

Synopsis of the stage version of:

PYGMALION by G B Shaw
Performed by TNT Theatre Britain

Convent Garden market in London about 1910. It is a poor area in the heart of a rich central London, the market sells mainly vegetables. A scene of market life to music, it starts to rain. People of different classes gather under the cover of the church doorway in the centre of the market.

An aristocratic woman who has come out of the theatre is annoyed that her son cannot get a taxi cab as so many people want them to avoid the rain. She is forced to mix with common people as they all want shelter from the storm. A poor flower seller, Eliza Doolittle, is also sheltering. She tries without success to sell flowers to the waiting people. A well dressed but secretive man is taking notes on the accents and dialects of the people forced together by the rain. He is Professor Higgins. The poor folk notice he is taking notes and mistake him for a policeman. Eliza objects, Higgins tells the people where they are from, his ability to know which accent is from where is extraordinary. Another man observes this, Colonel Pickering. He and Higgins start to talk and realise that they are looking for each other. The Colonel is an expert on Indian languages and vowel sounds and shares his fascination for language with Higgins. Higgins invites Pickering to stay with him in London. Eliza hears all this and realises that Higgins is a teacher who can transform anyone he wishes to by changing the way they speak English. The rain stops. The rich woman walks off leaving her son to waste his time looking for a taxi cab. Eliza begs Higgins to buy her cheap flowers, he is about to curse her as a beggar but feels pity and gives her a large amount of money for flowers of little value. Eliza cannot believe her luck and takes the taxi that the son did not need. She feels like a rich woman, with her few shillings. But it plants an idea in her mind.

The next scene is in Higgins house in London. He is teaching vowel sounds to Pickering who is exhausted by his enthusiasm. They are using an old fashioned recording device. They get on very well, these two bachelors with their passion for language. Mrs Pearce, their housekeeper and chief maid, tells them that a rough woman demands to be seen. They let her in expecting a linguistic curiosity but find it is only Eliza. Higgins wants to throw her out but Eliza holds firm. She has come on a mission: to persuade Higgins to teach her proper English so she can be employed in a smart flower shop. She is prepared to pay for lessons just like Higgins' wealthy clients. Higgins is fascinated when he realises how much money Eliza is offering out of her poor weekly earnings. She must want to improve herself. Pickering is touched and offers to pay for her lessons himself – but Higgins has a greater idea: he bets with Pickering that he can transform Eliza into a Duchess in a few weeks and pass her off as an aristocrat at the Royal Ball at Buckingham Palace. Pickering agrees to the bet. Eliza is uncertain, and feels

bullied (as she is!) but she agrees when offered chocolate and the vision of a better life. But it is already clear that Higgins is not just a teacher but a monster and cares nothing for her feelings. This is despite the good advice of Mrs Pearce and good manners of Pickering. Eliza is taken into the kitchen by Mrs Pearce to burn her clothes and give her a good bath and dress her in fine things that Pickering has paid for an ordered from Harrods, the most expensive store in London.

While she is getting bathed, Eliza's father appears. He is a dustman, a garbage collector, and he smells of his trade. He is often drunk but a very clever uneducated man, who knows how to get what he wants. Higgins sees he is a difficult man and tries to throw him out, accusing him of setting up Eliza to blackmail him. But Alfred Doolittle (his name) is no fool, he backs off and using extraordinary eloquent speech persuades Higgins to give him five pounds (a lot of money but not a fortune) to leave Eliza with him. Higgins and Pickering are greatly amused by Alfred, who is a rogue but likable rogue. He is also honest, saying that he will not waste the money but spend it on drink. He philosophises about the meaning of morality and manners to those who have no money. Eliza sweeps in dressed in a Japanese gown that Higgins had collected on his travel. Alfred fails to recognise her until she opens her mouth. Eliza launches a verbal attack on her father, who has done nothing for her and now is trying to spoil her good luck and effort to rise in the world. Alfred leaves, but not before advising Higgins to be firm with his daughter and beat her if she needs it. Pickering is furious and defends Eliza. Alfred is gone. Eliza is relieved and says she never wants to see him again or her stepmother (one of six) who threw her out of the family home a few years ago.

The new clothes arrive from Harrods and Eliza runs to try them on. Higgins and Pickering listen to her rough speech and wonder if they will ever make this street flower seller into a Duchess. It will be a big job.

The next scene is a short one showing the long process of teaching Eliza to speak proper English. Amazingly it is successful, but can she not only speak but also behave like an aristocrat?

