



Adelaide Theatre Guide

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PYGMALION

Independent Theatre Co

Odeon Theatre

Review by Simon Slade

Shaw's provocative and very funny play was a theatre staple until Lerner & Loewe turned it into "My Fair Lady." As part of the rights deal, it was restricted for some years and tended to fall off the radar for many companies.

So it's rare, fascinating, and highly enjoyable to see "Pygmalion" on stage. The differences between Lerner's musical and Shaw's original are starkly highlighted by the similarities with many lines in the musical taken word for word from the play

At the centre is Henry Higgins, the gruff, spoiled professor of phonetics who fancies himself such a genius that he can blithely boast that after six months of lessons he could pass off a cockney flower girl as a duchess at Buckingham Palace. Rob Croser, as Higgins, conveys the stubbornness and impatience with anybody not up to his level; along with the childlike passions that make this insufferable fellow somehow likeable. The one character trait that was underplayed, however, was the gruff anger, which detracts a little in two scenes.

Tahli Corin is a marvel as Eliza, the flower girl taught to talk properly and act ladylike, with the result that the fiery and intelligent young woman within is unleashed. She is so convincing as the crying "draggletailed guttersnipe" in the first scene that it is a genuine revelation to see her, articulate and at last self-confident, displaying the innate sturdy elegance to make it clear that she's a match for Higgins and more.

Surrounding the pair is a number of delightful, colourful characters. Chief among these is Eliza's father, Alfred Doolittle, played by Les Zetlein. An eloquent dustman, the play's real protagonist, Doolittle turns up in Higgins's study moments after the "experiment" with Eliza begins, to "touch" the gentlemen for a fiver. Najwa Basheer is wonderful as Higgins's mother, bringing out all the subtleties of the role. Graham Nerlich is a perfect Colonel Pickering, making him instantly likable even if a bit of a fool. Myra Waddell, as Higgins's housekeeper Mrs. Pearce, as a stern taskmistress for her so-called master.

David Roach's direction sees Eliza's progression move gradually and yet noticeably, with uses of similar positioning of characters providing visual links. The scene changes are almost choreographed and under partial light, which makes them seem quicker. Laraine Wheeler's lighting is a fine example to designers of how to make a design interesting with few lights.