



A DECIDEDLY
unromantic
COMEDY.

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW'S

Pygmalion

Directed by JONATHAN MOSCONE

encore
arts programs

2014 SEASON
40TH ANNIVERSARY
CAL SHAKES
CALIFORNIA SHAKESPEARE THEATER

CHANGING ON THE [IN•SIDE]

noun; on the inner side or part of; within



BY RESIDENT
DRAMATURG
PHILIPPA KELLY

"Life isn't about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself." This is one of George Bernard Shaw's famous maxims, quoted in everything from self-help books, to Facebook pages, to documents about the American constitution. Shaw lived for almost an entire century in class-bound Britain. Fundamental to his socialist politics was the idea that people don't have to stay where they are born—and that language, and the way one speaks, often provides the key to social mobility.

It's not difficult to find instances, even in recent times, of British accents being gentrified in pursuit of such mobility. In the 1980s Margaret Thatcher used a voice coach to lower the register of her high-pitched accent, which had been labeled "shrewish"; while David Beckham, as a speaker of Cockney-style colloquial English, naturally dropped 80 percent of his h's and got them all back again once he moved to America. In a reverse accommodation, an effort to appeal to a broad demographic prompted English Prime Minister Tony Blair to modify his upper-class accent ("Received Pronunciation") to the more informal "Estuary English." Old Etonian Prime Minister David Cameron, and even royalty, have been accused of altering upper class accents for the same purpose.

This—the change of public identity via a change of accent or inflection—is at the heart of Shaw's *Pygmalion*, written in 1912, just before the time when "BBC English" would be established as the public voice of England. Shaw was a committed member of the Fabian humanist and socialist society (the same society that Tony Blair would join several decades later). Shaw supported the advancement of democracy in all respects, including pushing for equal pay for men and women, advocating the abolition of private ownership of productive property, lecturing at trade unions, and campaigning for a simplification and reform of the English alphabet.

Before the Industrial Revolution, English society had been divided into a caste system that practiced endogamy, the marriage of people within the same demographic. This included the hereditary transmission of occupation, social status, and political influence. After the nineteenth century, social mobility—created by educational reform, legal reform, and opportunities brought on by a newly travelling and market-based meritocracy—began to dismantle the structures of the British caste system. Although class was still codified, it became possible for a person of low birth, such as *Pygmalion*'s Eliza Doolittle, to become financially self-reliant and thus socially mobile.

But people could only move *up* if they were willing to change their accents, shucking off their identities with the vowels and consonants of their regional birthplaces and socioeconomic positions. In the early twentieth century, half of the English population could not read or write their own language. For men and women like *Pygmalion*'s Eliza, born in the slums, a lack of education was assumed by any hint of a local dialect or accent. Changing this, Eliza realizes, can provide the key to economic opportunity, to pulling herself out of the gutter and into a flower shop.

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Enter Henry Higgins. For Higgins (whose character is based on that of a famous voice coach, Henry Sweet, who was one of Shaw's close friends and colleagues), women like Eliza are a curiosity, an experiment, a cold-blooded exercise in their own powers of transformation. Here is the challenge Higgins sets himself: is it possible not just to do what Eliza wishes, but to transform a person's whole being by changing them on the outside? In a hilarious "trial-scene," Eliza suggests that this is not the case: the poor low-class ("gutter-snipe") flower-girl, picked up by a famous voice coach who accepts a bet to pass her off as a Duchess within six months, accompanies Higgins to a small soiree, speaking and dressing impeccably, but with her Cockney vocabulary intact. Clearly she is not going to pass as a duchess if she changes only on the outside. She has to change on the *inside* as well.

But can this new Eliza actually be different from the inside out, and does she want to be? She can only feel different on the inside if Higgins treats her as such. Yet his own intransigence seems entrenched—is she always to remain his servant girl, his experiment, his oddly quirky anomaly?

There is something rather ironic and even poignant about this play, *Pygmalion*. Rather like its namesake—the Greek sculptor who became enchanted by his own statue—the arrogant, self-assured Henry Higgins does begin, in the course of the play, to feel something more than pride in his craft. What is it that he feels? Admiration for, and even astonishment at, the new lady he's created? Regard for someone who will bear his instruction but not his imprint? Even the sneaking glimmers of attraction? Whatever the reasons we might imagine, it is clear that Eliza manages to get under Henry's skin—but will he, in turn, go so far as to change *himself* on the inside?

Higgins' intransigence has an autobiographical precedent in Shaw's own relationship with both words and people. Shaw grew up with a stammer, which he learned how to conquer via the many speeches he gave to the Fabian society. In his theater-making, he craved control and authority. Mrs. "Stella" Patrick Campbell first played Eliza, and Shaw was notoriously bossy with every aspect of her performance. One can't help but wonder, in this respect, whether Henry Higgins embodies not only the spirit of his real-life predecessor Henry Sweet, but also the spirit of Shaw himself. Shaw had an affair with Mrs. Campbell, although speculation has not concluded as to whether this was physical or strictly emotional. But, as with Henry and Eliza, the relationship was impeded not so much by *her* limitations as by *his*. This is the irony of *Pygmalion*—Eliza can change, she does change: but Henry, devoted to himself and his own structured way of life, may be the transformer and not the transformed, the sculptor but not the sculpted. Will he see any need to be anything other than his own prideful self?

Pride indeed plays an important part in this play. Shaw, as a great supporter of women's rights, suggests that in his patriarchal society men find change less possible than women. He compares Higgins' privileged self-satisfaction with the pride of the street as manifested by Eliza's father, Alfie Doolittle.

I'm one of the undeserving poor: that's what I am. Think of what that means to a man. It means that he's up agen middle class morality all the time. If there's anything going, and I put in for a bit of it, it's always the same story: "You're undeserving; so you can't have it."


