

PYGMALION

An Abridged Acting Edition

By George Bernard Shaw

Adaptation by Christopher Morse

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DEDICATION

For Marsha, of course

STORY OF THE PLAY

London. On a rainy evening in 1913, linguist Henry Higgins has a fateful encounter with an impertinent Cockney flower seller. When the girl shows up at his laboratory the following day, the haughty and impulsive Higgins makes a bold wager with a colleague: employing his mastery of language he will transform Eliza Doolittle from a rough street urchin into an aristocratic lady in just six months' time. And so begins Eliza's halting metamorphosis ... but what will become of the poor girl once this "experiment" is over?

George Bernard Shaw's classic has been a hit with audiences for more than a hundred years. *Pygmalion* skillfully blends social satire, philosophical wit, a heated battle of the sexes, and what is perhaps the greatest platonic love story every committed to paper. The play's musical incarnation, "My Fair Lady," remains a Broadway staple.

Although it has everything you could want in a play – laughs, drama, iconic characters -- the original is not often performed on modern stages, primarily because of its ponderous length. This seamless abridgement removes about thirty percent of the dialogue, while retaining every important character and plot point. None of the meat of the play goes missing. This absolutely remains Shaw's *Pygmalion*; it's just a lighter, livelier *Pygmalion*, easier on actors and more entertaining for the audience.

ORIGINAL PRODUCTION

An earlier version of this abridgment was first performed by Stratford Players of Idyllwild, California, in the spring of 2013.

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

(4 m, 5 to 6 w, 2 extras)

HENRY HIGGINS: Bachelor of about 40, a professor of linguistics.

ELIZA DOOLITTLE: A young Cockney flower girl.

ALFRED DOOLITTLE: Eliza's father, a dustman with a philosophical bent.

COLONEL PICKERING: Friend and colleague of Higgins, some years his senior.

MRS. HIGGINS: Henry's mother, a society woman.

MRS. EYNSFORD-HILL: Middle years, a friend of Mrs. Higgins.

CLARA EYNSFORD-HILL: Mrs. Eynsford-Hill's daughter, a modern young woman.

FREDDY EYNSFORD-HILL: Mrs. Eynsford-Hill's son.

MRS. PEARCE: Henry's housekeeper.

PARLOR-MAID: Maid of Mrs. Higgins.

BYSTANDERS: (2) either gender and any age. For ease and thrift of production a crowd of Londoners has been eliminated from the opening act. Shaw seems to have had ten or twenty extras in mind; now just two "bystanders" speak their lines. Companies wishing to reinstate the crowd may refer to the original play.

DOUBLING

The bystanders may be played by any two actors who do not appear in ACT I: Alfred Doolittle, Mrs. Pearce, Mrs. Higgins, the Parlor-Maid.

A very skilled and hardy actress could take on the roles of Mrs. Pearce and Mrs. Higgins, or Mrs. Pearce and Mrs. Eynsford-Hill.

PRODUCTION NOTES

SETTING

London, 1913. ACT I takes place outdoors on the portico of St. Paul's Church, Covent Garden. ACTS II and IV are set in Prof. Higgins' laboratory. ACTS III and V take place in his mother's drawing room.

These sets need only be suggested. ACT I could be played on the proscenium before the curtains. The Professor's laboratory has a careless, cluttered feel while Mrs. Higgins' drawing room expresses elegant taste, but actual furnishings may be minimal.

COSTUMES AND PROPS

Attractive period costumes will be appreciated by the audience and would be the best use of your budget. Eliza, in particular, benefits from several striking changes of attire. Doolittle requires two outfits, one shabby, one dapper.

ACT I: A notebook and pencil; a basket of flower bunches; a handful of coins.

ACT II: A box of chocolates; a handkerchief; a 5-pound note.

ACT III: Pen and writing paper for Mrs. Higgins.

ACT IV: A pair of men's slippers; a diamond necklace and earrings; a ring.

