



Loverly
The
Life & Times
of
My Fair Lady

DOMINIC MCHUGH

LOVERLY



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Loverly: The Life and Times of "My Fair Lady"
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The Life and Times
of *My Fair Lady*

DOMINIC McHUGH

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FOREWORD



When I received the proposal that would evolve into the book you are about to read, I immediately recalled Mozart's apocryphal but no less prescient remark after meeting with the seventeen-year-old Beethoven: "Keep your eyes on him—someday he will give the world something to talk about." The analogy may be imperfect, but Mozart's prophecy remains fundamentally apt to describe the thoroughly accomplished young author of *Loverly: The Life and Times of "My Fair Lady,"* Dominic McHugh, of the University of Sheffield. Indeed, McHugh has produced the first comprehensive and most accurate account of how this great and perennially popular show came to be, and *Loverly* will give us much to talk about, just as the revered subject of this book has for generations added immeasurable wealth to the American musical treasury.

In telling the story of how Alan Jay Lerner (1918–86) and Frederick Loewe (1901–88) created what one opening night critic described as "a new landmark in the genre fathered by Rodgers and Hammerstein," McHugh, in contrast to most of his predecessors, turns to Lerner's 1978 memoir, *The Street Where I Live* "only where no other source exists." Although never less than engaging and indispensable, and although we have grown accustomed to accepting Lerner's recollections at face value, McHugh's approach is a welcome one. By looking more closely at Lerner's street—without, however, drawing comparisons with his stage characters as I am doing here—McHugh's reliance on his documentary exploration reveals that Lerner's memory shares much in common with that of Honoré and Mamita in *Gigi*, who think they "remember it well" but clearly do not. Among many polite but firm refutations in the course of *Loverly*, McHugh carefully points out that contrary to Lerner's claim in his memoir, Mary Martin did appear to be a "natural" for the role of Eliza. Lerner wrote at the time that "everyone else after Mary has to be second choice" and that despite Lerner's assertion Rex Harrison was the first choice for Higgins, in fact Lerner and Loewe approached both Noël Coward and Michael Redgrave before turning to Harrison.

Instead of following Lerner at every turn as most previous writers have done, McHugh offers a meticulous exploration of voluminous contemporary sources, including letters, memos, lyric and libretto drafts, and scores both discarded and replaced. The saga begins with the Theatre Guild (entirely omitted in Lerner's expansive narrative) and its attempt to find a talented

composer and lyricist, starting with Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein in 1951, who had produced the great Guild hits *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel* (and the miss *Allegro*) in the 1940s. About a year after Rodgers and Hammerstein concluded, as Hammerstein later allegedly reported in a conversation with Lerner, that “it can’t be done,” the Guild solicited Frank Loesser, Cole Porter, and Irving Berlin before turning to Lerner for the book and lyrics and Loewe for the music. If I may borrow a song title from the completed show, they “did it.”

McHugh next details the two stages of Lerner and Loewe’s attempt to adapt Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, the abandoned project of 1952 and the successful second effort from 1954 to 1956 that led to the historic opening night March 15, 1956, which was produced by Herman Levin rather than the Theatre Guild. The next chapters look at Shaw’s original play of 1914, the 1938 film adaption directed by Gabriel Pascal that became the principal source for the stage version, Lerner’s outlines prior to script changes during the crucial rehearsal process, the development of the score based on a rich treasure of musical source material, and the finished show’s stage and film legacy to date. In his final chapter McHugh reviews selected commentary on *My Fair Lady* and offers a provocative and well-argued interpretation of “the nature of the ambiguous relationship between Eliza and Higgins.”