And yet when offered the opportunity to change his accent within three months, with a jokey guarantee that he'd be eligible to run for Parliament, Doolittle replies:

Not me, Governor, thank you kindly. I've heard all the preachers and all the prime ministers—for I'm a thinking man and game for politics or religion or social reform same as all the other amusements—and I tell you it's a dog's life any way you look at it. Undeserving poverty is my line.

In the end, this is where father meets daughter. Both face the question: what happens to your inside when you change on the outside? Perhaps you renounce the legacy of who you are. Will Eliza take the leap that her father refuses? You'll have to see.

Thank you to Hannah Langley and Ciara Crowley for sharing their thoughts on *Pygmalion*, and to Lynne Soffer, whose speech lineage goes directly back to Henry Sweet.

SHAW, AS A GREAT SUPPORTER OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS, SUGGESTS THAT IN HIS PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY MEN FIND CHANGE LESS POSSIBLE THAN WOMEN.



FROM MANSPLAINING TO LEANING IN: SHAW'S *feminism* TODAY

BY KAYA OAKES

IN 2008, San Francisco-based writer Rebecca Solnit wrote an essay entitled “Men Explain Things to Me.” In the essay, Solnit describes an incident at a party. A man was holding forth to her and a friend about a dazzling new work of historical nonfiction, but he refused to believe that the person who’d written it was standing right in front of him. He was pontificating to Solnit about her own book. This kind of over-confident, reflexive propensity, Solnit writes, “[is] the presumption that makes it hard, at times, for any woman in any field; that keeps women from speaking up and from being heard when they dare; that crushes young women into silence by indicating... that this is not their world.”



HIGGINS HAS A VAST UNDERSTANDING OF PHONETICS, BUT WHEN HE ENCOUNTERS ELIZA DOOLITTLE, HE INSISTS ON EXPLAINING TO HER THINGS SHE ALREADY KNOWS. ELIZA IS CLEAR THAT HER SPEECH IMPACTS HER SOCIAL POSITION, AND THAT'S WHY SHE WANTS TO CHANGE IT.

Within a few years of Solnit's online essay going viral, a new term entered the pop culture lexicon: "mansplaining." In "A Cultural History of Mansplaining," which appeared in *The Atlantic*, Lily Rothman defines mansplaining as "explaining without regard to the fact that the explainee knows more than the explainer," a phenomenon not reserved solely to men, but one perhaps more typically exhibited by them. Solnit subsequently published a book of essays about mansplaining with the same title as her essay, and the concept turned into a meme. Politicians, unsurprisingly, were frequent receptors of the term. During the last election cycle, there was an entire blog devoted to "Mansplaining Paul Ryan," and a column in *GQ* about Mitt Romney called "Mittsplaining."

In *Pygmalion's* Henry Higgins, we have a superb example of a mansplainer. Yes, Higgins has a vast understanding of phonetics, but when he encounters Eliza Doolittle, he insists on explaining to her things she already knows. Eliza is clear that her speech impacts her social position, and that's why she wants to change it. But Higgins never listens to Eliza; he lectures Eliza. Higgins is so preoccupied with phonetics that it is sometimes difficult for him to hear what people are really saying. So, he explains. And explains. And explains. And Shaw merrily allows Higgins to dig himself into a hole.

For a man of his time, Shaw had a very contemporary interest in bringing three-dimensional female characters to the stage. Shaw supported Women's Suffrage, and in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, he engaged the "woman question" of whether or not women should work outside of the home. When *Pygmalion* was staged in 1914, the theater manager Herbert Tree changed the ending and paired Eliza and Higgins romantically (an ending that survived into the popular musical version of *Pygmalion*, *My Fair Lady*; the film ends with Higgins demanding that Eliza fetch his slippers, which she does. That rumbling you just felt was Shaw rolling over in his grave). Shaw saw this pairing as impossible and absurd, arguing in an afterword he wrote for the play "when Eliza emancipates herself, she must not relapse. She must retain her pride and her triumph until the end." After the romantic ending was added, pairing Eliza with the man who tricks and deceives her, Tree wrote to Shaw, "my ending makes you money. You should be grateful." Shaw's reply? "Your ending is damnable. You ought to be shot."

Eliza overcomes Henry Higgins' mansplaining when she finds her voice, but also when she realizes that Higgins is trying to reinvent her on what she believes to be a whim. Eliza discovers that she is free to stand on her own. And like Henry Higgins' mansplaining, Eliza's discovery of her willpower has a contemporary resonance. Facebook's Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg's 2013 book *Lean In* encourages women to stop letting men explain things to them and, instead, to speak for themselves. Sandberg admits "I still have days when I feel like a fraud. And I still sometimes find myself spoken over and discounted while men sitting next to me are not," but she's turned that awareness into a strength. "I know how to take a deep breath and keep my hand up," she writes. "I have learned to sit at the table."

Near the end of the play, tired of Higgins' manipulation, Eliza finally leans in. "If I can't have kindness," she tells Higgins, "I'll have independence." Eliza learns that all along, she was on the same level as Higgins. Yes, he may have helped to transform her, but it is Eliza who overcomes a lifetime of mansplaining. Like many women of her time who paved the way for women's rights, Eliza chooses her own path. Within six years of Shaw's writing *Pygmalion*, The Eligibility of Women act was passed in England, allowing women to serve in Parliament. After decades of struggle and protest by Suffragettes, British women won the right to vote in 1928. Since then, women have run governments, founded businesses, gone into space, triumphed in the arts, been ordained, and have radically shifted our notions of gender. Somewhere, a man is trying to explain to a woman why this is, but, like Eliza, she's too busy making plans for a better world to listen.