

NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD SHOWCASE FESTIVAL 2023-24

“My Fair Lady”

Book & Lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner

Music by Frederick Loewe

A production by Colchester Operatic Society
performed at the Mercury Theatre, Colchester, Essex

Directed by Claire Carr
Adjudicated by Rob Porter

01/02/2024

Introduction

The musical ‘My Fair Lady’ based on the play ‘Pygmalion’ by George Bernard Shaw, is an oft-performed and well-loved story about the societal education of spirited Victorian flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, under the tutelage of the boorish, upper class Professor Henry Higgins. His entirely ignoble intentions give weight to the juxtaposition between the two characters in this delightful satire of class in Victorian society, which is, of course, packed with showstopping tunes!

Colchester Operatic Society is one of the region's oldest musical theatre companies; now entering its 100th year. A production of this scale would be a daunting task to most amateur groups but COS are dab hands at this sort of thing. Indeed they have performed ‘My Fair Lady’ three times before, over the years so I was looking forward to seeing what director, Claire Carr, would have in store for us in 2024.

Front of House and Venue

My wife and I arrived early at the fantastic Mercury Theatre, and were warmly greeted in reception by COS chairperson, Katie Cutmore, who gave us our tickets and programme. The rest of the audience were well served by her and the rest of the front of house team comprising Jessica Bailey, Caroline Fritz, Laura Hicks, Andrew Hodgson, Becki Lee and Neil Somerville.

The Mercury is one of those venues that manages to seem both intimate and spacious at the same time; this helps create a fantastic atmosphere for live theatre, particularly when it is close to capacity, as it was tonight. Our fantastic seats, provided by COS, placed right in the centre of the auditorium, enabled us to see, hear and feel everything very clearly.

Programme

The sixteen page, glossy, West-End style A4 programme was beautifully designed by Gabriella Skinner. The front cover depicted Eliza’s silhouetted profile, complete with fashionable lady’s hat, set against a gloriously colourful, floral backdrop of warm orange, violet and red. Internal pages were mainly white text printed on a purple background, many of which containing translucent rehearsal pictures, that gave a sense of depth to the pages.

This kind of detail can be tricky to get right, as it can easily make a page look too busy, and sometimes, difficult to read. I am pleased to say the level of opacity here was just right, enhancing the pages with a visual representation of the sense of community spirit involved in this production.

Every performer involved was presented clearly in the centre pages with black and white pen pics, courtesy of Wild Bears Photography, and more detailed background information was provided for the leads. Other useful information included: an about COS section, a letter from the chair and details of the creative team, full cast, crew and orchestra lists, and some interesting facts about the history of My Fair Lady. This was a wonderful, detailed programme that enhanced the theatrical experience, as any good programme should. Perhaps the only thing missing was a list of previous productions, something I personally like to see in a programme, but not essential.

Set

The first thing that struck me when the curtain rose was the wonderful, detailed set, which was hired in from Scenic Projects Limited for this production. There were several different large sets on wheels that were wheeled on and off for each scene by the stage crew (more on that later). The attention to detail in these designs was fantastic, from Henry Higgins' bookcase and mobile stairs to the warm glow coming through the window inside his house viewed from the outside, and the streetlamp, lit up by a bulb inside the set. The only slight issue was a tendency for them to wobble particularly at the top, if doors were shut forcibly, however I would imagine this would be hard to eradicate with such large moveable sets.

Costume & Props

Melanie Bird and her team did an excellent job with the superbly detailed period costumes, again hired in, this time from Triple C's Costume Hire, COS Costume Team and CAODS. The contrast between the finery of Eliza's outfits as a lady, and those of her as a flower girl, not to mention the scruffy old rags of her father, was very effective. A particular highlight were the wonderful, matching monochromatic outfits worn by the upper class spectators during the 'Ascot Gavette'.

Props, organised by Andy Bird, and provided by COS, Scenic Projects Limited, Mercury Theatre, CAODS and Springers, were well chosen and appropriate for the time period. One small detail omitted that did surprise me was that the phone on Henry Higgins' desk was not plugged into anything, which resulted in some rather unintentional, 'Play That Goes Wrong' style humour as Colonel Pickering wandered around the table talking into a wireless phone. I appreciate wires on stage can be a trip hazard but it is relatively straightforward to create the illusion a phone is connected by simply having the cable disappear behind the desk.

