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## Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion at Town Hall Theatre

By Sophie Braccini



Clive Worsley as Henry Higgins and Ginny Wehrmeister as Eliza Doolittle Photo Stu Selland

Town Hall Theatre (THT) is closing its 2011/2012 season with the 100-year-old play *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw. The play is based on the classic Greek myth of a man who fell in love with the statue of a perfect woman he carved that came to life by the power of Aphrodite. The musical adaptation, *My Fair Lady*, and the film that followed, were based on Shaw's play. In 1912 Victorian England, Phonetics Professor Henry Higgins tutors the very Cockney Eliza Doolittle, not only in the refinement of speech, but also of her manners. The end result produces a very ladylike Miss Doolittle, without crushing the spirit of the young woman, who regains her independence in the end.

The first thing to like about *Pygmalion* is that it is not *My Fair Lady*. Nobody breaks into song, and the ending is what Shaw always intended. On stage, the irony of Shaw's style comes alive. It is raw, unlike the Hollywood film version, and more efficient as a social critique of the time.

The second good thing is that THT's team does a wonderful job recreating this charming comedy. It is pleasant and engaging from start to finish, with some scenes that are downright excellent.

Eliza's transformation from common flower-girl to Duchess-like is set in two phases. At the end of the first phase, she's already mastered the mannerism of a lady, but the old wild spirit still comes out. That's one of the most hilarious scenes of the play. Ginny Wehrmeister, as Eliza Doolittle, is at her best. You'll never say, "How do you do?" the same after seeing that scene.

Clive Worsley, otherwise Artistic Director at THT, plays Professor Higgins. He obviously had fun playing this insufferable jerk, a "Dr. House" like character, self-centered and very sharp. "He (Higgins) can come off as an egotistical blowhard," said Worsley. "I wanted to allow myself to be such a jerk. But also find more multi-dimensional aspects of the character. I believe that he comes to love and respect someone like Eliza, which is not ordinary for a man of his time." At times Worsley makes a caricature of Higgins, accentuating his fidgeting and mannerisms.

Director Dennis Markam and his team of actors definitely chose a more feminist vision for the play. While Eliza is molded into upper class behavior by Higgins, she retains her independence and her fighting spirit resurges in the end. "Eliza realizes at the end of the play that she is an independent person, even if she was dependent on Higgins for a while," said Markam. "One core theme of the play is that you can change your appearance, but in the end the humanity is unchangeable."

The rest of the cast is also very solid. Chris Parnell-Hayes, who plays Eliza's father, Alfred Doolittle, has a wonderful comic presence. Don Wood is a charming Col. Pickering and Ann Kendrick renders Higgins' mother with poise and great elegance.

Kudos as well to Martin Flynn for the scene design and Maggi Yule for the costumes. The rendition of early 20th century England is very believable and the change of sets between three different places is made effectively.

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