with him, offering an intimacy they've never attempted before. Higgins, in a daze, mutters "Where the devil are my slippers?" just to have something to say. She strokes him fondly on the cheek...and then strides boldly off the stage up into the audience and out into the world opening up for her. Higgins looks on, pride and tears crossing his face in equal measure.

This isn't a terribly radical choice. It's the original ending of the play *Pygmalion*. It was the original ending of the script for the 1938 Oscar winning film that Shaw wrote. (He didn't know the filmmakers shot it with the two leads clinching romantically until seeing the premiere.) And it's been the ending of *My Fair Lady* since day one. Shaw fought any musical adaptation and almost certainly would have not allowed one that changed his ending. So the theater world simply waited Shaw out. He died in 1950. *My Fair Lady* opened on Broadway less than six years later.

This "new" old ending is an admirable, exciting, defensible choice. I just don't think it works. Lerner and Loewe didn't write a show about two people falling in love and then falling apart. Every scene, every song brings them closer and closer together, with Eliza's newfound confidence prodding Higgins to break out of his shell and admit he's a man with feelings and needs. Maybe I'm too used to the contours of this story. After all, it was the very first professional theater I ever saw, starring Rex Harrison no less as he toured the country back in the very early 1980s. But if Eliza is going to leave at the end, I think earlier

scenes should play darker, with more emotion and more at risk. And the staging doesn't help. Since we've seen Eliza step off the stage and into the "real" world (if not the actual auditorium) at several points in the show, her final breaking of the fourth wall doesn't have the same impact it might if it was taking place for the very first time.

END OF SPOILER

However it ends, it turns out that *My Fair Lady* really is a problem play of sorts. Not the problem of sexism, but the problem of being embalmed as a "classic." This is only the third revival on Broadway in more than 60 years. One in 1976 lasted less than a year and one in 1993 lasted less than six months. (I'm ignoring Harrison popping in for a few weeks with bus and truck version in 1981 I saw in Florida as a child.) That's shocking for a show of such immense popularity, boasting such great roles and offering a score that ranks among the most hummable and well-known in history. Who better than Sher to tackle it? He brushed aside the issue of gender with good casting and a faith in the text. Unfortunately, he hasn't performed his usual magic of burnishing a too-familiar show into something fresh and new, work he did so well on musicals like *South Pacific* and the more problematic *The King And I*.

Apparently, the wax museum quality of director George Cukor's hugely successful but deadly dull film version has suffocated the show but good. It preserved (in amber) iconic performances by Rex Harrison and Stanley Holloway as Eliza's dad, not to mention the dazzling black and white brilliance of the Ascot Racetrack scene. But, oh, how it drags with all the self-importance of a prestige picture. Sadly, those faults are on display here. *My Fair Lady* should be thrilling, its scenes bursting with brisk excitement and humor, one great song tumbling after another. In most musicals, you wait for the songs to begin. In *My Fair Lady*, the dialogue is so good you're completely absorbed until a song pops in and you'd almost be annoyed if the songs weren't so good they lifted you up into heaven. Not here. This edition moves with the stately progress of an ocean liner, scene dutifully following scene like island stops on a cruise. Here on your left is "Wouldn't It Be Lovely" and coming up on your right? "With A Little Bit Of Luck!"



Photo ©2018 by Joan Marcus

One reason for this is the scenic design by Michael Yeargan. The Vivian Beaumont is a jewel of a space and has a deep backstage that only the Metropolitan Opera can match, I believe. Yeargan makes full use of this when creating a photo-realistic home for Higgins that includes a front entrance, bathroom, stairways and a two-level library. I not only applauded this particular set, I wondered if it was available for rent. In a moment veteran theatergoers probably appreciated more than most, one scene transition began with the library set poised way, way, way at the back of theater and slowly gliding into view. The luxurious scope of the moment took your breath away. The problem is that it was *always* gliding slowly in and out. Every scene change became such a parade that Sher fills the dead air with people moving lampposts this way and that just to entertain the eye. Worse, a gap on the left and right of the stage was needed to allow all these moving parts to twirl around one another. That meant giant black strips of material would glide down from the rafters to fill in the gap on either side. All well and good, but this happened so frequently it became distracting, with the black strips yo-yoing up and down all night long in their own merry dance.

