

The 'Lady' stripped bare

The beauty of song is missed in a spare and direct staging of this classic musical by Ten Thousand Things.
Graydon Royce, May 10, 2010

Director Lear DeBessonnet writes in her program notes of the exquisite music in "My Fair Lady," and how aptly this is illustrated when Bradley Greenwald fills our hearts with "The Street Where You Live" in Ten Thousand Things' staging. Greenwald's small triumph, though, was the exception in this production of Lerner and Loewe's meditation on Shaw's "Pygmalion."

Ten Thousand Things targets its work at audiences who rarely see theater -- at prisons, chemical-dependency homes, shelters and other nontraditional locales. The company's stripped-down style has a distinct and lean simplicity that more often than not rediscovers the essence of drama.



However, DeBesonnet's vigorously focused staging -- aimed at telling Shaw's story of class and feminism -- banishes most anything that would add beauty, adornment or sensitivity. Unfortunately, this includes the musical treatments -- which are as profoundly valuable as character, dialogue, plot or gesture. Here, they seem shouldered aside as fluff. Some are sung with spare accompaniment by Peter Vitale, an occasional violin from Kimberly Richardson and Greenwald's baritone horn. Never does the music seem essential.

The acting is sound and unmistakable. Steven Hendrickson struts with a taut understanding of Professor Henry Higgins, a mercurial boor whose



self-obsessed genius allows him deeds of cruel indifference. He treats the London underclass as mere amusements for his observation and categorization. Yet, we see the small flame of humanity in his advocacy for education, manners and proper carriage as means of striving for a better station in life.

Kate Eifrig's Eliza Doolittle, who scowls and scams her way through the streets, is smart and ambitious enough to curiously investigate Higgins' offer of remodeling her into a graceful individual.

Brilliant as they are individually, DeBesonnet does not allow much chemistry in their relationship. Shaw never intended an outcome in which Eliza and Higgins would cozy up. Still, he imagined that their battles would create a lifelong bond.

Luverne Seifert knocks about as Alfred P. Doolittle, one of Shaw's wittiest inventions -- a fellow so comfortable with the coarse edges of poverty that he chafes when he acquires unwelcome wealth and its social requirements. Richardson is cast as Colonel Pickering, Higgins' confidant. The cross-gender move has a point, but Richardson never advances Pickering's character beyond a collection of overwrought gestures.

So bravo for making as plain as the rain in Spain the gritty realism of Shaw's story. But if you didn't want it to be a musical, there is a play called "Pygmalion."