We don’t know if Porter, among the composers approached by the Theatre Guild to adapt *Pygmalion* to the musical stage, regretted not taking on this daunting assignment, but Rex Harrison’s recollection that “Porter reserved himself a seat once a week for the entire [six-year] run” suggests the possibility that he had. Thanks to a surviving letter—supplied to me by Dominic, naturally—we now know that when the first season tickets arrived Porter wrote to Lerner expressing his deep gratitude for obtaining his “subscription’ seats.” Although *My Fair Lady* was not customarily regarded as revolutionary in its own time or since, its perfect blend of story, words, and music along with its verve and originality have earned the show an honored place in the history of the musical. After he first saw it Fred Astaire wrote an effusive note to Lerner to share his enthusiasm for what he considered “simply the best show that has ever been produced.” More recently, although he dismissed Lerner’s work for its lack of interest compared with his predecessors Lorenz Hart and Ira Gershwin, Stephen Sondheim found Shaw’s characterization “more layered and surprising,” and even questioned the notion of doing this musical at all. Sondheim, who was just a few years too young to have been asked to adapt *Pygmalion*, recalled in his “attendant comments” in *Finishing the Hat* (2010) that *My Fair Lady* was “the most entertaining musical I’ve ever seen (exclusive of my own, of course).”

Many of us might say the same about *Loverly*, a book that tells us how Lerner and Loewe transformed Shaw's fine play into an enduring musical capable of pleasing such diverse critics as Porter and Sondheim, and of course millions of musical theater aficionados for more than fifty years.

GEOFFREY BLOCK

Series Editor, Broadway Legacies

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



If there's one musical that deserves to be assessed in a series titled *Broadway Legacies*, it's surely *My Fair Lady*. From the moment of its premiere, critics and audiences alike took the show to their hearts and embraced its wit, its sense of drama, its poignancy, its vivid characters, and its tremendous score. It belongs to a select group of musicals that can truly be said to be artistic landmarks in the genre—a category that also includes shows like Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II's *Show Boat*, Richard Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*, Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim's *West Side Story*, and Sondheim's *Company*—as well as enjoying outstanding commercial success (its original Broadway run lasted 2,717 performances).

Yet to date, *My Fair Lady* has been the subject of comparatively little scholarly literature, and its composer and lyricist have been similarly marginalized. The only book dealing with their entire output is Gene Lees's *Inventing Champagne: The Musical Worlds of Lerner and Loewe*, which broke new ground in establishing a text on one of Broadway's most important partnerships. However, its reliance on gossip and hearsay, its absence of any musical illustration or analysis, and the decision not to cite sources for the information contained in the book, render it sometimes unreliable. Keith Garebian's *The Making of My Fair Lady* similarly makes some useful observations and is a fine introduction to the show for general readers, but it is inadequately annotated for scholarly purposes. Gerald Harold Weissman's 1957 dissertation "The Musicalization of Pygmalion into *My Fair Lady*" (master's thesis, Stanford University, 1957) benefited from input from Lerner, who allowed the author to see an early outline of the show, but the critical discussion is largely limited to how Shaw's play was adapted into a musical. The only substantive studies of the show are a single chapter each in Joseph Swain's *The Broadway Musical* (New York, 1990) and Geoffrey Block's *Enchanted Evenings* (Oxford, 1997; rev. ed. 2008), both of which offer original views on the show. In particular, Block's account is the first to make full use of Loewe's autograph manuscripts (housed at the Library of Congress), while Swain provides a personal analysis of the score and libretto. But because both of these are single chapters in larger books on the genre as a whole, there is an understandable limit to the amount of space that Block and Swain can devote to the show.

When I began my research in this field, it was not difficult for me to decide to focus on this undoubted masterpiece (not least because it has always been

my favorite musical). The real question was how to go about it. We are fortunate in recent years to have seen a steady increase in the amount of quality scholarship on the Broadway musical available in print. Alongside Block's seminal *Enchanted Evenings*, the books that have most guided me on my way include Stephen Banfield's *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals*, a magisterial study of the work of perhaps the most influential composer and lyricist of the past forty years; James Leve's volume on Kander and Ebb in the excellent Yale Broadway Masters series; and three books that focus on a single musical each—Tim Carter's *Oklahoma!: The Making of an American Musical*, Jim Lovensheimer's *South Pacific: Paradise Rewritten*, and Bruce D. McClung's *Lady in the Dark: Biography of a Musical*. Although the individuality of each of these authors takes their work in different directions, what they share is a seriousness of purpose that shows itself through the depth of research informing their every word. Naturally, the specific focus of Carter, Lovensheimer, and McClung's wonderful volumes on one show made them especially valuable models for me to use.