Lighting and Sound

Lighting designer Peter Small and programmer Tom Davis did a superb job with the lighting, bringing out the bright and vibrant colours of the costumes and detail of the set. The timing of lighting cues was exemplary throughout and the use of dimmed lighting during brief

musical interludes around 'The Servants' Chorus', was particularly effective in creating a sense of the passage of time, much as a montage would.

Sound designer Wesley Laing and sound engineer Joey Hawkin, along with the rest of the team, ensured the sonic qualities of the production were of a high standard throughout. The main cast wore microphones for the duration of the performance, and these were equally effective during both dialogue and singing. The music from the orchestra was well mixed and perfectly balanced. The only time I noticed any quality drop was when Henry Higgins arrived at Ascot and his voice sounded rather tinny for a while. My wife was quick to point out this was most likely due to his hat covering his microphone, and indeed the problem resolved itself as soon as he took it off. As the production had already been running over a week by the time I saw it, I would have expected this to have been picked up earlier.

The Orchestra

Sadly invisible to those of us in the audience, the orchestra, superbly led by musical director and conductor, Geoff Osborne, did a fantastic job in bringing Frederick Loewe's wonderful score to life. From an audience perspective we could only see the back of Geoff's head as he conducted directly in front of the actors on stage. His image, along with that of the performers on stage, was then fed back to the orchestra below via video link, enabling everyone to keep perfect time with each other throughout the production. Nothing beats a live orchestra, and these talented musicians should be immensely proud of the work they have done here as such an essential part of the production.

Performances

ELIZA DOOLITTLE: A challenging role that requires a wide vocal range, particularly in terms of singing style, and the ability to gradually transform oneself on stage in both physical movement and demeanour, and the spoken word. I am delighted to report that COS debutant, Hannah Ambrose, excelled on all counts. Initially brash and bolshy, dropping 'er aitches and adding them back in where they shouldn't be, she sang boldly and in character, using the full power of her voice, letting rip with some delightful guttural noises when showing frustration. As the story developed, so did her poise, speech and singing voice, displaying it's full range in 'I Could Have Danced All Night', although I would have liked her to have held the final 'night' for longer, rather than cutting the word short. Her classically spoken delivery at Ascot, using dialogue learnt on the streets, was the highlight of the evening, with each sentence enunciated with perfect cadence and timing. This was not only extremely funny, but served to show what a superficial job Professor Higgins had actually done. A fantastic performance of a complex character.

HENRY HIGGINS: Wayne Setford, not lacking in experience in playing the bad guy, excelled in this role. A clear disciple of Rex Harisson's narcissistic depiction of the character, Wayne conveyed a wonderful sense of egotism and arrogance throughout. Indeed, I was hard pushed to find any redeemable qualities, even towards the end when he slowly realises that he needs Eliza more than she needs him. His dialogue was delivered confidently and abruptly, conveying little or no consideration for those around him, particularly Eliza, and the harsh effect his words could have. His singing voice was perfectly suited to talk-singing style, made famous by the aforementioned Mr. Harrison, and so important to this role. Much like

his dialogue, songs were delivered clearly, with each word perfectly enunciated as he strutted arrogantly around the stage, dismissing women and blowing his own trumpet! A brilliant portrayal of a character we all love to hate.

COLONEL PICKERING: Graham Bowden was perfectly cast as the polite, gentlemanly foil to Higgins' raging egotism. This was an intelligent and subtle performance from an experienced actor whose delivery and timing was always spot on, displaying a fantastic range of facial expressions. There were also some strong comedic aspects to this portrayal, particularly in his reactions to some of Higgins' more outrageous claims, and his frequent tendency to be 'dashed'. A fine piece of character acting.

