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"Shaw's play on class and language finds a new home in another country, context and time, and it's a surprisingly fine fit." —*The Hartford Courant*

Higgins in Harlem



Comedy
by

Lawrence Thelen

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"A fresh and entertaining reinvention of a theatrical masterpiece." —*NBC Connecticut*

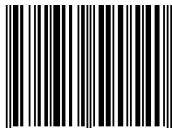
"*Higgins in Harlem* invites that ever-thorny conversation about race, assimilation, cultural appropriation and America."
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Higgins in Harlem

Comedy. By Lawrence Thelen. *Cast: 4m., 5w. Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw is reset in Harlem in 1938—a time when the affluent black society of Sugar Hill found itself at odds with the uneducated blacks of Harlem. Henry Higgins, a professor of phonetics, discovers Eliza Doolittle, a homeless, Harlem girl whose speech is nearly unintelligible, outside the Apollo Theatre. Appalled at her dialect, Higgins declares that with six months of training, she could pass as a university-educated African princess! Higgins goes about transforming Eliza into a high-class woman, and at the end of the six months she makes her debut at the annual Abyssinian Baptist Church Gala, where the minister declares she must be an African princess! Declaring himself the greatest teacher alive, Higgins abandons Eliza. In the end, Eliza must choose between a platonic existence with Higgins or a life on her own. "It's hard to create an adaptation that is both faithful to its original yet inspired and individual enough to allow us to experience the force of the concept anew. Thelen ... pulls it off nicely." (*Connecticut Wit*) *Two int. and one ext. sets. Approximate running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes. Code: HG8.*

Cover: Playhouse on Park, West Hartford, Conn., featuring (l-r)
Bob Johnson and Geri-Nikole Love. *Photo: Rich Wagner.*
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LAWRENCE THELEN

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For Julia and Johanna

Higgins in Harlem was presented at Playhouse on Park in West Hartford, Conn., on March 5, 2014. The cast, in order of appearance, was as follows:

ELIZA DOOLITTLE	Geri-Nikole Love
CLARA HILL	Vanessa Butler
MRS. HILL	Aurelia Clunie
FREDDIE HILL.....	Joshua Ramos
CONRAD PICKERING	Bob Johnson
HENRY HIGGINS.....	Kevyn Morrow
MRS. PEARCE.....	Xenia Gray
ALFRED DOOLITTLE.....	Jeffrey Cousar
MRS. HIGGINS.....	Janelle A. Robinson

Crew:

Executive Director	Tracy Flater
Artistic Directors.....	Sean Harris, Darlene Zoller
Director	Lawrence Thelen
Scenic Design.....	Christopher Hoyt
Costume Design	Valerie M. Webster
Lighting Design	Marcus Abbott
Sound Design	Ryan Kelly
Production Manager.....	Tate R. Burmeister
Stage Manager	Michaela Brown

Higgins in Harlem

CHARACTERS

The show is performed by an all African-American cast

HENRY HIGGINS: A professor of phonetics.

CONRAD PICKERING: His confidant.

ELIZA DOOLITTLE: A lower-class flower peddler.

ALFRED DOOLITTLE: Her father.

FREDDIE HILL: An upper-middle-class young man.

CLARA HILL: His sister.

MRS. HILL: His mother.

MRS. HIGGINS: Henry's mother.

MRS. PEARCE: Henry's housekeeper.

TIME: Summer to winter, 1938.

PLACE: Harlem, New York.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

First and foremost, this play is a love story. If the audience doesn't long for Higgins and Eliza to fall in love by the final curtain, it will be an unsatisfying evening of theatre. What holds the tale together is not that he transforms her, it's that *she* transforms *him*. She makes him love for the very first time—and that absolutely terrifies him because it requires him to relinquish some control over life; something he has likely never done before. That's the story the audience wants to see. That's the story that will hold their attention.

Secondly, though the play is built upon a serious foundation—disharmony among African-Americans of differing economic classes—overall, it is a comedy and should move with a comic pace and flair. The serious moments will find their way without a heavy hand, and the weight of the larger questions being asked will settle on the audience long after they've left the theatre. Don't turn the piece into a drama or a moral diatribe against society. Let the play speak for itself through its comedy. Everything else will take care of itself.

SPECIAL NOTE ON SONGS AND RECORDINGS

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SCENE 2

(HIGGINS' study. It is 11:00 a.m. the next day. Daylight streams in through the windows. It is a cluttered mess of a room on the second floor with only one door, UC, that leads to the rest of the house. At top, HIGGINS is in the midst of a lecture at which PICKERING is the only student.)

HIGGINS. It begins with “A” as in “take” or “A” as in “train.”
That’s the first discernable sound.

