

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Pygmalion in Pasadena

Sylvie · Wednesday, March 25th, 2015

No, it's not *My Fair Lady*.

Don't look for the gorgeous scenes at the party or the races or those soaring Lerner & Loewe songs. This is George Bernard Shaw's play, *Pygmalion*, with its soaring rhetoric, and it should be honored and respected for that.

Most of us know the story of the scrappy cockney flower girl, Eliza, and the linguistics professor, Henry Higgins, who makes a bet that he can turn her into a lady — and does. It has a lot to tell us about women and their role in society and how they were perceived (and in too many ways still are). Even if we've evolved well beyond what Shaw was pointing to in 1913, when he shunned the London scene and opened his *Pygmalion* in Vienna and then Berlin, before allowing England to see it the following April, we recognize the dangers of such a sharp societal transformation. The play is fun, it is wise, it is entertaining, it is bittersweet and it is, above all, ambiguous.

The production of *Pygmalion* that opened Sunday at the Pasadena Playhouse, however, is a puzzler. It suffers from several self-inflicted wounds, namely strange casting choices. In a play that is all about language and how language can zero in on precisely where you're from, it is more than a little ironic that the Playhouse chose to mount a production that uses language-blind casting — and not just in the smaller or more peripheral roles.

When everyone on stage is working to affect a British accent, and a key role such as that of Henry Higgins' friend, Colonel Pickering, is being performed by an Asian actor — Stan Egi — with an accent that is anything but British, the kindest thing to be said is that everything suddenly gets very dicey. Such casting may be appropriate with certain types of material, but with this play, a play that is all about accents, it becomes a real head-scratcher. To be fair, Mr. Egi himself does not seem comfortable in the role.

While the opening performance was, as a whole, not quite ready for prime time, the winning Paige Lindsey White proved herself a sturdy, spunky and smart Eliza. And after a soft start as Henry Higgins, Bruce Turk grew more assertive with every new scene. The final one, between these sparring partners was triumphant, and the ambiguity of the play's outcome was not lost.



Bruce Turk and Paige Lindsey White in *Pygmalion*

Mary Anne McGarry as Henry's eminent mother, Mrs. Higgins, gives a knowing and nicely

modulated upper crust performance, befitting her social standing. The same can be said of Time Winters as Eliza's father, Alfred P. Doolittle, in one of the production's strongest showings as a man who is just as flummoxed by his unwelcome sudden wealth as his daughter is confounded by suddenly being declared a lady.

The truth is that casting is 80% of the battle to get things right, and with the exception of Alex Knox as a tall and most engaging Freddy Einsford-Hill, the balance of this cast is too weak and too tentative, which upsets the timing and undermines some of the stronger scenes. The production should improve, however, with a few more performances under its belt.

The set by Stephanie Kerley Schwartz and costumes by Leah Piehl, work well enough, although the attempted humor of the gimmicky set changes doesn't quite come off.

It wouldn't be fair to Shaw to say that this collection of fundamental errors doesn't affect our perception of his message. His intent to demonstrate that every act of generosity is tainted with danger and egotism, to say nothing of self-congratulation, gets a bit fogged up in the struggle.

Where the flawed decision-making that affects this *Pygmalion* originated or why is difficult to assess, but Jessica Kubzansky, who has earned her stripes as a fine director elsewhere in Southern California and certainly at Theatre @ Boston Court, her home theatre, had a lot to overcome in staging this production and managed it only intermittently.

**WHAT:** *Pygmalion*

**WHERE:** The Pasadena Playhouse, 39 So. El Molino Avenue Pasadena, CA 91101.

**WHEN:** Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 4 & 8pm; Sundays, 2 & 7pm. Ends April 12.

**HOW:** Tickets \$30-\$75 (premium seating: \$125), available at [PasadenaPlayhouse.org](http://PasadenaPlayhouse.org) or 626-356-7529 or in person at the Playhouse box office (call for times).

*Top image: The cast of Pygmalion at The Pasadena Playhouse, with Paige Lindsey White (Eliza) and Bruce Truk (Henry Higgins) in the center.*

*All photos by Jim Cox.*

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