The next scene is at Higgins' mother's tea party: a very polite affair. Higgins persuades his suspicious mother to allow Eliza to attend and see if she can fool her guests that she is a gentlewoman. The family arrive who we saw at the church in Convent Garden: Mrs Eynsford-Hill and her son Freddy. They are very superficial and rather unintelligent people of good "breeding" but little else. The afternoon tea party begins and Higgins is very rude to everyone as he cares nothing for social occasions or good manners. They drink tea. Eliza enters and all are amazed by her beauty, clothes and fine manners. But as she speaks Eliza starts to give herself away, talking about events in her rough working class family, where an aunt was murdered for her straw hat and her father was drunk all day and night. Her accent is fine but her vocabulary and choice of topic are a social disaster. But Freddy finds her daring and modern and tries to flirt with her. Eliza puts him down and exits with grace, taking a taxi as Higgins nudges her to get out and save the day. The Eynsford-Hill family are too foolish to see this

was a trick but instead take on Higgins and Eliza's swearing and foul language as if it were the latest fashion. (This is a scene of social satire that reflects Shaw's views as well as part of the drama).

When the guests are gone Mrs Higgins criticises her son for his experiment and says that she believes Higgins and Pickering have not understood the true problem: what will become of Eliza after the royal ball and her hoped for transformation? Higgins becomes defensive and excited, he is enjoying this experiment and gamble so much. He calls Eliza a genius and comments that she is taking over the household arranging his appointments and making his life so easy, he and Pickering are having such fun. His mother accuses him of treating Eliza like a living doll. An image of this appears behind the action, Pickering manipulating their "toy" doll Eliza. The scene ends with Higgins promising he will take Eliza to the ball and ignoring his mother's advice. "Men, men men!" fumes his mother.

The next scene (after interval if there is one). is at the Royal Ball. It is a scene without words. Eliza persuades everyone that she is a Duchess, it is a great triumph for her and her two teachers. A Prince dances with her and tries to find her but Higgins spirits her away before anyone can find out that she is not the real thing: a divine, sophisticated aristocratic lady.

The next scene is after the ball back at Higgins' house. They are all tired and the men a little drunk on champagne and their own success. Pickering agrees that Higgins has won the bet. The men congratulate each other and ignore Eliza as if it was not her triumph but only their own efforts. When Pickering goes to bed she flings Higgins' slippers at him in anger. They have an argument as she accuses him of treating her like an object. Higgins is patronising and uncaring. They argue further, she attacks him with her nails and he loses his temper. She says she is leaving and asks if the clothes are her own, she gives back the jewellery on the spot in case she is taken for a thief – this really upsets Higgins who does care for her in his own way. He tells her to go to bed and sleep it off and in the morning they can talk. But she is too hurt and they carry on arguing until he leaves. She storms out of the house, despite it being past midnight.

The next scene sees Eliza all alone and in despair in London. She wanders back into Covent Garden but no one recognises her. The poor market traders think it wrong for a lady to be out so late alone. She hears a noise, drunken men stagger out of the pub. It is her father, dressed up in smart clothes. They talk. Alfred curses her and Professor Higgins. It appears that Higgins was so impressed with Arthur's fine talk about the nature of morality that he recommended him to a rich philanthropist in America who died and left money to Arthur Doolittle (as long as he gives lectures on morality). The money has changed Arthur's life, but not he thinks for the better. He cannot give it back and now he is trapped in his wealth. He has become respectable. Worst of all the woman he lives with now wants a proper marriage. Arthur is on the way to the church now for the wedding. He is angry, sad and drunk as well as rich. Eliza has no pity for him and when he sadly asks if she wants to go to her Dad's wedding she turns him down as he expected. He rolls off to the church. So Eliza is truly alone. She is feeling so low that she might "throw herself in the river Thames" and commit suicide.

The next scene is back at Mrs Higgins house. Higgins and Pickering are looking for Eliza. She has vanished from their house and they are both worried and angry, They have even called the police. Mrs Higgins is furious. She say they have no right to treat Eliza like a lost umbrella. She says she is not surprised that Eliza has run away. Then she drops her "bombshell "of information: Eliza is upstairs at this very house She came here in the morning after a terrible night alone in the city where she realised she fits in with neither poor nor rich people and almost killed herself. But she knew Mrs Higgins is wise and kind and came to her. Eliza comes downstairs and confronts Higgins and Pickering. She thanks them for what she has learnt but reminds them that they created a type of social "monster" , someone who fits into no known society. Pickering, always the gentleman, apologises, but Higgins simply says that he was trying to do his best and do what Eliza wanted in the first place: a transformation through language. Eliza departs, Higgins shouts after her to buy him some gloves and get coffee ready back at their house. Higgins is sad but says to his mother that she will come back.

Will she return? The play ends with a question not an answer.

Paul Stebbings 2018