

STUDY GUIDE

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THE PLAY

London is a charming place at the start of the 1900s – if you're a lady, not a poor "guttersnipe." **Henry Higgins**, a professor of the English language and **phonetics**, believes it's not what you say, but how you say it that defines a person. After a run-in with **Eliza Doolittle**, a flower girl with an appalling accent, he tells his colleague **Colonel Pickering** that the reason Eliza will always be poor is because she can't speak well.

Eliza overhears this and takes her destiny into her own hands. The next day she shows up at Higgins' door ready to pay for language lessons. Pickering challenges Higgins to back up his claim: can Higgins pass off Eliza as a duchess by teaching her to speak like the wealthy?

Manners are one thing, but respect is another. As Higgins undertakes his grand experiment on Eliza, who will be most transformed and at what cost?

phonetics – the science of speech sounds and their production, transmission, and perception, and their analysis, classification, and transcription



"You see...apart from the things one can pick up, the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she is treated."

MY FAIR LADY

Now playing in the Fichandler

November 2, 2012 – January 6, 2012

Based on the play *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw

Book & Lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner

Music by Frederick Loewe

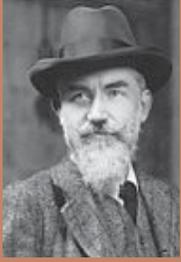
Directed by Molly Smith



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MEET George Bernard Shaw



Born in 1856 in Dublin, Ireland, G. Bernard Shaw (he hated his first name) had a childhood that was in some ways similar to Eliza Doolittle's. His father was a whole

grain salesman and an alcoholic who drank most of his money (just like Eliza's dad). When Shaw was 15, his father cut off his education and turned him out to work as a clerk. In 1876, Shaw moved to London.

There, he made money as a music critic, but came to write about almost every subject imaginable. He was a vegetarian, feminist, activist, outspoken socialist, harsh critic and skilled speaker. Many of Shaw's 55 plays dealt with politics, poverty and women's rights, challenging his audiences and the status quo. He wrote up until his death at age 94.

My Fair Lady is adapted from his play *Pygmalion*.



MEET Lerner & Loewe



Alan Jay Lerner was born in 1918, and spent his early childhood in a 17-room apartment on Park Avenue (a wealthy part of Manhattan). He started studying piano at age 5 and was sent to boarding school in England at 12. He then went to Harvard, and lost the vision in one eye during a boxing tournament there. This killed his dream of being a pilot, but led him to join Harvard's theater group. Lerner discovered he loved writing plays for radio (He wrote over 500!). In 1942, while at the Lambs Club, Fritz Loewe, a struggling composer, stopped by his table and asked Lerner to write with him. It became one of musical theater's most famous partnerships.

Born in 1901, Frederick "Fritz" Loewe was the son of a famous tenor opera singer. He played piano by age 4; composed musical sketches for his dad to perform on tour by age 9; and by 15 wrote the song "Katrina," which became a hit in Europe. He studied with some of the most famous living musicians, won awards, and was pursuing a career as a concert soloist when he moved to the US. Jazz was popular, and because he disliked the genre, he had trouble making money with his music. He went out west, worked odd jobs, and ultimately returned to New York, where he met Lerner. None of his successes matched the ones he had with Lerner.

But it wasn't easy. Lerner and Loewe wrote three musicals together before one took off – *Brigadoon*. *My Fair Lady* debuted in 1956 and broke all records. It ran longer on Broadway than any other show before, winning six Tony Awards. It later became a hit movie, starring Rex Harrison and Audrey Hepburn.

Picture: Original composition of "I Could Have Danced All Night" courtesy of the Library of Congress



"We finally arrived at those moments where music and lyrics could reveal what was implied and not repeat what was already in the text and catch the drama at the hilltops when it could ascend no further without the wings of music and lyrics." –Alan Jay Lerner

ADAPTATION: THE MYTH, THE PLAY, THE MUSICAL

The myth *Pygmalion* tells the story of a sculptor who, sick of the imperfections of women, sculpts the perfect woman and falls in love with her.

Venus, the goddess of love, answers his prayers and turns his statue into a woman, whom he marries. Shaw's play *Pygmalion* also tells the story of a man molding the perfect woman, but through language and manners.

To Shaw's horror audiences compared his play, meant to be a social commentary on classism and feminism, to *Cinderella*. Audiences wanted the happily-ever-after with Henry Higgins as the prince. Shaw thought such an ending would be "a revolting tragedy."

Though audiences clamored for it, Shaw was adamant that *Pygmalion* not become a musical. Only after his death did Lerner and Loewe tackle the adaptation. Other famous Broadway writers had tried to fit Shaw's words into the classically comedic musical theater style. Rodgers and Hammerstein worked on it for a year and gave up. However, as realism became more popular in musicals, Lerner and Loewe achieved the difficult task but also took some liberties with the story. Even in its success, Lerner expressed some fear about meeting Shaw in the Hereafter and answering for those changes. ●



Pygmalion and Galatea by Jean Léon Gérôme

In a retelling of this myth, the statue-now-woman is named "Elise," inspiring the name "Eliza Doolittle."

LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL CLASS

“Anyone can spot an Irishman or Yorkshireman by his brogue, but I can place a man within six miles.”

–Professor Henry Higgins

There was a chasm between classes in England in the early 1900s with little chance of social mobility.

The upper class was a world of gracious manners, garden parties, fashion, balls and diversions, like horseracing. Membership came with many advantages, especially education in which students cultivated “The Queen’s English” and mingled with those who shared that dialect.