Contrast that and the solid-looking Covent Garden with the more "suggestive" (or bare bone) sets, like the cardboard pop-up of a bar that Eliza's dad is forever strolling into for a pint. "With A Little Bit Of Luck" in particular seemed to take place on a notably sparse stage, all the more so when that lavish study hove into view a scene later. And *that* seemed to contrast even more starkly with the elegant simplicity of the set for Ascot, which suggested everything it needed with only an unfolding canopy. Here costumer Catherine Zuber managed the neat trick of nodding strongly to Cecil Beaton while leaving her own stamp on the moment. True, not every location can be equally lavish but the scenic design lacked a uniform point of view.

Even the home itself felt fussy and overly-detailed. One brief gag takes place when Eliza is dragged by a clutch of maids into a tiled bathroom for a long overdue shower. It's a modest joke but we're stuck with that tiled space for the rest of the show, which is soon revamped into a room with some sort of medical equipment. (I think.) In any case, the home of Higgins is forever spinning like a top -- often quite unnecessarily -- and every time it spins we see that tiled room, even though it is never used again and I became increasingly annoyed at having to look at it. Couldn't the wall collapse and the room "disappear" or not be used in the first place?

You begin to feel this *My Fair Lady* is a dutiful recreation of moments from the past rather than a living, breathing story taking place today. It's more diorama than drama. That extends to some of the performances. Norbert Leo Butz sounded like slam-dunk casting for the role of Eliza's philosophizing father. But he brings nothing distinctive to the role, seeming to show up and assume the memory of Holloway and those two great numbers do the rest. "Get Me To The

Church On Time" can't help but land -- it's the show's most elaborate number by far, but it's expert rather than thrilling. "With A Little Bit of Luck" in particular felt rote, as if Butz were a year into the run rather than a week.

And why can't anyone rethink Freddy? Every production I've ever seen offers up a silly fop of a Freddy (Jordan Donica) who belts out "On the Street Where You Liiiiiiiiive" in a tiresome, old-fashioned style. Donica is certainly a handsome man but he's asked to be a nonentity like every Freddy before him. If only this Freddy were sexy and appealing. Imagine if Eliza was actually *charmed* by him, at least on a physical level. Imagine if he sang that standard with a lighter, defter touch (Harry Connick Jr. does a nice, sure-footed version) rather than declaiming it to the rafters. Higgins might worry about an actual rival instead of being able to dismiss Freddy as casually as we do. No such luck.

One can't do terribly much with the other roles, though as Pickering Allan Corduner sketches out a man that might be more of a foil to Higgins than we're used to seeing. Manu Narayan is suitably silly as Professor Karpathy. And if anyone deserves to glide gracefully on and off stage it is certainly Dame Diana Rigg as Mrs. Higgins. She gives her scenes the warmth and bite they need.

That leaves our two leads. Harry Hadden-Paton is a solid, if not revolutionary Higgins. His age does most of the work for him in terms of rethinking the part, though he is certainly jolted by more emotion than found in the reserved Rex Harrison. And he nails "I've Grown Accustomed To Her Face," a piece that is far trickier than I ever realized. Hadden-Paton might be more prickly, more frustrating, more *anything* really. But Sher guides him to a grace note that underlines the better angels of Higgins and why Eliza flourishes. Yes he berates her -- as he does others -- but who could take "you squashed cabbage leaf" to heart? Then on the night of her breakthrough, when the rain in Spain finally falls mainly on the plain, it's not the bullying that helps Eliza. The key to her trying just one more time is the way he brings her a cup of tea and speaks a few kind words, treating her with respect and showing faith that she can accomplish this task. And suddenly she does it!

