

My Fair Lady – Critique by Jo Evans

On March 15th 1956, My Fair Lady, starring Rex Harrison as Professor Higgins and Julie Andrews as Eliza Doolittle, opened on Broadway to rave reviews. Exactly 66 years, 1 month and 2 weeks later, My Fair Lady, with Chris Walton-Turner and Heather Campbell in the leading roles, opened in Rotherfield to similar rave reviews!

‘Wow,wow,wow what a show!’ ‘Absolutely brilliant.’ ‘Fantastic’ ‘Best show ever’ ‘Flawless’.....

I could have just written a critique by copying and pasting all the accolades from social media but that wouldn’t have given me the opportunity to throw the numerous bouquets I had lined up after seeing the show for myself.

What a great choice by the Players to give us all a real boost after two years of lockdown. The story based on Pygmalion by George Bernard Shaw and adapted into a musical by Alan J Lerner and Fredrick Lowe, tells the story of a young woman who wants to better herself and learns some surprising lessons on the way. Full of well-crafted characters, wit and mirth, it is a show that has always been popular with audiences all over the world.

One couldn’t be blamed for humming along to the memorable, now classic songs, such as ‘Wouldn’t It Be Lovely?’, ‘I Could Have Danced All Night’ and ‘Get Me to The Church on Time’. From the overture, our feet were tapping in expectation of a great evening and didn’t we get it!

The set, props and dressing were superb, and with 16 scene changes, the Stage Manager and crew are to be congratulated, along with the Lighting Director and Sound Engineer for the seamless way this was done, in the background, but vital to the flow and pace of this production. Likewise, costumes, wigs and hats were both prolific and brilliant, each character being dressed with attention to detail and suitability for age, status and visual effectiveness, particularly in the ensemble scenes, The Ascot Race Meeting being the highlight.

What a stunning performance by Heather Campbell as Eliza. She perfectly captured the innocence, gaucheness and feisty character of the cockney flower girl in the opening scenes who then blossomed into the beautiful, sophisticated socialite adored by everyone who met her. From cockney accent to received pronunciation, with a few hilarious clangers in between i.e.,” Come on Dover, move your bloomin arse” to a horse at the Ascot Races, together with her excellent voice, this was an Eliza one couldn’t help falling in love with, as indeed did Freddie Eynsford-Hill. She hit those high notes with confidence and ease.

Equally Chris Walton-Turner portrayed a Higgins who made one both furious with his lack of courtesy and compassion for Eliza and women in general, and yet pulled at our heartstrings with his need for a loving relationship. Probably having the more difficult songs with regard to timing and pace, he executed them with aplomb!

Derek Holland as Colonel Pickering gave a masterful performance of a character who can often be played as a society ‘bore’. He raised the bar with this Colonel, making him gutsy, intentional and definitely a supporter of the downtrodden. One heard every word he spoke with clarity wherever he was on the stage.

I think I would run a mile if Mark Rosier's Alfred Doolittle came to empty my dustbin! What a fabulous performance and stage presence throughout, rolling the lovable rogue, absent father, and hen-pecked husband-to-be all into a cocktail of fun and laughter. The musical numbers, 'With a Little Bit of Luck' and 'Get Me to The Church on Time' were show stoppers.

Gussie Morley as Mrs Pierce was just gorgeous. We could all relate to her frustration at Higgins' chauvinist behaviour and her motherly care of Eliza. One felt she would have been only too pleased to have taken one of Pickering's newspapers, roll it up and inflict justice on Higgins! Lovely performance.

Special mention must go to Christian Mc Donald as Freddy Eynsford Hill. When that social sop opened his mouth to sing, we had one of the best performances in the show. What a find!

One would never have realised that Barry Shyvers playing Jamie, one of Alfred's sidekicks, had only been drafted into the show at two weeks' notice due to an accident by the original member of cast. Every word, song, detail was perfectly performed and were a credit to his experience and professionalism.

Larry Robinson as Harry, the other sidekick and Zoltan Karpathy was equally engaging and showed his developing skills at playing comedy characters

The lovely Alison Organ, who has graced the stage since the first Players' production in 1976, gave a beautiful cameo performance as Mrs Higgins, berating her son and taking Eliza to heart. We read that this might be Alison's swan song. I hope not!

Shows like this never work unless there is a strong and talented ensemble. We weren't disappointed here. Quick changes of character and costumes were all done throughout with focus, ease and intention. The singing from this group was superb with excellent pitching and harmonies. One of the best numbers being the 'Servants Chorus'.

Congratulations to Amanda Philip as Musical Director, who brought out the best in the cast and kept our feet tapping; to Victoria Field for brilliant choreography. What was noticeable was that the dancing was choreographed with the whole cast in mind, so that every one of them was able to execute the dances confidently and with skill. Not a mean feat!

Kate Organ, director par excellence, ably assisted by Lucy Pop Buck as producer, should be duly proud of what has been achieved with this production. The enthusiasm and dedication of the cast and crew alike was tangible. The standard was high in all areas and left us, the audience feeling very glad that we hadn't missed such a brilliant, heart-warming show which could have been put on the West End!

Well done to everyone involved, from the welcome and care we received from the Front of House Team, the bar staff and to all those working behind the scenes. It was a real team effort and shows what can be done when the vision is captured and shared by everyone. Roll on the next show!