Where Eliza grew up, just streets away, language education was almost non-existent because desperate poverty meant children worked. The working class lived in slums and was nicknamed “The Great Unwashed” because of the scarcity of clean water and soap.

One of the easiest ways to tell a person’s class was the way they spoke. For example, people in lower class regions might drop the “h” sound (such as a “urricanes ‘ardly ‘appen”), while higher classes dropped the “r” sound (“proper” sounds almost like “prop-ah”). Prejudice based on speech was common and still exists today.

Henry Higgins is certain that teaching Eliza to speak like a lady will allow her to become a lady, opening the doors to a higher class and its advantages. ●

a! ACTIVITY: How do people from different areas, classes and backgrounds speak differently in the US? Make a list of words, phrases and speech patterns heard in the US which cause you to make an assumption about the speaker. What is the relationship between speech and prejudice in America today?



Henry Higgins uses the most modern methods in phonetics.



The costumes, designed by Judith Bowden, also help distinguish the classes. Costumes for the lower class have a steampunk aesthetic to create a feeling of danger. Steampunk combines Edwardian and Victorian fashions with edgy, industrial elements. The upper-class costumes have the regal style of Alexander McQueen.

BRITISH WOMEN IN THE EARLY 1900S

Women’s roles in British society were slowly changing. In 1869, the first petition for women suffrage (voting rights) was presented to Parliament, and from 1911 to 1915 the movement reached a frenzy. Suffragists did radical things like smashing windows, planting bombs and going on hunger strikes to get attention.

The movement was mostly led by women who had the ability (money) to do so. Women like Eliza, who made only 38 pounds a year, could not afford to get an education. This paralyzed them in a low social class and made them dependent



on marriage. Becoming a lady in a flower shop would mean Eliza could make 300 pounds a year, but how could she make this transition? How could poor women assert their independence? In what ways were upper-class women also trapped?

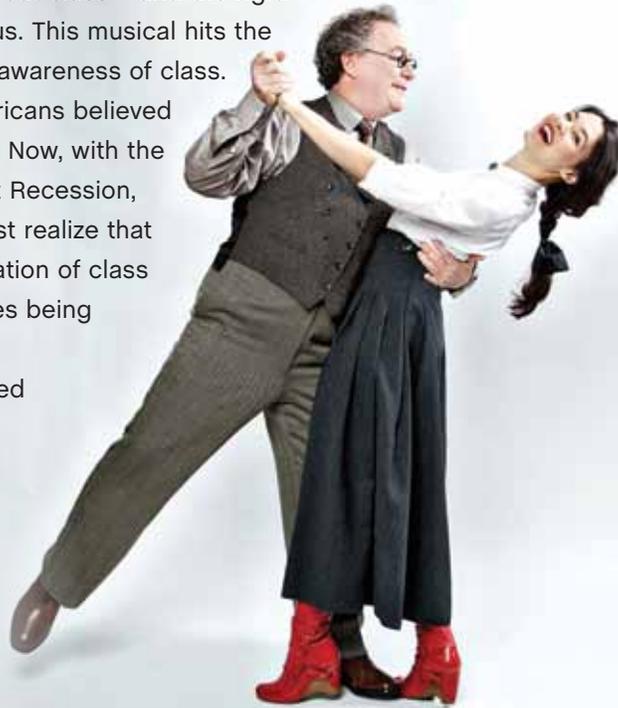
How does the musical depict the role of women? How is Eliza treated by the men in her life? How does Eliza respond to this? ●

FROM THE DIRECTOR'S NOTEBOOK

"*My Fair Lady* is a potent story about class – and the rigid social structures, which confine us. This musical hits the sweet spot of our contemporary awareness of class.

Until the last 10 years, most Americans believed there was no separation of class. Now, with the Occupy movement and the Great Recession, the curtain has been raised—most realize that there has always been a stratification of class in America. Listen to the speeches being given by President Obama and Mr. Romney—today we are steeped in discussions about class."

—Molly Smith, director



Helpful Hints for Theater Audiences

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

Arrive at least 30 minutes early.

Visit the restroom before the show starts.

Before the show begins, turn off your cell phone, watch alarms, pagers and other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, shut it off immediately.

Save food and drinks for the lobby. There is no eating or drinking inside the theater.

Walk to and from your seat - no running in the theater!

Do not talk, whisper, sing or hum.

Do not use cell phones for calls, text messages, pictures or games.

Keep your feet on the floor, not on the seat in front of you.

Avoid getting up during a show because it distracts your neighbors and the performers. If you must leave, wait for a scene change, then exit quietly and quickly.

Performers appreciate enthusiastic applause rather than whistling or shouting.

Cameras and videotape are prohibited because they are distracting to the performers.

Enjoy the show!

THREE BIG QUESTIONS

ONE

How do style, language, behavior, gender, etc. define social status?

TWO

What does it take to move between social classes?

THREE

What makes people transform and with what consequences?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BOOKS

On the Street Where I Live by Alan Jay Lerner

The Rise & Fall of Class in Britain by David Coannadine

American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity by Raymond Knapp

Women and the Politics of Schooling in Victorian and Edwardian England
by Jane Martine

The Making of My Fair Lady by Keith Garebian

The Musical Theatre: A Celebration by Alan Jay Lerner

ON THE WEB

In-depth *My Fair Lady* study guide from the Shaw Festival: www.shawfest.com

The Victorian Web: www.victorianweb.org

BBC Primary History "Victorian Britain:" www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/victorian_britain

FILMS

My Fair Lady: Paramount, 1964.



the mead center
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Written by Noelle Viñas
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