That moment of intimacy speaks volumes, along with the way Lauren Ambrose soaks it up like a flower thirsty for rain. If there is a flaw in this perfect musical, it might be the lack of one more scene between them where he appreciates her more as an equal than a flourishing student. We are told after the fact that Higgins has come to depend on Eliza, but he makes it sound more like she's a useful employee rather than his true love. All night long we see Eliza come into her own; yet for Higgins, his emotional attachment to her is more implied, perhaps to a fault.

We never doubt the change in Eliza, thanks to Lauren Ambrose in her

musical theater debut. For years we've been hearing that this excellent dramatic actress was poised to do a big musical. First they announced *Funny Girl*. Lauren Ambrose in the role that made Barbra Streisand a star forever? Really?? And then it fell through. Then it was Lauren Ambrose in *My Fair Lady*, the role that made Julie Andrews a star forever. Really?? For those of us who never heard her sing a note, all we could assume was that the woman sure as hell must be able to sing. And indeed she can. It's a lovely clear voice, if not a big brassy one. It's a lucky thing she started with this show rather than *Funny Girl*. Ambrose can sing nicely and act the hell out of a lyric, but she's not going to belt it to the back of the house a la Tyne Daly or Ethel Merman. *My Fair Lady* needs subtlety but *Funny Girl*? Not so much.

In a way, her vocal talent and neophyte status suit the part nicely. When Ambrose sails into a beautiful register, winning us over and expressing the yearning or anger or joy of the moment, you're rooting for her the same way you're rooting for Eliza. Performer and character coincide in a way they rarely do. In the future, she seems best suited for more thoughtful musicals a la Sondheim where her acting skills will be put to the best use. Unlike Audrey Hepburn in the film version, she wisely downplays the broad comedy of the early section (another reason *Funny Girl* wouldn't have been the best choice).

Some comic bits don't land, like the scene where Higgins and Pickering share a pastry and she can only stare at it wistfully. This might have as much to do with Sher as Ambrose. What she nails is the hunger and self-worth of Eliza, which is there all along from the flower stalls of Covent Garden to the gilded ballrooms of the upper crust. At the ball, Hepburn was all grace and perfection; you never saw her sweat. Ambrose neatly lets the audience into the terror of the moment so we can keep cheering her own. I can imagine her confidence and performance growing throughout the run; this is almost certainly a show you'll want to catch again before she leaves if you possibly can.

That would be a luxury, whereas with previous Sher productions (*The Light In The Piazza*, *South Pacific*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Oslo* and more) revisiting a show of his felt essential. It's a first class production, delivered with professionalism and skill and will surely be the most successful revival since the original blockbuster run. "Wouldn't It Be Lovely?" and "The Rain In Spain" and "I Could Have Danced All Night" are all masterpieces and they're all here. You'll nod your head and think, yes, that's pretty much how they're done. Christopher Gattelli offers fine choreography and Ted Sperling conducts a lush 29 piece orchestra, an orchestra so big I may have lost count. Craft is evident in every detail but you never quite feel the ecstasy a great musical like *My Fair Lady* should generate or even a moment of surprise until right at the end. The pavement stays right beneath your feet from start to finish.

Perhaps my expectations were too high? But if Higgins can demand the best from everyone around him and Eliza can expect the best from



herself, surely we can expect the best from this cast and creative team. They've blown away the suggestions of sexism. Perhaps it will take another production to blow away the dust.

NOTE: Lincoln Center produces The Lincoln Center Theater Review, a lovely magazine filled with articles about their current production. The current one is devoted to *My Fair Lady* and while the collector's program is always a treat, they've really outdone themselves this time. It includes interviews, essays on the history of the show, poems inspired by the Greek myth that gave Pygmalion its name, odes to the show by other musical theater talent, a New Yorker cartoon and more. It's all handsomely packaged with a gorgeous cover and a back page devoted to album art from the countless cast albums and recordings based on the show. if you're lucky enough to be in New York City, slip into the lobby at Lincoln Center, leave the modest suggested tip and snap up a copy fast.

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