

## Theatre

# Much fairer to that lady

A gorgeous local production takes a more nuanced look at the classic musical

Keith Bain

If the smug Edwardian phonetician and linguist Henry Higgins were real and alive today, he would probably have got himself cancelled.

On the face of it, the character first created by George Bernard Shaw for his 1912 play *Pygmalion* is not only a misogynist but also a bully who uses his superior vocabulary and proper diction to put Cockney flower-peddler Eliza Doolittle firmly in her place.

Being a literary invention, of course, Higgins gets away with calling Eliza whatever he pleases.

In *My Fair Lady*, a musical that hardly needs introduction, he famously does so in the context of a bet, taking it upon himself to transform the flower seller with a penchant for “murdering” the English language into someone able to pass as a duchess.

Higgins’s jibes stretch from “squashed cabbage leaf” to “ungrateful guttersnipe”.

He also calls her speech an “incarnate insult to the English language”, highlighting the notion that, with substantial linguistic improvements, she might pass for nobility.

Each instance of this infernal name-calling is, of course, designed to generate laughs.

Those laugh-line insults, many of which are lyrics for some of musical theatre’s most enduringly popular songs, many of them ear worms, still work to this day.

Higgins, the pompous chauvinist, ridicules and belittles Eliza and there we sit in the dark and, instead of making for the exit in protest, we giggle and guffaw, perhaps turn to the person next to us and smile at the cleverness of the language, the way such sophisticated vocabulary is weaponised against the innocent Eliza.

Based on the ancient Greek myth about a poet and sculptor named Pygmalion who falls in love with a statue of a woman he has carved and subsequently asks the gods to bring her to life, Shaw’s play (and the musical it spawned) is one of the modern era’s original code-switching satires, one written in protest not only against the class system that so appalled the writer, but also against the patriarchy.

We’re introduced to Higgins as a kind of Edwardian prototype of today’s manosphere-inhabiting incel bros. He sits around sipping tea and discussing his superior qualities with other intellectuals (in this case, Colonel Pickering), not only dissing women, but unflinchingly singing about the superiority of men.

That’s the hubristic Higgins we meet, but — as much as Eliza is transformed by means of his intervention — he also evolves.

For decades, critics have cited the musical’s “of-its-time” misogyny, cautioning against the manner in which it takes agency away from Eliza and makes her a plaything or puppet in the hands of a smarter man.

That narrative framework has become a defining characteristic of countless romcoms that provide sugary escape and frothy laughs but, ultimately, portray pretty women being rescued by their male suitors.

Indeed, in *My Fair Lady*, Eliza



All I want is a room somewhere: Leah Mari plays Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*, which is being performed at the Teatro Montecasino in Johannesburg. Photos: Kim Stevens



Why can't the English?: Scenes from *My Fair Lady*, (above and left) with Craig Urbani as Henry Higgins and Leah Mari as Eliza Doolittle. Photos: Kim Stevens

starts out as a callow simpleton who is prodded, poked and forced to speak with marbles in her mouth as her “trainer”, Higgins, treats her like some kind of sentient plaything or performing monkey.

But this production, on at Joburg’s Teatro Montecasino, offers something more nuanced.

Perhaps it’s in the twinkling eyes of Craig Urbani, the actor who plays Professor Higgins as a mature, barrel-chested dreamboat intellectual.

Or maybe it is his instinctual

channelling of Shaw’s heart and soul and deep-seated antagonism against the “system”.

Whatever it is, Urbani performs Higgins as a kind of closet feminist.

Urbani is an absolute scream, skillfully and subtly refashioning Higgins into someone who, despite the social strictures of his time, manages to have fun and let loose — and get away with being resolutely unshackled from the norms and expectations of his upper-crust world.

He might say (and sing) the most

horrid things but you sense that, underneath it all, there’s a deeper, more human individual occupying the Higgins meat suit.

He’s in on Shaw’s parody of middle-class morality and society’s shallowness, secretly rooting for Eliza because he recognises in her something he admires even more than brains and charm and good diction — her independent spirit.

It certainly helps that Eliza is played by the irresistible Leah Mari (who alternates the role with Cape Town

Opera songstress Brittany Smith).

She is radiant, fresh-faced and “lovely” in the best possible way.

She brings humanity and pathos to the role, while still managing to allow Eliza to laugh at herself, her sweet, unassuming intelligence shining through. Her voice, too, is unstoppably beautiful.

Urbani meanwhile leans into his character’s weirdness, his inability to go with the mainstream. As a result, he is not so much a tyrant as someone who is “different”, wearing knowledge like a suit of armour, defence against a social system he actually abhors.

In many respects, Higgins deploys Eliza as a Trojan horse, sending her into the bosom of high society in order to prove that, for all their airs and graces, the rich and powerful dwell in a house of cards.

The musical not only celebrates code-switching as a way of tricking the entitled elite, but also exposes the flimsiness of class-based morality by cracking the code entirely.

And, at a more intimate level, what director Steven Stead and his excellent cast have created is a show that is less about a man using a woman as his guinea pig, and more a story about an outsider who finds redemption in the form of a woman who is wise enough to forgive him for all his many flaws, to see into his soul beyond his ill manners and anti-social behaviour.

*My Fair Lady* is undeniably gorgeous, wall to wall with lush music and energetic dance numbers choreographed by Duane Alexander, who has a knack for making you want to get up and join the cast.

That cast, in turn, is rapturous, their sublime singing voices vibrant and full of emotion, whether it’s one of the upbeat full-throttle numbers you find yourself singing the next morning or one of those more soulful, thoughtful songs that has the audience rapt with emotion.

It’s to the credit of everyone involved that the singing is crisp and clear throughout, ensuring you hear every word and follow the minutiae of a show that is not only properly written, but full of the kind of language that reminds you just how precious and powerful words can be.

It is a musical that not only sweeps you off your feet but seems destined to be the one that South African audiences will talk about for years to come.

***My Fair Lady* is playing at the Teatro at Montecasino until 2 March.**