

Why My Fair Lady betrays Pygmalion

It is 100 years since George Bernard Shaw premiered *Pygmalion* amidst scandal and controversy. And the arguments go on



Not as the author intended: Audrey Hepburn and Rex Harrison as Eliza and Professor Higgins in *My Fair Lady* Photo: Everett Collection / Rex Feature

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At seventy-six seconds, by the hands of the stage manager's stopwatch, it may well be the longest laugh in British theatrical history. On 11 April 1914, the first night audience of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, at His Majesty's Theatre in London, incapacitated themselves with laughter as the words 'Not bloody likely' fell like a bombshell from the lips of Mrs Patrick Campbell in the role of Eliza Doolittle, the flower girl transformed into a duchess by Henry Higgins's science of speech.

In her fiftieth year, already a grandmother, and fighting increasing girth, Mrs Pat was only too conscious of the fact that she was at least a quarter of a century too old for the role of an eighteen-year-old 'guttersnipe'. But, in her sonorous voice with its immaculate diction, she knew how to put across a shocking line to maximum effect.

This was certainly not the first time that a sanguinary expletive had been heard on the English stage, and Shaw defended the epithet by claiming that it was in common use by four-fifths of the population. Yet its introduction that evening, after rumours in the press suggesting that there was something scandalous about Shaw's new play, almost wrecked the performance.

Shaw writhed in agony during the ensuing pandemonium. But in the

final act his discomfiture changed to anger at the liberties taken by Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree as Higgins with the ending of the play.

Throughout weeks of fraught rehearsal, with the director-playwright and his stars sometimes refusing to speak to each other, Shaw had attempted to clarify the difference between Ovid's myth of Pygmalion and Galatea, and his modern interpretation of it.

In classical mythology, Pygmalion marries the statue which he has sculpted and brought to life. By contrast, Shaw was adamant that Higgins and Eliza must never marry. Such an outcome would be 'unbearable'. By the end of the play, Eliza has become an independent woman, well up to defending her independence in a battle of words with Higgins. Furthermore, she has come to recognise that, unlike Pygmalion, Higgins is not a life-giver. He is mother-fixated, imprisoned by his science of phonetics, and has given Eliza a freedom greater than he himself possesses.

There is no chance then of a romantic future for Higgins and Eliza. Shaw had subtitled *Pygmalion* as a romance, but only because 'the transfiguration it records seems exceedingly improbable.' All this was blithely ignored by Tree. Instead of disregarding Eliza in the final scene and concentrating his attentions on his mother, Higgins wooed Eliza 'with appeals to buy a ham for his lonely home like a bereaved Romeo'. As the play's run progressed, Tree introduced other bits of business to indicate an amorous conclusion, like throwing flowers at Mrs Pat as the curtain fell.

A hundred years on from that first production, the ending of *Pygmalion* continues to be a sticking point. It stands as an unspoken matter of contention between audiences, confidently expecting a romantic resolution of the plot, and most directors who wish to remain true to Shaw's intentions. And it may help to explain the conundrum of why the play, for all its enduring fame and popularity, remains relatively underperformed today.

Shaw reserved harsh words for those of us with 'enfeebled' imaginations, who are lazily dependent on what he called the 'ready-mades and reach-me-downs of the ragshop in which Romance keeps its stock of "happy endings" to misfit all stories.'

Of course he himself isn't entirely blameless for our fantasy of a conventional outcome. In Act Five, he teases us with a comic parody of the wedding we're waiting for, only it's Doolittle's, not Eliza's, while the final moments of the last scene contain sufficient ambiguity to send the audience from the theatre wondering whether Eliza can ever again lead a life free of her teacher and his influence.

Shaw struggled, better late than never, to remove all evidence of that ambiguity in a sequence of revised endings for the play which give *Pygmalion* its peculiarly complicated textual history. He added a sequel to its published text, describing Eliza's marriage to the 'very wet round the ankles' Freddy Eynsford Hill, in the face of continuing romantic interpolations to the play in performance.

However, when, in 1938, the film version was made by the producer Gabriel Pascal – the impecunious Transylvanian who had charmed the rights out of Shaw – the studio disliked the unequivocal final scene in which Eliza (a superb Wendy Hiller) and Freddy are shown working in

a South Kensington florist shop, and substituted one in which Eliza returns to Higgins (played by Leslie Howard, who, as Shaw noted, 'thinks he's Romeo').

Since 1956, and its triumphant opening on Broadway, the greatest obstacle to the fulfilment of Shaw's wishes, has been My Fair Lady, Lerner and Loewe's musical adaptation of Pygmalion. Coincidentally, 2014, in addition to being the centenary year of Pygmalion also marks a half-century since the release of the film version of the musical, directed by George Cukor and starring Rex Harrison and Audrey Hepburn. The film swept up most of the major Oscars for its year, though, famously, there was resentment in some quarters that Julie Andrews had not been allowed to repeat her stage Eliza, and that the role had gone instead to Hepburn, the established star who, nonetheless, had to have her voice dubbed.

Today, the film My Fair Lady seems a rather over-reverential replica of the stage original, deprived of its theatrical zest. 'Rotting on the screen', was New Yorker critic Pauline Kael's terse verdict. Hepburn's transformation, swathed in Cecil Beaton's lace and ribbons, seems to leave her uncomfortably restricted like some mechanical doll. There should be a collective sigh of relief, though, that a recent projected remake of My Fair Lady, with Colin Firth as Higgins, failed to get off the ground. Rex Harrison's talking-on-pitch singing style and his mastery of social comedy make the idea of anyone else in the role almost unthinkable.

In his lifetime, Shaw had resolutely rejected any attempt to turn Pygmalion into a musical. In 1921 he learned that Franz Lehár was basing an operetta on the play, and fired off a salvo warning the composer not to infringe his copyright. Shaw insisted that Pygmalion possessed its own verbal music, but he must also have been wary of the conventions of musical comedy which would demand a romantic union at the conclusion.

This was precisely the scenario that was eventually used in My Fair Lady. Eliza returns to find Higgins in his study, disconsolately listening to her voice on his recording machine. 'If he could but let himself', the stage directions read, 'he would run to her.' Instead, he leans back and says softly, 'Eliza, where the devil are my slippers?'

This is a crowd-pleasing travesty of the original, which defies the story's own internal logic. Higgins has produced a woman with a soul to call her own. Initially, he deprived Eliza of her independence as a flower seller, and in effect enslaved her. But by the end, Eliza has the power to exist without Higgins. Why should we wish her to stay with him, as his perpetual slipper-carrier? Eliza, as Shaw never ceased trying to explain, should be well shot of him.