ALFRED P DOOLITTLE: Bearing an uncanny resemblance to Compo from 'Last of the Summer Wine', and dressed accordingly, Stuart Williams was superb as Eliza's loveable rogue of a drunken father turned philosopher. Wonderfully fluent with his dialogue, particularly in the scene in which he wheedles £5 from Professor Higgins, the timing and emphasis Stuart put on each word was perfected to exact just the right amount of irritation or guilt from the listener to achieve his goal. His singing and dancing, particularly in showstopper 'Get Me To the Church On Time' was delivered with such joyous abandon, not to mention a high level of skill, that it brought the house down. A pure joy to watch.

MRS PEARCE: Barbara Ryan's first major role for COS was that of Eliza nearly 50 years ago! Clearly a production she enjoys, she returns here in the role of Higgins' housekeeper, Mrs. Pearce; the servant who provides a balance between the upper and lower classes in the play. Barbara cut a formidable figure throughout much of the play. Her lines were all delivered with a sense of surety of her place in society, to the point that she was prepared to challenge her employer over the appropriateness of his 'experiment'. Her facial expressions were a delightful mixture of disdain, irritation and the surety of knowing one's place in society.

FREDDY EYNSFORD-HILL: Tom Pleasant gave a strong vocal performance in the underwritten role of Freddy, Eliza's love interest. His earnest portrayal of the character was one of wide-eyed innocence and naivety, falling instantly for Eliza's charms in contrast to Higgins' inability to see them. A powerful and confident singer, Tom's performance of 'On the Street Where You Live' had the audience on their feet at the end of Act 1, as he danced and sang joyously, in the wistful daze of new love, under the streetlamp, outside Higgins' home.

MRS HIGGINS: Jackie Grant brought a touch of Lady Bracknell's extreme Victorian conservatism to her role as Henry Higgins's mother. Her dismissive tone and authoritative demeanour gave the character a wonderful sense of superiority. Perhaps even more impressive, was how she was able to reflect the mellowing effect Eliza had upon her later in the play. Through subtle changes in body language and tone, this skilled actor showed a softer side to the character, whilst simultaneously maintaining her overall confidence and upper class sense of self-importance.

SUPPORTING CAST: A supporting cast made up of 35 very talented actors, singers and dancers did a fantastic job in complementing the leads throughout the production. The entire cast performed to a very high standard throughout, dancing with grace, style and co-ordination and singing powerfully and harmoniously. Notable mentions included Mark

Littlewood, whose body language and mannerisms were a delight as the comical Zoltan Karpathy, and Maeve Borges as the domineering figure of Mary the Landlady.

Stage Management

Stage management of a production of this size is a daunting and demanding task. Terry Lyon, Charlotte Butcher and their backstage crew have done an incredible job in coordinating such a complex production with military precision. The play demands many changes of scenery and props, not to mention large scale costume changes, often in very short spaces of time. All of this flowed seamlessly; costume changes were always completed in time meaning the cast always arrived on cue, and sets and props were moved in and out efficiently during brief interludes with the lights down, accompanied by music from the show.

Direction / Choreography

Of the many impressive aspects to this production, the choreography may top the list. Every musical number was brought to life by a vibrant and perfectly-drilled supporting cast, adding exactly what was needed to each song. Large scale showstoppers such as 'With a Little Bit of Luck' made excellent use of the whole of the stage. I particularly liked the entire cast pouring out of the pub, giving it a tardis-like feel, as traditional old community pubs frequently had. Another highlight was the beautifully choreographed, austere movement of the nobility at Ascot, in which the entire ensemble are dressed in very similar, monochromatic costumes, moving slowly in unison; primly and austere, until two of them notice they are wearing the same outfit and turn away in disgust. In solo numbers, such as Freddy's 'On the Street Where You Live' and any one of Higgins's puffed up, spoken word rants, performers were expertly guided to make use of the whole stage and scenery; in Higgins's case, even climbing his staircase to emphasise his own sense of self-importance.

Director Claire Carr and her assistant Holly Bird have succeeded in bringing their wonderfully romanticised vision of Victorian London to life, creating an amateur production of West End quality. Their expertly-chosen cast and crew are a credit to them and COS as a whole, and were a joy to watch throughout. I would like to offer my thanks to COS for inviting me to adjudicate this production, and my huge congratulations to all the incredibly talented people involved. A fantastic achievement.

Robert Porter (Adjudicator)