

## My Fair Lady

### From squashed cabbage to Queen of Cyprus

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* tells of Pygmalion I, King of Cyprus, who fell in love with an ivory statue of his own making. He brought it gifts, spoke to it the words of love and draped it in the most beautiful robes. By night he laid it on a bed resting its head on soft pillows. At the festival of Aphrodite, Pygmalion visited the statue and prayed to the goddess that he would have a wife like this ivory maid. When he returned home and kissed the statue again, Pygmalion felt the warmth of flesh rather than the cold of ivory. He married the woman who had been the statue (now named Paphos) and Aphrodite attended the wedding.

And here one sees the irony of George Bernard Shaw's play. For in his *Pygmalion*, the woman is created not out of love, but for something far more prosaic; a bet. Higgins may change her speech patterns and tutor her in the mechanics of etiquette, but her humanity is with her from the start and Higgins' "experiment" neither diminishes it nor increases it. He also, who understands the importance of speech and the mechanics of etiquette, remains unchanged. He has no sense of real manners and acquires none through his entire association with Eliza or Colonel Pickering.

However this was only one of the points of Shaw's play. He himself was passionate about a great many things, one of which was the usage (or abuse) of the English language. (On his death he donated all the royalties of his plays to research into forming a new English alphabet of 49 characters – the better to instruct the English in the correct use of their language!)

*Pygmalion* caused such a stir when it first opened. Was Higgins intended to be a portrayal of the phonetician Henry Sweet? Was it actually possible to create the transformation in speech portrayed in the play? Upon Eliza's return to Higgins at the end of the play, did she stay? Did they marry?

Such was the interest that Shaw felt compelled to write both a Preface and a Sequel to his play in order to put wagging tongues to rest. In brief, his answers are (in order); No, Yes, No and No...but he was particularly adamant about the answers to the last two. Eliza marries Freddy; one of nature's more hopeless cases. With the continuing support of the Colonel and occasional support of Higgins, they make a more-or-less comfortable go of things. However it is definitely Eliza who keeps body and soul together.

Would Shaw have liked *My Fair Lady*? He was generally appalled by the idea that anyone would contemplate tampering with his prose or try to set it to (horror of horrors) popular song. Writers before Lerner and Loewe considered it "unwriteable". (A certain Oscar Hammerstein II commented to Lerner in 1952, "It can't be done. Dick [Richard Rogers] and I worked on it for over a year and gave it up.") We will, of course, never know Shaw's reaction. It is, however, my belief that he would have been delighted with Lerner and Loewe's extraordinarily faithful and accomplished treatment of his masterpiece. That is, with one important exception...and that concerns the ending. He is no doubt turning in his grave at the implication that Eliza and Higgins finally do declare a lasting (if uneasy) love for each other.

All this is very interesting, no doubt. But today you have come not by invitation of the gods of ancient Greece, nor to see Shaw's *Pygmalion*, but to see its musical incarnation, Lerner and Loewe's *My Fair Lady* (whatever Shaw may have thought of it)...and so far I've not said anything about it.

I've not told you how it narrowly escaped being called *Fanfaroon*; nor why work on this "unwriteable" play was abandoned for two years; how Lerner and Loewe had to take on MGM (and nearly the British Government) for the rights to Shaw's play; how one of its most enduring songs, *On The Street Where You Live*, was very nearly dropped because it just didn't "work"; or why Rex Harrison refused to go on for the opening night; how the great Broadway star Mary

Martin reacted so badly to some of the songs that Lerner lost so much confidence that he couldn't work on the play for almost four weeks; or why there has never been a production of *Lady in France*; or how the show was responsible for the Bolshoi Ballet's first visit to America. All these things, and many, many more, I've not told you.

The reason is simple. Alan Jay Lerner has already tilled that particular field so superlatively in his stunning book of theatrical gossip and intrigue, *The Street Where I Live* (Da Capo Press, 1994 – available, as they say, from all good bookshops), that any further comment is redundant. As Vincente Minnelli said, (of the book), "Heaven to take up and hell to put down."

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