PICKERING. As in, “Take the A train.”

HIGGINS. Exactly. And from there it modulates down 72 vowel steps to “uh”—as in “ugly.”

PICKERING. You certainly have a grasp of far more vowel sounds than I do. I only hear 24, which is puny compared to your 72—most of which I can’t tell a bit of difference between.

HIGGINS. Oh, it comes with practice. They may sound the same at first, but over time they become as distinct as Adam from Eve.

(Enter MRS. PEARCE, a stocky woman in her mid-50s)

HIGGINS (*cont'd*). Yes, Mrs. Pearce?

MRS. PEARCE. There's a young lady downstairs to see you, sir.

HIGGINS. A young lady? What does she want?

MRS. PEARCE. She'd like to speak with you—said you'd understand. A plain little waif of a thing.

HIGGINS. Send her away, Mrs. Pearce, I don't have time to chitchat right now.

MRS. PEARCE. I was going to, sir, but then thought better of it—thought you might want to hear her speak. She has a rather distinctive sound about her.

HIGGINS. Distinctive?

MRS. PEARCE. I could hardly understand her. At first I thought she was foreign. But she knew your name, and so I thought you might have asked her to come by.

HIGGINS. I've asked no one to come by. Nevertheless, if she's that unintelligible, she might be worth listening to. Show her in, Mrs. Pearce.

MRS. PEARCE. Yes, sir.

(MRS. PEARCE exits. HIGGINS continues to PICKERING.)

HIGGINS. Don't worry. We'll make a game out of it. We'll get her talking and see how many vowel sounds we can pull out of her.

PICKERING. We're not certain the girl's come here to play games.

HIGGINS. They're not for *her*, they're for *us*.

(MRS. PEARCE re-enters with ELIZA, who wears the same clothes she wore the night before.)

MRS. PEARCE. Here she is, professor. What's your name, girl?

ELIZA. 'Liza Doolittle.

MRS. PEARCE. You're guess is as good as mine.

ELIZA (*looking around*). Man, you got money. Nothin' like this back in Harlem.

HIGGINS. Don't make yourself comfortable. This is the girl from the street last night. I've jotted down as much as I want of her. I certainly don't need any more Harlem cats screeching and squealing in my ears. Go away. Shoo!

ELIZA. But you don't know what I come for yet.

HIGGINS. Whatever it is, I've no interest in it. Now, please leave and never return.

ELIZA. But I come for lessons. You give lessons, don't ya? Ya said so last night. So, I come for some lessons. And I ready to pay for 'em too. The ol' lady last night give me a dollar. Oughta teach me somethin'.

HIGGINS. Yes, it should. It ought to teach you to save your money for a rainy day and not squander it on elocution lessons which, without serious investment, Miss Doolittle, will get you nowhere in life.

MRS. PEARCE. Sorry, professor. Come along.

ELIZA. I ain't goin' nowhere. I gotta right just like everybody else. I come for lessons.

MRS. PEARCE (*looking for guidance*). Professor ... ?

ELIZA. You black, me black. Why you not help me? Maybe I wanna be rich like you some day—buy some fancy things like you got.

HIGGINS. There is more than mere economics that separates the two of us.

ELIZA. Like what?

HIGGINS. Like education.

ELIZA. Hell, I went to school for awhile.

HIGGINS. Really? And what did you learn there?

ELIZA. I learns all kinda stuff. I learn how ta fight. I learn how ta spit. I learn how ta keep my mouth shut so I don't git no whoopin' ...

HIGGINS. But you never learned how to read or write. You never learned the capacity of your potential. You barely learned how to talk.

ELIZA. Oh, I don't learn talkin' in school; I pick that up on the street—

HIGGINS. No doubt.

ELIZA. From you last night. That why I come for lessons.

HIGGINS (*flabbergasted*). What exactly do you expect me to say?

ELIZA. Well, you might axe me ta sit down. I'z been on my feet all mornin'.

HIGGINS. Pickering, should we ask the trash to stay or put her out at the curb where she belongs?

ELIZA (*hurt*). I shouldn't be called garbage when I come willin' to pay like anyone else.

HIGGINS. But you're not anyone else, you're you.

PICKERING (*taking pity on her*). What is it you hope to gain from all this, girl?

ELIZA (*a bit embarrassed to expose her aspirations*). I like ta getta job somewheres; maybe in a flower shop 'stead of working on the street. But I can't git one 'less I can talk ta customers good. Then you said you give lessons. Thought it might help. Maybe pick up a bit a respect, too, yeah?

PICKERING. And if you spend your money on lessons, how do you intend to eat?

