

MY FAIR LADY

CIVIC THEATRE CHELMSFORD

If My Fair Lady was a woman, and that woman set up a dating profile, it would probably read as follows: "Old fashioned, traditional kind of gal. Likes reprises of songs and wordy scenes; dislikes short first acts and multiple female principal roles. Extremely popular with theatre-loving folk."

The show is a funny one for me as it was one of the first I ever did as a child (aged 13) and was probably one of the best experiences of my life. It was a summer show, so rehearsals were always conducted with the hall doors wide open, and I made friends for life. I cried buckets during the Saturday night curtain call. But as an audience member, it can be quite a tough watch. The first half runs to around 1 hour 35 minutes (I'm glad I didn't have a glass of wine beforehand!), meaning the show itself doesn't finish until 10.30pm. There are lots of very wordy scenes during which you have to concentrate quite a lot, and there are large chunks of time between the energetic chorus numbers.

I saw the opening night of Chelmsford Operatic's run this week and I was pleasantly surprised to see an almost full house. This goes to show that the group have a strong, supportive core audience and also that My Fair Lady is a show which usually sells. Adapted from George Bernard Shaw's play Pygmalion, which was also made into a film starring Audrey Hepburn, we follow Eliza Doolittle from "worthless guttersnipe" to well-spoken lady as she is moulded by Professor Henry Higgins, a phoneticist, and his friend Colonel Pickering.

Eliza, which is the only real female principal character in the show, is played by Joanne Quinney. A beautiful face and a beautiful singing voice, she certainly attacks the part. Her common Eliza is a little OTT for me; Eliza's cockney voice is meant to be jarring to hear, but for me it jars just a little too much. However, I enjoyed watching her transform and thought she plays "posh" Eliza very well. It's a huge part, only really matched by Higgins, which is probably an even larger role. Played by John Sullivan, it is hard not to think you are watching Michael Palin, as his wig and glasses (and even his voice!) give him an uncanny resemblance to the Monty Python star. (Although in the programme, the "real" John looks nothing like him!) Higgins needs to strike the right balance between sarcasm, bordering on rude, but believable as someone Eliza would want to please, which John does well. He seems almost word perfect which, for opening night and with so much dialogue, coupled with nerves I'm sure, is impressive.

Kevin Abrey as Colonel Pickering gives a great performance. The part pretty much calls for the actor to observe from the sides most of the time but he is never boring to watch. However, the absolute stand-out star for me is Barry Hester as Alfred P Doolittle, Eliza's father. I've never seen the character played quite so drunk before, but when you listen to a lot of his lines, that's exactly what he's meant to be. When he first enters, he looks quite wretched, and reminds me of a cross between Bill Sykes and Fagin from Oliver! He certainly gets the most laughs throughout the show and the rousing rendition of Get Me to the Church on Time lifts the second half of the show immensely, just when it's needed. The chorus should also be congratulated for this, and all their scenes, as looking around, I could see each little group have their own story going on, which is always important. Their harmonies are good and they all look to be having a really great time.

I like the performance of Lynette Sullivan as Mrs Higgins, Henry's mother, who champions Eliza from the start. There's not much to get your teeth into with the role but she does well. Kieran Bacon plays Freddy Eynsford-Hill, who meets Eliza at Ascot and instantly falls in love with her. Freddy's song, On the Street Where You Live, is my favourite from the show, and he performs it well, but I would say the part is possibly lacking a little in the charisma you usually associate with Freddy.

CAODS always puts on a very high standard of production and this is no exception. The chorus' street costumes look fantastic onstage; it's tempting to have everyone in browns, greys and whites as they are meant to be so poor, but all the costumes have just the right amount of colour within them. The Ascot

costumes are, as is traditional, black and white and are beautiful. The sets are detailed and the lighting well thought out. When Eliza is sitting around a fire in the street, the whole area around her glows orange whilst the rest of the stage seems much colder and dimmer. I was also impressed at the sound quality; neither the band or the singing are drowned out at any point and have the perfect balance.

There are a few little oddities or faux pas here and there on the night I attended. During one of the act two scenes in Higgins' study, I could see almost all of a bright red flower cart offstage left, which was a shame. There was also a maid scrubbing the floors in Higgins' house during one scene, and she obviously didn't want to make any noise to disturb the dialogue, which meant she was "scrubbing" about 2 inches above the floor! Perhaps this could've been done with a cloth instead to avoid the problem. But strangest of all, there is a scene where Eliza has to recite poetry with a mouthful of marbles. She spits them out in protest and, as the lights went down at the close of the scene, Eliza shoved the whole handful back in her mouth, chewed and swallowed! It was a shame that the illusion was then broken as to what was actually in the bowl and I think this could be easily avoided. Groups must remember it's the little things which can sometimes make or break a scene.

But these are picky things. On the whole, CAODS have done fantastically well. If that was opening night, then I think anyone heading to the Civic Theatre for the rest of this week is in for a real treat.

Sardines