One of the trickiest aspects of dealing with a much-loved show like *My Fair Lady* is that almost everyone seems to have a story to tell about it. In contrast to the surprising dearth of scholarly literature on such a widely admired show, there is a huge amount of gossip attached to it. I quickly realized that not all of it can be proven to be true, however, so in chapters 1 and 2 I try to describe the background to the musical's genesis from scratch. The foundation of my revised account lies in several hundred unpublished letters from various archives around the world, most notably the papers of Herman Levin, who produced the show. Chapter 1 describes Lerner and Loewe's early frustrated attempts to adapt Shaw's *Pygmalion* into a musical in 1952, and chapter 2 goes on to show how they eventually managed it in 1954–56. In chapter 3 I take a brief look at the background to Shaw's play and try to clear up some of the confusion about the 1938 film of *Pygmalion*, which contains some changes: for instance, although the play does not show Eliza's lessons with Higgins, the film does. The *Pygmalion* movie is also the source of the reunion of Higgins and Eliza at the final curtain and is not a "happy ending" appended by Lerner to the musical; he just adopted it. I then explore Lerner's draft outlines for the show, which document his developing thoughts as to the show's structure, and go on to look closely at changes made to the script that was used during *My Fair Lady's* rehearsals. What begins to emerge is a shift of focus, even this late in the day, from a show depicting a conventional Broadway romance to a story with a much more ambiguous center. Lerner went out of his way to make the relationship between Eliza Doolittle and Henry Higgins as ambiguous as possible, and a great many of the changes to

the script made during the final weeks before the show opened in previews served this specific purpose. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 point toward the same purpose in the development of the score. I examine in great detail the unusual wealth of music manuscript material available for *My Fair Lady* in the Library of Congress's Frederick Loewe and (in particular) Warner-Chappell Collections, which contain everything from the composer's sketches for unused songs to the dance arranger's scores for the cut ballet. By showing the relationships between different manuscripts, I aim to give a flavor of how much of a collaboration the development of a Broadway musical's score is; it involves arrangers and orchestrators in as much of an authorial role as the composer is, though there is no doubt that Loewe took a keen interest in everything that was being written and orchestrated. Again, various changes of lyric hint at an obscuring of the Higgins-Eliza relationship (though, sadly, Lerner destroyed all his lyric sketches for the show, depriving us of a complete portrait of the lyrics' composition), as do the rejection of numerous conventional love songs well before they reached even the rehearsal process. In chapter 7 I examine the musical's complex legacy on stage, which has been unusual in the number of attempts to re-create the original production. Finally, in chapter 8 I visit some of the secondary literature on the show and in particular examine the nature of the ambiguous relationship between Eliza and Higgins. Just as some of the famous stories about the show are not included in the opening chapters, I do not scrutinize the show from every possible angle here, but rather hope to open up the debate for the future.

If *My Fair Lady*'s primary message is that education can change your life, I certainly owe a debt of gratitude to the numerous people who have taught me everything I know. First, thanks are due to the librarians at the many archives I visited, including Charles Perrier at the New York Public Library; Harry Miller and the staff at the Wisconsin Historical Society; the staff at Yale University Library; the Special Collections Librarian at St John's College, Cambridge; Ned Comstock at USC; and most especially Mark Eden Horowitz, Walter Zvonchenko, and their colleagues at the Music and Theatre Divisions of the Library of Congress. Mark's generosity with his time and help knows no bounds, and I have benefited both from his intimate acquaintance with his collections and his extraordinary knowledge of the musical theatre in general. His friendship has been a guiding force of this book.

Special thanks go to Jerold Couture of the Loewe estate and David Grossberg of the Lerner estate: by giving me permission to copy original musical materials they have allowed me to go into far more depth with this study than would otherwise have been the case, as well as lending support and

enthusiasm along the way. Alan Jay Lerner material is reproduced by permission of the copyright owners, the estate of Alan Jay Lerner and family. Thanks to Alfred Music and Warner-Chappell for allowing me to publish extracts from the score. Quotations from the papers of Herman Levin are reproduced by kind permission of his daughter, Gabrielle Kraft. Passages from Hanya Holm's notes are used with permission of the estate of Hanya Holm, thanks to her granddaughter, Karen M. Trautlein. Quotations from Theresa Helburn's papers are used with thanks to the family of her niece, Margaret Kocher. Material from Sir Cecil Beaton's diary is reproduced by kind permission of Hugo Vickers, Beaton's Literary Executor. Many thanks are also due to Rosaria Sinisi for allowing me to reproduce passages from Oliver Smith's letters.

