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Get Thee to the Opera on Time! if you must...

Why can't the Lyric learn to stage? Beginning with their 2013 production of *Oklahoma*, the Lyric Opera of Chicago has expanded their horizons with their "Broadway at Lyric" initiative. While financially successful, the Lyric's renditions of established musicals suffer from an identity crisis as the Lyric's heavy-handed operatic sensibilities mire these nostalgic classics.

For the rare uninitiated, Alan Jay Lerner (lyricist) and Frederick Loewe's (composer) wildly successful musical *My Fair Lady* premiered in 1956, yielding six Tony awards and an adored film adaptation starring Rex Harrison and Audrey Hepburn. Based on George Bernard Shaw's linguistically lush 1913 play *Pygmalion*, much of the dialog heavy musical directly lifts its predecessor's script. These 20<sup>th</sup> century retellings of roman storyteller Ovid's mythical narrative poem tell the story of scholar of the English language Professor Henry Higgins's (Richard E. Grant) chance encounter with the harsh-to-the-ear Cockney Eliza Doolittle (Lisa O'Hare). The chauvinistic Higgins places a bet with his colleague the gentler Colonel Pickering (Nicholas Le Provost) that with proper training in speech and manners the lowly Eliza can be transformed into a respectable lady in time for the Queen of Transylvania's Embassy Ball.

This *My Fair Lady*, first staged by the Théâtre du Châtelet in 2010, ineffectively re-sets the typically Edwardian musical just before the Second World War. Any consequential dramaturgical significance is overshadowed by the Lyric's predictably oppressive staging. "You hear much better in the dark" Higgins lectures. If true, then it is not only the Lyric's muddying, reverberating acoustics—built for opera, not theater and dialogue—that dampened the accented,

diction heavy musical, but also Tim Hatley's blindingly white set. This at once minimal-effort and ornate set feels sterile when it isn't clashing, draining this cherished musical of its signature charm. The "so clean you don't dare touch it" marble aesthetic, Corinthian columns that frame the stage, and a distracting screen that frequently curtains the stage for halting set changes forces its audience to recall the mythological Pygmalion. In case you didn't get it, the aforementioned screen pretentiously reads "Mea Pulchra Puella"—"My Fair Lady" in Latin. Almost thoughtful lighting design occasionally colors this canvas, vaguely commenting on the facades of class.

If the intent of this set is to remind its audience that this is Pygmalion's/Higgins's/the creator's story, it is severely let down by a monotone Richard E. Grant. As the "endearingly" bigoted professor, Grant implores the English to learn their letters from A to zed. His performance hardly ranges from A to B. With a voice that holds no character or ability to even inflect, Grant neither speaks nor sings, nor speak-sings, in a way that convinces us of Higgins's passion for language or irritation with women. His thin, disinterested voice betrays a much more engaged bodily performance, making for incongruous acting that baffles rather than edifies during what would have been Grant's more successful, heartfelt scenes throughout Act 2.

Thankfully, Lisa O'Hare's performance is anything but one-note. Sporting a confident soprano, amazing human sensitivity, and a wit to withstand the misogynistic blows of her instructor, O'Hare's Eliza transforms elegantly before the audience's eyes while still retaining the street-smart charm that endears us to her in the first place. Her performance reminds us that the dressings of class are only surface deep. Most importantly, O'Hare's "I Could Have Danced All Night," in the legendary company of Julie Andrews and Marni Nixon, fully delivers.

As lover Freddy Eynsford-Hill, the charismatic Bryce Pinkham (a former co-star of O'Hare's in the Tony winning *A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder*) steals the night with

an effortless “On the Street Where You Live.” Also turning out memorable performances are Helen Carey as the unforgiving mother of Henry Higgins, and the talented if oversized ensemble of 56. The gorgeous costuming, to the Lyric’s credit, is mercifully colorful, and provides a trite but important, clear statement on classism in this otherwise confused production.

In spite of a great many faults, the Lyric Opera’s production is miraculously saved by the intrinsic, infectious charm of Lerner and Loewe’s work. The Lyric’s glamorous orchestrations let the score breathe with resounding rhythm and life. Leaving the opera humming the shows’ memorable tunes, a smile on my face, is testament to the fact that, thanks to the timelessness of their work, I could “still have begged for more.”

*My Fair Lady* plays at the Chicago Lyric Opera through May 21.