

'My Fair Lady' makes triumphant return to Shaw stage

MY FAIR LADY ★★★★

At the Shaw Festival Theatre. Three hours, with one intermission. Co-directors: Tim Carroll, Kimberley Rampersad. Lyrics: Alan Jay Lerner. Music: Frederick Loewe. Adapted from George Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion." On till Dec. 22.

Penny-Lynn Cookson
Special to The Lake Report

For the nay-sayers who lamented, "Please, not another 'My Fair Lady,'" rest assured, the performances and presentation of this musical comedy are stellar, with a depth of social issues still relevant today.

The moment the curtain rose to the soaring music score played with strength and polish by the Shaw orchestra there was a palpable emotional reaction in the audience.

Lips moved to words well-known, audible hums murmured along. For many, it was the third and fourth time seeing "My Fair Lady" and they were back for more. They would not be disappointed.

On stage, the action begins with market sellers and toffs leaving the opera House seeking shelter from the rain in the portico of St. Paul's Covent Garden.

Henry Higgins, a scholar of phonetics, is taking notes of the Cockney slang, yowls



Kristi Frank as Eliza Doolittle with, from left, Gryphyn Karimloo, Allan Louis, Graeme Kitagawa, J.J. Gerber and members of the cast in Lerner and Loewe's "My Fair Lady." The show is on now at the Shaw Festival. DAVID COOPER

and mangled vowels of a flower seller, Eliza Doolittle.

A happenstance meeting with a fellow linguist leads to a bet that Higgins will, in six months, turn Eliza from a "guttersnipe" to a duchess speaking "proper English." This will be a clash of two egos.

Kristi Frank triumphs as Eliza Doolittle in a strong, convincing performance of will, determination and sensitivity in her transition from the market to upper-class scrutiny at Ascot and the Embassy Ball.

It is pure pleasure to see Frank hold her own in voice and acting in a role so identified with Julie Andrews, Audrey Hepburn and Marni Nixon.

Tom Rooney, as Henry Higgins, is up against Rex Harrison's famed petulant Higgins of stage and screen. He succeeds with a tighter, controlled and nuanced interpretation.

His criticisms of Eliza are no less whiplash stinging, misogynist, bullying and belittling, but out of his mama's boy selfish entitlement, Rooney draws a dawning tenderness of need and understanding of self.

Sharry Flett is sublime as the refined, long-suffering mother of the indulged, exasperating, ill-mannered Higgins.

She loses her friends whenever he appears. Flett's pacing, pauses and believ-

ability brought the greatest appreciative laughs from the audience.

David Adams as Eliza's father is a dynamic, fast-talking Alfred P. Doolittle, who accepts and is happy with his lot in life as a dustman able to share a few pints with his friends.

He is not happy to be catapulted into money, morals and the middle class by an unexpected inheritance due to his gift of the Welsh gab.

As Freddy Eynsford-Hill, Taurian Teelucksingh has looks, voice and appeal as the besotted pursuer of Eliza. Will he succeed in winning her?

The role of Zoltan Karpathy, Hungarian translator

and accent sleuth at European royal courts, is presented as a bushy-bearded buffoon rather than as a suave sophisticate.

He will be the one to determine if Eliza is a fraud. Unfortunately, we cannot understand his accent or his garbled words.

Crystal chandeliers and the glitter of gowns are the backdrop to the Ball scene. Eliza dazzles in a splendid chiffon-over-satin gown true to 1912 style.

Her trim, fitted skirt suit at Ascot echoes one worn by Rose in the film of the ill-fated Titanic. But where were the broad-brimmed hats with ostrich feathers expected at Ascot?

The contemporary sculp-

tural hats were provoking but immediately recalled Princess Beatrice's scandalously controversial Philip Treacy fascinator worn at the royal wedding in 2011. Intentional?

The exuberance, the charm, the delightful Cockney Quartet, all entertain.

But what lay beneath Shaw's Pygmalion was his socialism and his recognition of the strongly held traditions in England of class hierarchy meant to exclude, rampant speech discrimination, economic inequality, male power vs. the rights of women and the consequences of gender and societal change from the Great War to his death in 1950.

These issues continue.

Will Eliza find love with Higgins or Freddy? She knows Higgins will not change. She will always be fetching the slippers.

She is grateful to him but it is Colonel Pickering, the counterfoil to Higgins, who has given her self-esteem, independence and strength because he has always treated her with kindness as a lady. Shaw was adamant who she would choose.

In the words of Alfred P. Doolittle, "I'm willing, I'm wanting and I'm waiting to tell you ..." get yourself to this "My Fair Lady."

Penny-Lynn Cookson is an arts and culture historian, writer and lecturer living in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Young stars lead the way as Music Niagara's season opens

Staff
The Lake Report

As they often say, it's the youth that will lead the way to tomorrow — and that happens to be the case for Music Niagara's 26th season.

The organization's annual Summer Festival will kick off with the Young Virtuoso and Choral Festival Series, running from Sunday, June 16 to Friday, July 5.

Five chamber choirs from a diverse array of backgrounds, all comprised of young singers, will perform at venues across Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Opening up the season



The Oakville Choir for Children & Youth will kick off Music Niagara's 26th season with a free performance at Ironwood Cider House on June 16. SOURCED

will be the Oakville Choir for Children & Youth, who will give a free performance at the Ironwood Cider House on June 16 at 4 p.m.

This choir, made up of seven ensembles for individuals aged 4 to 20, is known for its exceptional music education

and encouraging leadership and community engagement among young singers.

Next, hailing from coastal California, the Young Women's Chorus of San Francisco will perform at 7 p.m. on June 25 at St. Mark's Church.

This choir was founded in 2012 and was praised by the American Record Guide for its "refined and beautifully controlled singing." It's earned accolades such as the American Prize in Choral Performance and the Margaret Hillis Award for Choral Excellence.

The following day, June 26, the festival is back at the Ironwood Cider House for another afternoon performance, this time from Philippine Madrigal Singers, at 4 p.m.

Joining Music Niagara from the University of the Philippines, the group was founded in 1963 and has been recognized by UNES-

CO as Artists for Peace, for their efforts in promoting cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue and a culture of peace.

The festival will be back at the St. Mark's Church on June 30 with an afternoon performance from Yip's Ensembles and the Canadian Youth Chinese Orchestra at 4 p.m.

This concert will talk its audience through diverse musical genres, from classical to contemporary and folk traditions, celebrating musical diversity and collaboration.

Finally, on July 5, for the final performance in the Young Virtuoso and

Choral Festival Series, the Monaco Boys Choir will be at Mount Carmel Spiritual Centre in Niagara Falls, for a performance at 7 p.m.

This ensemble has a rich heritage dating back to its foundation in 1974 and boasts a prestigious presence as part of the Monaco Cathedral Choir. This group has become a global ambassador of Monaco's cultural and performing arts tradition.

For more information about each performance, and to purchase tickets for these and other Music Niagara concerts this season, visit musicniagara.org/concerts-2.

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