I'm honored to count Liz Robertson (Lerner's widow) as a close friend and enthusiastic supporter. Helpful hints about the Theatre Guild Collection at Yale came from Tim Carter of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I'm also grateful to the distinguished Broadway orchestrator, composer, and conductor Larry Blank for sharing his years of experience and giving me the benefit of his wisdom and musicianship, not to mention his friendship. The staff of the Music Department at King's College, London, have been supportive throughout my seven-year education there, and thanks are due especially to John Deathridge and Christopher Wintle. Ever since attending his lectures on Mozart and eighteenth-century music performance practice as an undergraduate, I have admired and been inspired by the scholarship of my PhD supervisor, Cliff Eisen. Without question, by coaxing me into following his footsteps down the path of primary research (albeit in the opposite direction across the Atlantic) he enabled me to make my doctoral dissertation, and its adaptation into this book, a much more rigorous study than it would have been, while his encouragement and care at every stage have been invaluable. I'm also grateful to Stephen Banfield and Nigel Simeone, distinguished scholars in this field, for their helpful comments on my dissertation during my doctoral viva. More recently, I am grateful to my new colleagues at the University of Sheffield for their support of my research.

At Oxford University Press, I have to thank Norm Hirschy from the bottom of my heart for being so extraordinarily kind and patient throughout the publication process. In spite of my extreme naivety on the subject of publishing books, Norm has always been quick to answer all my questions (many of them incredibly mundane), thoughtful in his responses, supportive when difficult decisions had to be made, and generally a dream to deal with. No less important to this process has been Geoffrey Block, who is not only the most important scholar in the field of American musicals but also a talented and

inspiring editor for this series. It has been a wonderful experience for me, and I'm touched that Geoffrey and Norm have put so much effort into helping me bring this book to fruition. Thanks, too, are due to the three anonymous reviewers, my copy editor, and the entire production team at Oxford.

Of my friends, particular thanks are due to: Tracy and Darren Bryant; Rex Bunnnett and the late John Muir; Richard C. Norton and Gary Schocker; Elliot J. Cohen; Michael Feinstein; Ethan Mordden; Ian Marshall Fisher; Larry Moore; Terry and Sue Broomfield; Sir Cameron Mackintosh; Sir Tim Rice; my close friends Dorothy and Michael Bradley, Lynne Huang, Marina Romani, and Arlene Tomlinson; Richard Tay, who has been an especially strong supporter and dear friend; and members of my family, including my brother Alistair and his partner Natallia, and my wonderfully supportive Auntie Lin and Uncle John. Special thanks are due to my beloved, long-suffering partner, Lawrence Broomfield, who is the foundation of all my successes. Nevertheless, I owe everything to my parents. By introducing me to *The Sound of Music* and *My Fair Lady* at the age of four, they opened a window into a whole new world, and without their generosity, love, and care I would never have been exposed to such a wealth of culture throughout my life, understood the value of education, or become the person I am today. This book is dedicated to them.

