

Poor Professor Higgins!

In George Bernard Shaw's original play, Eliza and Henry don't even get it together. No wonder *My Fair Lady* is miles better than *Pygmalion*

Trevor Nunn

Occasionally we must admit that an adaptation into a new form can actually improve on a great original. There is a strong body of opinion that Verdi's *Otello* is better than *Othello*, *Falstaff* more coherent than *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *West Side Story* more immediate and affecting than *Romeo and Juliet*. There is certainly a case for *My Fair Lady* to be part of this tradition, since it not only supersedes *Pygmalion* dramatically, but provides the work with an ending implied by but missing from the original play.

Shaw was almost two thirds through his writing lifetime when he hit the jackpot with *Pygmalion*. In the Roman poet Ovid's first treatment of this mythic tale, King Pygmalion of Cyprus, a sculptor in his spare time, creates a statue of his ideal woman, falls in love with it and, Aphrodite having granted his prayer for the figure to be brought to life as Galatea, marries her.

Anybody aware of Shaw's radical reputation in 1912 would have surely found it inexplicable that he had embarked upon his own dramatic adaptation. After all, a king fantasising about and possessing a love object of his own creation would seem to be unpromising material for a Fabian socialist and proponent of feminism.

Shaw's abiding obsession was with our language, with the inconsistencies of its spelling and pronunciation and the inadequacies of its alphabet and principles of punctuation. By turning his *Pygmalion* into a professor of phonetics, Shaw transformed the existing plot into a fable through which he could focus on some of his favourite targets: class, the inequalities of English society, snobbery. But inevitably, too, it made his "Pygmalion" - male fantasist figure Henry Higgins - into something like a self-portrait.

Shaw avoided any necessity for intervention by the gods: the metamorphosis in his play is accomplished by a girl from the gutter sloughing off her dialect and being taught pronunciation, social behaviour and self-confidence, achieving the status of a princess. But what of the other strand of Ovid's tale, the emotional relationship between Pygmalion, the creator, and Galatea, the creation, ending in marriage?

A close reading of Shaw's play reveals that his intention was indeed to create this emotional attachment. Uncharacteristically, he calls his comedy *A Romance in Five Acts*. The stream of hints in *Pygmalion* that Higgins will become emotionally attached to Eliza is constant, climaxing when, unable to cope with her departure - prompted by his failure to recognise her as a woman of feeling and sensibility - he searches for her. When he finds her, he blurts: "Get up and come home and don't be a fool."

Shaw gives Eliza a double triumph. She conquers fashionable London society, and she becomes independent of her teacher ("I'm not afraid of you and can do without you"). But Shaw is still a step away from finding an ending.

In early performances the actors actually refused to go along with Shaw's unresolved conclusion. In response to Higgins's final order for her to buy some gloves for him, Eliza had departed the play with, "Get them yourself"; but in performance Mrs. Patrick Campbell was in the habit of returning as the curtain fell to enquire, "What size?" Moreover, as the company took their bows, Herbert Beerbohm Tree as Higgins would present his Eliza with a bouquet, before they posed together in what was unmistakably a wedding photograph tableau. Shaw allegedly disapproved but did not forbid, and their additions were allowed to continue.

Shaw was never very good at endings, but the last lines of the published version of *Pygmalion* in 1916 surely amount to his worst. Higgins tells his mother that Eliza will marry the vacuous and indolent Freddy Eynsford-Hill, and then laughs in repeated mockery at the stupidity of this arrangement - serving only to underline the problem that this outcome is not prepared for by the play, and that the consignment of his heroine to an unhappy, unintelligent and unworthy future leaves a sour taste.

The explanation for this conclusion has nothing to do with the lame contrivance of Shaw's Afterword, printed in 1916, in which he first denies that he means anything romantic by his use of the word "romance", and proceeds to detail a miserable, impecunious life of drudgery and dependence for Eliza. But this breathtakingly vindictive betrayal can be understood in relation to Shaw's real-life obsession with his leading actress.

Give Higgins and Eliza autobiographical identity as Shaw and his protegee Mrs. Pat and all becomes clear: Shaw wanted his close relationship with her to continue, but didn't dare propose that it should have a sexual content. A shared life "for the fun of it" was as far as the "Irish pope" was prepared to go.

In between the first performance of the play in 1914 and the publication of the text in 1916, a momentous change had occurred in Shaw's private life. Mrs. Pat had married a handsome, aristocratic and empty-headed young man called George Cornwallis-West, despite a flow of letters from GBS begging her not to. Shaw was clearly hurt and felt rejected by the actress he thought owed her fame to him. The 1916 ending and afterword are revealed as a private message willing Mrs. Pat to a wretched life in a bad marriage.

Shaw again addressed the problem of how to resolve his play when he agreed to write a film script based on it for Gabriel Pascal. The movie ends with the brilliant invention of a despairing Higgins sitting alone, listening to his recording of Eliza's voice and becoming aware that the last sentence has been spoken live, because his pupil has returned. Shaw hinted that hands other than his had been involved in the screenplay. As he accepted his Oscar for writing it, he was asked about his view of the variant ending. "It's of no consequence," he replied. That's as near to a blessing as anybody could expect.

The ending of the 1938 film was adopted in its entirety by Alan Jay Lerner in *My Fair Lady* his brilliant adaptation of *Pygmalion* for the musical stage. But this was not his only improvement. Even leaving out of account the almost unperformable verbosity of some sections of Shaw's play, its repetitiveness and the long diversion investigating the financial circumstances of Eynsford-Hills, *Pygmalion* is more static than Lerner's adaptation and places the most intriguing and significant action offstage.

It's actually quite a shock to discover that *Pygmalion* contains no elocution lessons, no moment of celebration when Eliza has "got it", no visit to Ascot, no triumph at the ball, no return by Eliza to Covent Garden to discover that she passes unrecognised through the scenes of her past life, and no moment when we see her appalling father in his home territory, as a member of the "undeserving poor". So much of the world we assume Shaw created just isn't there.

Better still, Lerner searches out the possibilities of musical expression with unerring analytic accuracy, from Higgins's opening diatribe, through the first glorious celebration of Alfred Doolittle's fecklessness, Higgins's disparagement of female friendship, the celebration of Eliza's phonetic breakthrough on *The Rain in Spain*, and her glorious eruption of independence *Without You*. Perhaps most triumphantly, *I've Grown Accustomed to Her Face* dramatises the battle within Higgins and indeed the battle within Shaw, before resolving whether he will allow himself to feel or not.

But the real achievement of Lerner's adaptation is his insight that the story requires not one, not two, but three personal journeys. Doolittle is changed into a respectable member of the reviled middle classes; Eliza is changed into a new woman once her "guttersnipe" habits are expunged; but the third metamorphosis is of Professor Higgins, who is transformed finally and movingly from a man unable to express his feelings into a more complete emotional human being. *Pygmalion* is a collection of very brilliant theatrical and comic ideas, but *My Fair Lady* quite simply is a masterpiece.

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