

‘My Fair Lady’ lives up to the hype at the Arts Council of Coastal Carolina.



It has been called “the perfect musical,” and it just might be. The script is so clever, the score so memorable, the characters so utterly indelible. It’s a genuine classic. A cultural treasure. Everybody knows it and everybody loves it...

And there’s the rub for any director with the guts to take on *My Fair Lady*. People have... expectations. Screwing up is *not* an option.

Fortunately, Lerner and Loewe’s beloved legacy has landed in safe hands with Casey Colgan at the Arts Center of Coastal Carolina. This is *My Fair Lady* in all its glory – big, colorful, exuberant and fun. With marvelous sets that move as if by magic, spectacular costumes that twirl and dazzle, and a cast so good you can’t stop grinning at the stage... the production runs, as they say, like a well-oiled machine. One can only imagine how much painstaking, back-breaking work goes into making a show this complicated look this easy.

So, it’s slick and smooth and spectacular... but is there anything “new” here? Well, yes... one. And it’s a doozy. But we’ll get to that in a moment. For the most part, Colgan’s production is just an impeccable, straightforward rendering of a timeless piece that needs no twisting nor tweaking. Bless you for that, Mr. Colgan.

A smash hit on Broadway in 1956, *My Fair Lady* is best known for its wildly popular and acclaimed film adaptation, made in 1964.

The story itself – first recounted in George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*

— is set in 1912 London and has held up surprisingly well.

The

The Fairest of Them All

Written by Margaret Evans

The tale of lowly flower girl Eliza Doolittle and uppity linguist Henry Higgins, while celebrated for its humor and light-hearted melodies, resonates on many levels... some of them pretty dark. While a cursory analysis might find the story somewhat “dated” – with its pointed commentary on class and gender issues (we’re beyond all that now, right?) – the archetypal themes of pride and prejudice never go out of style. In complex characters like Eliza, her scoundrel of a father, the self-involved, self-deluded Henry Higgins, and the gentle, genteel Colonel Pickering, we’re reminded that kindness and decency recognize no class or gender distinctions. Also, that “education” has many definitions. The arrogant, erudite Professor Higgins believes he can “transform” Eliza by teaching her to speak proper English; but in the end – and only the bitter end – it is Higgins, himself, who is truly transformed. The catalyst? A good, hard dose of humility. That, and a crazy little thing called love.

Of course, this is my just interpretation. Plenty of critics see Henry Higgins as an irredeemable classist and chauvinist. According to film reviewer Tim Dirks, at the end of the movie (which is just like the end of the play), “Without learning the lesson that he may have lost Eliza, Higgins returns to his accustomed, unreformed, selfish, and chauvinistic ways.... This is a tacked-on, compromising, insulting, misogynistic ending, presumably for box-office considerations, since a harder, more realistic ending might have been more difficult for audiences to watch.”

Call me a hopeless romantic (or maybe a cock-eyed optimist?), but I felt neither insulted nor compromised by the ending of *My Fair Lady*. With all due respect to our contemporary “isms,” I see Higgins more as a plain, old-fashioned jerk – a rather lovable one, at that – whose redemption has been set in motion by end of the play. I believe Higgins and Eliza have come to a new (and mutual) understanding in the last scene, and that Higgins’ final words to her are spoken in tender jest, much as hers are to him. You, of course, will have to draw your own conclusions about the conclusion. Either way, I must sing the praises of the man who brings this controversial character so beautifully and convincingly to life. Peter Simon Hilton takes Henry Higgins to new heights – and depths – and will send you home from the theater mumbling, “Rex
Who?”

Rex Harrison was pushing 60 when he made Higgins a household name, and though his performance is twinkly and devilish and very charming, I was never quite sold on the idea of Higgins and the 20-ish Eliza as a “couple” (which they may – or may not – be, depending on how you interpret the ambiguous ending). As a red-blooded American female, I am bold enough to tell you that having a young, sexy Higgins on stage enhanced my enjoyment of the show many fold. Oh, don’t get me wrong – Hilton’s not *just* young and sexy. He’s an accomplished thespian with plenty of Shakespeare on his resume, mad acting chops and charisma out the wazoo... and, unlike Harrison, he actually

sings

his songs, instead of speaking them, and he’s got a terrific voice. These things are all well and

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good – frankly, at the Arts Center, they're

de rigueur

– but it's the "young and sexy" that's new. For me, it makes

My Fair Lady

a different play.

It's a brave, unexpected casting choice that really pays off.

The rest of the cast is splendid, as well. The effervescent Lindsay Van Winkle imbues her Eliza with complicated notes of mischief and melancholy. Having seen her do a soulful "Eponine" in the Arts Center's "Les Miz" last spring, I smiled when I saw she'd been cast. John-Charles Kelly is just right as Colonel Pickering – dignified and tender and very funny. Alfred P. Doolittle is boisterous, outrageous, and shameless as ever in the skilled hands of Drew Taylor; and Scott Evans lends a lovely voice and winsome presence to the hapless swooner, Freddy Eynsford Hill. Special kudos to Terry Palasz for proving the axiom that there are no small roles, only small actors. Her "Mrs. Higgins" is a flat-out masterpiece.

And the chorus is made up of singing, dancing actors just as passionate and dedicated as the principals. Their attention to detail and commitment to character enliven every production number. Of course, it's easier to "commit" when swathed in exquisite costumes, like the ones created by Jennifer P. Correll, while whirling across wondrous sets like those designed by Terry Cermak and Sabrinna Cox. The orchestra, conducted by Bradley Vieth, is vibrant and dead-on, never missing a beat. Seriously, the values of this production could not be higher were it on Broadway, itself.

The result is a joyful night of – dare I say it? – "interactive" theater. The audience I was in gasped in unison when the Ascot scene was revealed in all its black-and-white, strike-a-pose perfection. "Get Me to the Church On Time" was a technicolor spectacle that had us hooting and hollering in our seats. Heads were bobbing to the wistful "Wouldn't It Be Lovely." During the overture, folks were actually singing aloud. Indeed, the energy in the audience was almost as palpable as the energy on stage. People. Love. This. Show.

My Fair Lady will run through December 27th at the Arts Center of Coastal Carolina on Hilton Head. Gentleman, I can think of no finer holiday treat for
your

fair lady than a pair of tickets to this wonderfully romantic production. (Just don't let her anywhere near the guy who plays Henry Higgins!)

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Call 843-842-ARTS or visit www.artshhi.com for tickets.

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