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LOVERLY

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1

FALSE STARTS AND ARTISTIC PROMISE



ESTABLISHING A MYTH: PYGMALION FROM OVID TO SHAW

The Pygmalion myth has its roots in classical Greek legend. Ovid tells us (in Dryden's translation of *Metamorphoses*) that Pygmalion "loathing their lascivious life, / Abhorr'd all womankind, but most a wife: / So single chose to live, and shunn'd to wed, / Well pleas'd to want a consort of his bed."¹ The misogynist Pygmalion is a sculptor, and in spite of scorning women in general his "fear of idleness" induces him to carve a beautiful maiden out of ivory. Pleased with his work, Pygmalion "commends, admires, / Adores; and last, the thing ador'd, desires." This neat progression from feeling pride in the product of his work to finding it an object of desire culminates in Pygmalion's prayer to Venus, begging her to make the statue come to life. The goddess takes pity on Pygmalion and blesses the union of the sculptor and his creation by granting them a son, Paphos. Later versions refer to the sculpture as Galatea, while in his 1767 retelling Goethe calls her Elise, based on variations of the story of Dido (Elissa). The myth was of interest to visual artists (Rodin, Goya), inspired numerous works of literature (from William Morris's "Earthly Paradise" to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*) and was the subject of operas by Rameau, Cherubini, and Donizetti, as well as Kurt Weill's 1943 musical *One Touch of Venus*. Yet its most famous incarnation will probably always be George Bernard Shaw's 1913 play, *Pygmalion*, and the latter's adaptation into the musical *My Fair Lady*.

Though the road from Ovid's *Pygmalion* to Shaw's was a long one, we can already see in the original tale the roots of Henry Higgins's personality. Both Pygmalion and Higgins feel nothing short of contempt for the opposite sex, and yet—or perhaps as a result of this—they both lavish their special talents on creating the ideal image of a woman. At the same time, there is a major divergence

from the original myth in the final scene of Shaw's play. The birth of Paphos after the union of Pygmalion and Galatea is the conclusion of the legend, but the end of the play leaves the audience with an unanswered question: Do Henry Higgins and Eliza Doolittle form a romantic union after the curtain has come down?

When creating their 1956 musical adaptation of *Pygmalion* as *My Fair Lady*, Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe's greatest challenge was to deal with the complex nuances of the Higgins-Eliza relationship. Although the current study is far-reaching in the topics it embraces, the evolution of this aspect of the show is a unifying theme. It is hardly surprising that Shaw's *Pygmalion* should be compared to Ovid's version, or that *My Fair Lady* should be compared to both; since Ovid and his successors bring the lead characters together, it is natural to expect this to be reflected in Shaw's version. Yet the fact that the playwright himself was so vehement in his rejection of the romantic union of Eliza and Higgins—famously writing an epilogue to clarify what he intended by the final scene—means that we are left with a compelling ambiguity in the text that can be played one way or another, according to the preferences of the reader, director, or performer.

From initial planning to the opening night in March 1956, it took Lerner and Loewe almost five years to work out how to maintain this ambiguity while employing the paraphernalia of 1950s musical comedy. To have Higgins and Eliza marry would be too conventional, but to rob their relationship of romance would take away the intrigue and tension that were to prove part of the musical's winning formula. The pages that follow describe the *My Fair Lady* story, starting with the approach of various composers to Shaw with the idea of turning *Pygmalion* into a musical and his persistent refusal, through Lerner and Loewe's two separate attempts to write the show before finally getting it right and bringing it to the stage. Although the precise details of how they molded the musical and dramatic material are discussed in later chapters, it is striking even from the narrative in this chapter and those following that Lerner and Loewe were initially thinking along more conventional lines, right down to pursuing Mary Martin, one of Broadway's most in-demand musical comedy stars after her success in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* (1949), for the role of Eliza Doolittle. But in the end, imagination rather than convention was what made *My Fair Lady* special.

WRITING BROADWAY HISTORY: DOCUMENTARY SOURCES FOR THE GENESIS OF MY FAIR LADY

My Fair Lady was the most successful musical of its day, yet surprisingly little is known about the creation of the piece. Although the story of its genesis has

often been retold, the main source of information for most accounts until now has been Alan Jay Lerner himself. The first third of his memoir, *The Street Where I Live*, is devoted to a highly entertaining report of how he came to write *My Fair Lady* with Frederick Loewe and the journey that team undertook to bring it into being.² However, Lerner's story was written after a significant lapse of time, and the author was prone to romanticize events or completely omit them from his book. Furthermore, little has been said in print about the attempts of other composers to write about the show or of the contribution of the Theatre Guild (producers of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel*) in trying to get the project off the ground.