STAGED READING

A dialogue-rich play without a great deal of action, *Pygmalion* adapts easily as a staged reading. A narrator sets the scene simply by reading the introduction to each act; no further narration is required. Entrances and exits are made as indicated by the script. Costuming is basic black, accessorized with a few pieces such as a kimono for Eliza in Act II or a fine top hat for Doolittle in Act V. You may also wish to employ some of the props listed above.

ACT I

(AT RISE: Covent Garden at 11:15 pm. SFX: Torrents of heavy summer rain. Cab whistles blowing frantically in all directions. Under the portico of St. Paul's Church stand MRS. EYNSFORD-HILL and her daughter CLARA in evening dress, as well as a couple of BYSTANDERS in shabbier attire. Nearby a MR. HENRY HIGGINS with his back turned to them seems wholly preoccupied with a notebook in which he is writing busily. SFX: The church clock strikes the quarter hour.)

CLARA: I'm getting chilled to the bone. What can Freddy be doing all this time? He's been gone twenty minutes.

MRS. EYNSFORD-HILL: You exaggerate, but still, he ought to have got us a cab by now.

CLARA: If Freddy had a bit of gumption, he would have got one at the theatre door.

MRS. EYNSFORD-HILL: What could he have done, poor boy?

CLARA: Other people got cabs. Why couldn't he?

(Enter FREDDY EYNSFORD-HILL. He trots "out" of the rain.)

CLARA: *(Cont'd.)* Well, haven't you got a cab?

FREDDY: There's not one to be had for love or money.

MRS. EYNSFORD-HILL: Oh, Freddy, there must be one. You can't have tried.

CLARA: It's too tiresome. Do you expect us to go and get one ourselves?

FREDDY: I tell you they're all engaged. The rain was so sudden: everybody had to take a cab.

MRS. EYNSFORD-HILL: Did you try Trafalgar Square?

FREDDY: I tried as far as Charing Cross Station.

CLARA: You haven't tried at all.

MRS. EYNSFORD-HILL: You really are helpless, Freddy. Go again; and don't come back until you have found a cab.

FREDDY: I shall simply get soaked for nothing.

CLARA: And what about us? Are we to stay here all night in this draught, with next to nothing on? You selfish pig—

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FREDDY: Oh, very well: I'll go, I'll go.

(HE exits, bumps into ELIZA as she enters carrying a basket of flowers to sell.)

ELIZA: Nah then, Freddy: look wh' y' gowin, deah. (Now then, Freddy: look where you're going, dear.)

FREDDY: Sorry. *(Exits in haste.)*

ELIZA: *(Picking up her scattered flowers and replacing them in the basket.)* There's menners f' yer! Te-oo banches o voylets trod into the mad. (There's manners for you! Two bunches of violets trod into the mud.)

MRS. EYNSFORD-HILL: How do you know that my son's name is Freddy?

ELIZA: Ow, eez ye-ooa san, is e? Wal, fewd dan y' de-ooty bawmz a mather should, eed now bettern to spawl a pore gel's flahrzn than ran awy atbaht pyin. Will ye-oo py me f'them? (Oh, he's your son, is he? Well, if you'd done your duty by him as a mother should, he'd know better than to spoil a poor girl's flowers then run away without paying. Will you pay me for them?)

CLARA: Do nothing of the sort, Mother. The idea!

MRS. EYNSFORD-HILL: Please allow me, Clara. Have you any pennies?

CLARA: I've nothing smaller than sixpence.

MRS. EYNSFORD-HILL: *(To Clara.)* Give it to me. *(CLARA parts reluctantly. To Eliza.)* Now. This is for your flowers.

ELIZA: Thank you kindly, lady.

CLARA: Make her give you the change. These are only a penny a bunch.

MRS. EYNSFORD-HILL: Do hold your tongue, Clara. *(To Eliza.)* You can keep the change.

ELIZA: Oh, thank you, lady.

MRS. EYNSFORD-HILL: Now tell me how you know that young gentleman's name.

ELIZA: I didn't.

MRS. EYNSFORD-HILL: But, I heard you call him by it. Don't try to deceive me.

End of Freeview

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