ELIZA. Oh, I don't eat very much as it is. I gone long stretches without eatin' 'fore. I can always find 'nough to git by. Gimme lessons today, maybe I eat mo' tomorrow.

PICKERING (*going to HIGGINS*). It's your call. But she does make a good point. Can't understand half of what she says, but her thoughts are sound.

HIGGINS. Are they? She's brought a dollar. That will get her two vowels and diphthong. How is she going to pay for the rest of the alphabet? Selling daisies? A normal student pays me sixteen dollars for sixteen lessons. She probably hasn't seen sixteen dollars her entire life.

ELIZA. Sixteen dollars?! I ain't got no sixteen dollars! Zat what you charge?

HIGGINS. Stop whining; I'm merely making a comparison.

ELIZA. 'Tween what?

HIGGINS. Between you and the rest of the human race.

(ELIZA begins to cry, wiping her eyes with her sleeve.)

ELIZA. That ain't very nice.

HIGGINS. Oh, good God, don't cry!

(After a moment, he hands her a handkerchief.)

ELIZA. What this?

HIGGINS. It's a handkerchief. Use it to wipe your eyes—or any other part of your face that's wet.

ELIZA (*after blowing her nose, she hands the handkerchief back to him*). Thank you, sir.

HIGGINS (*disgusted*). Please keep it. Forever.

(PICKERING gives a hearty laugh.)

PICKERING. Higgins, I find the whole situation utterly intriguing; and I think you do too. Let's make it interesting. Last night you said within six months you'd have her talking like an African princess. I'll take that bet. If you can, I'll pay for the girl's education. All of it.

HIGGINS. It is indeed tempting. It would be quite a feat, knowing how incredibly low and disgusting she is.

PICKERING. Yes, that's it; present her in society as a princess in six month's time, and, if successful, you'll be the greatest teacher alive. No doubt about it.

HIGGINS (*becoming excited*). A little bit of sport, you say? A little bit of a wager at stake. Yes, by God, Pickering, I think you've hit upon something. What is life without a challenge to overcome? (*Looking at ELIZA.*) And she is without a doubt a challenge.

ELIZA. You teach me then?

HIGGINS. Yes, I would be the greatest, wouldn't I? It's not often an opportunity like this—one so seemingly impossible, one with disaster written all over it—comes along. To mold this bedraggled little guttersnipe into a person of value—a princess, no less—it's too tempting to pass up. All right, Pickering, you're on! It'll be good sport indeed—a good bit of folly, if nothing else.

ELIZA. This mean you gonna teach me or not?

HIGGINS. Yes! We'll begin right away! Mrs. Pearce, take her away. Give her a bath first thing. Discard those rags she calls clothes and replace them with something respectable. Set her up in the Crimson Room upstairs. I'll call for her in an hour.

MRS. PEARCE. Oh, professor, no.

HIGGINS. And if she gives you any trouble, slap her. That'll keep her in line.

PICKERING. Now, just a minute, Higgins ...

ELIZA. Listen here, gator-face [*a black man with a long face and big mouth*]; I call the police, I will! You don't own me, no sir. I ain't no slave to you or anybody else.

HIGGINS (*surprised by everyone's reaction*). What seems to be the trouble? Why is everyone in such a state? I'm merely looking out for the girl's best interest.

PICKERING. Are you?

HIGGINS. We all must be protective and nurturing of her if we're to prepare her for a brand new life. Was not that the goal? If I failed to make that clear, it was merely a selfish attempt to keep from losing another handkerchief.

MRS. PEARCE. Professor, you can't simply take her in like a stray dog off the street and lock her away for your own amusement. You know nothing about her. Maybe she has family. Maybe she's even married.

ELIZA. Fat chance that, lady!

HIGGINS. "Fat chance that," Mrs. Pearce. Clearly, she is not. But when I'm done with you, Eliza, slack-jawed men will be standing in line just to hear you coo over them.

ELIZA. What that? Some kinda line? Some sorta come-on? I ain't no hussy. You gotta twisted sense. Pervert!

HIGGINS. Yes! *I'm* the twisted one—and you, my little miss, are living a perfect life: cowering in the gutter with rats, eating out of trash cans and selling weeds you pluck from empty lots. Let her go, Mrs. Pearce. Buy her no clothes; let her live in rags.

ELIZA. But I don't come here for no clothes. I come for lessons.

HIGGINS. You ungrateful termite. This is the thanks I get for attempting to elevate your station? Get out!

MRS. PEARCE. Professor, please! (*To ELIZA.*) Go home to your parents, girl. Ask them to take better care of you.