Rather than regarding Lerner's autobiography as the primary source of information about the genesis of the show, this book depends largely on contemporary documentary sources, acknowledging Lerner's version of events only where no other source exists. While there is no major collection of correspondence belonging to either Lerner or Loewe currently held in any public collection, the Theatre Guild's role in the musical is illustrated by the company's papers at Yale University, which also houses details of Loewe's projected show with Harold Rome during 1953–54. Background on Cecil Beaton was obtained from his diaries and correspondence at St John's College, Cambridge, and similar information about Michael Redgrave was found at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Hanya Holm's personal notes and correspondence at the New York Public Library brought new insights into the choreography for the show, especially the creation of the ballet; and the bulk of the story was constructed from the papers of Herman Levin, the producer of *My Fair Lady*, held by the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research (also home to Moss Hart's papers).

Some of these sources have been written about previously. In particular, Steven Bach's excellent biography of Moss Hart takes advantage of the Levin and Hart papers, and the riveting epilogue of David Mark D'Andre's doctoral dissertation on the Theatre Guild gives by far the most detailed account of Lerner and Loewe's initial attempt to write the show.³ Both of these sources remain problematical, largely due to a reliance on Lerner's book to fill in the gaps, and no attempt has been made to marry up all the currently available documentary evidence on the genesis of *My Fair Lady* until now.

Although it would be a mistake to focus too sharply on Shaw when assessing Lerner and Loewe's musical, an account of the genesis of *My Fair Lady* must begin with his *Pygmalion*, the play on which it is based. The first two chapters of this book deal with two key phases, with the summer of 1954 as the cut-off point between them. The first period concerns the approaches of various parties to Shaw to turn *Pygmalion* into a musical and his persistent

refusal to allow this; his giving the screen rights for his plays to Gabriel Pascal, the Hungarian film maker; Pascal's decision to make *Pygmalion* into a musical in the wake of the success of his 1938 film version of the play; his joining forces with the Theatre Guild to commission various composers to attempt to write the piece; the signing of a contract by Lerner and Loewe to write the musical, with the hope of having Mary Martin as Eliza Doolittle; Lerner and Loewe's backing out of their contract, having failed to find a way to do the piece; and finally, the Theatre Guild's eventual abandonment of the project in early 1953.

The second period, discussed in chapter 2, involves Lerner and Loewe's decision to try again with the show during the early autumn of 1954, following Pascal's death; their hiring of Herman Levin to produce it instead of the Theatre Guild, and the latter's unsuccessful battle to wrest the rights to *Pygmalion* back from them; Lerner and Loewe's drawn-out search for an actor to play Henry Higgins, as well as other cast and production team members; the creation of the score and script in the background of all these practical dealings; and the mounting of the piece on the Broadway stage on March 15, 1956 after a rehearsal period in New York and tryouts in New Haven and Philadelphia. A brief account is also given of Lerner and Loewe's activities between late 1952 and the middle of 1954, when they each attempted to write one or more shows with another collaborator. In a sense, then, this is the story of two *My Fair Ladies*: one aborted version, and one completed version. By clarifying the genesis of the show in this way, we can understand more fully how the piece came into being and also see how certain decisions—such as the shift of focus from writing a vehicle for Mary Martin to creating a vehicle for Rex Harrison—ultimately changed the content of the script, score, and lyrics.

A SHAVIAN MUSICAL: PYGMALION UP TO 1950

While Oscar Straus's 1908 adaptation of George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* (1894) as *Der tapfere Soldat* (*The Chocolate Soldier*) proved that a musical based on a Shaw play had the potential for popular success, it merely confirmed the playwright's opinion that his works should be left well alone. To Theresa Helburn's suggestion in 1939 that he should give the Theatre Guild permission to allow Kurt Weill to turn *The Devil's Disciple* into a musical, Shaw declared that after *The Chocolate Soldier*, "nothing will ever induce me to allow any other play of mine to be degraded into an operetta or set to any music except its own."⁴ Nor had Shaw been impressed in 1921 when Franz Lehár had