ELIZA. I ain't got no parents t'speak of; no home ta go home to. Mama die when I a girl and daddy on the street too ... somewhere. He didn't have no money and so sent me 'way when I old 'nough ta look after myself. I got nothin' but nothin'.

(ELIZA sits and once again bursts into tears. With utter disdain, HIGGINS slowly crosses to her and "donates" another handkerchief, which she takes.)

HIGGINS (*smugly*). You see, the girl doesn't belong to anyone. She's of no use to anyone but me. If it makes you feel more comfortable, Mrs. Pearce, you may adopt her. That should keep you amused for years. In the meantime, take her up to the Crimson Room and put her back together again.

PICKERING. Higgins, did it ever occur to you that your approach may be too dictatorial for her?

HIGGINS. Dictatorial? Ridiculous.

MRS. PEARCE. And what's to become of her after I've gotten her cleaned up. Is she to be provided with wages, or is she merely a laboratory rat? And after you're done teaching her, what then? Are you simply going to send her back out into the street? You have to think a little bit ahead, professor.

HIGGINS (*impatiently*). Is it better that I leave her in the gutter? After I'm done with her, she'll no doubt be better off than she is today. I can only improve upon what's here; I certainly can't damage her anymore than she already is.

ELIZA. You a mean man, Mr. Higgins. There ain't a nice bone in you whole damn body. Keep you lessons for someone else. I find my way without chou. (*She starts to leave.*)

HIGGINS (*thinking quickly, he picks up a chocolate bar off the table*). Would you like some chocolate?

ELIZA (*tempted, she comes closer but thinks better of it*). You think I stupid, don't ya? I heard a girls being drugged by sickos like you.

(*HIGGINS takes some chocolate, breaks it in half and puts half in his mouth.*)

HIGGINS. You see? Harmless. It's a covenant—I eat half, and you eat half.

(*ELIZA opens her mouth to respond, and HIGGINS pops the remaining half of chocolate into her mouth before she can say a word. Despite almost choking, ELIZA savors the confection and swallows it.*)

HIGGINS (*cont'd*). You will have boxes of them daily. And taxis to take you around town. Clothes without patches. And jewelry that sparkles.

PICKERING. Now you're simply bribing the poor thing.

HIGGINS (*in ELIZA's ear*). There's a great renaissance taking place in Harlem right now, Eliza, and you're going to be at the center of it.

(*He hands her the candy bar and she rushes to sit down and finish it.*)

MRS. PEARCE. She has to think beyond today, professor, and think of her future.

HIGGINS. Nonsense. There's no point in her thinking of the future when she has no future to think of.

PICKERING. I must interfere, Higgins. If the girl is to become your experiment, she must understand what she's getting herself into.

HIGGINS. Impossible. She can't understand life beyond her day-to-day existence. How do I explain to her why I do what I do? Eliza, you will simply have to put your life in my hands and trust me. That is all.

PICKERING. That's an awfully tall order coming from a complete stranger.

HIGGINS. Whose side are you on? This was your idea in the first place. (*Giving in.*) All right. Fine. (*Turning to ELIZA, with little patience.*) Eliza, you will move in here for the next six months. I will teach you how to speak beautifully, like a cultured woman of New York. If you're good and do as you're told, you'll live the life I live—eating well, traveling by taxicab, sleeping in a real bed. But if you are lazy and slack, you'll have none of the above. You'll be forced to sleep on the kitchen floor and I'll see to it that Mrs. Pearce wakes you each morning by slapping you with a broom.

MRS. PEARCE. Oh, Professor ... !

HIGGINS (*building to a near rage*). At the end of six months, I will present you in society as an African princess direct from the university. If you are found out, you'll be arrested for impersonating royalty and thrown into prison for the rest of your life. (*Tempting.*) But if you pass, if you can manage to absorb my world to the nth degree, I will set you up with fifty dollars and a job off the street in a real-life florist shop. (*More matter-of-factly.*) If you refuse my offer, then resign yourself to a miserable life of poverty with no chance for improvement, knowing you once had the oppor-

tunity to escape the gutter but were too stupid to realize it. *(To MRS. PEARCE.)* There. Does that suit you? *(To PICKERING.)* I can't put it any plainer than that?

(There is a long pause as ELIZA takes it all in. Then, slowly, she crosses to HIGGINS with a calm demeanor and looks him straight in the face.)

ELIZA. You a cruel man. So smug, so cold, so without feelin' I feel sorry for you. *(She turns away for a moment, as if to leave but then turns back with a conviction we have not yet seen up to this point.)* I want a better life. I'll stay.

HIGGINS. Good. Nothing more need be said then. Mrs. Pearce, take her upstairs.

MRS. PEARCE. Come with me, child. I'll look after you.