*Rehearsal for the Broadway production of My Fair Lady,
January 1956 (Photofest)*

the notion that *Pygmalion* would be an excellent basis for a musical work. In his response, Shaw mentioned the Straus adaptation and stated firmly that “A *Pygmalion* operetta is quite out of the question.”⁵ Yet the playwright was not against the idea for whimsical reasons. As he explained, during the time of *The Chocolate Soldier*’s domination of the stage, nobody wanted to produce *Arms and the Man*. He continued: “*Pygmalion* is my most steady source of income: it saved me from ruin during the war, and still brings in a substantial penny every week. To allow a comic opera to supplant it is out of the question.” Shaw’s eagerness to protect himself financially should be borne in mind when considering his refusals to allow more of his works to be set to music. Anxiety over the potential loss of money was Shaw’s main concern from the very moment he heard of the proposed *Chocolate Soldier* project in 1907.⁶

The Shaw estate would ultimately receive a huge sum of money from *My Fair Lady*, however, and his objections often seemed to be more on artistic than practical grounds. For instance, a musical *Pygmalion* was also the subject of RAF serviceman E. A. Prentice’s request to Shaw in 1948. A stern reply was dispatched, forbidding “any such outrage” and adding that “If *Pygmalion* is not good enough for your friends with its own verbal music, their talent must be altogether extraordinary.” He advised instead that they might put on Mozart’s *Così fan tutte*, or Offenbach’s *La Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein*.⁷ At around the same time, Gertrude Lawrence approached Shaw about a potential musical adaptation of *Pygmalion*, following her success as Eliza Doolittle in the play. Noël Coward was to write the score, and Fanny Holtzmann, the New York attorney for both Lawrence and Coward, communicated with Shaw

on their behalf. Again, the playwright was sharply dismissive, calling it “crazy nonsense” and saying that “Noël could not conceivably interfere in my business.”⁸

These refusals came even after he had entrusted the cinematic adaptation of his plays to Gabriel Pascal, who made his film of *Pygmalion* in 1938, so we may take it that Shaw was firm in disliking the idea of his works being set to music, regardless of who approached him. But it is apparent from these letters that various people thought *Pygmalion* was excellent material for a musical. The initial obstacle was the playwright himself, but on his death in 1950 the possibility arose again, this time with a more realistic hope of it being brought to fruition.

THE THEATRE GUILD AND THE SEARCH FOR A COMPOSER

October 1951–May 1952

The first public mention of a musical adaptation of *Pygmalion* for Broadway came in the *New York Times* on May 20, 1951. In a gossip column dealing with show business, the journalist Lewis Funke wrote about Mary Martin’s immediate plans to take her hit 1949 show *South Pacific* to London. Funke went on to write that Cheryl Crawford, who had previously produced Weill’s *One Touch of Venus* for Martin, “has spoken to her about a musicalized version of *Pygmalion* . . . [I]t is understood that “feelers” have been put out to the Shaw estate on the subject. Miss Crawford, understandably, might even be nurturing the idea that she could interest Rodgers and Hammerstein in the project.”⁹ The story was taken up on October 5, 1951, by another *Times* columnist, Sam Zolotow, who wrote that “In Richard Rodgers’ opinion, the chances are ‘fairly good’ for him and his team-mate, Oscar Hammerstein II, to acquire the rights to *Pygmalion* from the Shaw estate. Their objective, of course, would be to convert the celebrated play into a musical. . . . Mr. Rodgers conceded that Mary Martin was a possibility [for the lead role].” The article continues by explaining that although an identical project had already been considered jointly by Mary Martin and Cheryl Crawford, the latter would no longer be part of the production.¹⁰

It seems that Rodgers and Hammerstein decided not to take the *Pygmalion* idea any farther, but the Theatre Guild started to explore the potential of the material, as can be seen in various letters from the Guild’s papers at Yale University. The Guild was approached by Gabriel Pascal, with a view to co-producing the show. While in Hollywood on the Theatre Guild’s behalf, Armina Marshall on October 24, 1951, wrote to her husband, the Guild’s executive

director Lawrence Langner, to report on a meeting with Pascal. He said that he had the rights to make a musical adaptation of *Pygmalion*, and claimed that he could persuade Frank Loesser, composer and lyricist of *Where's Charley?* and *Guys and Dolls*, to write the score.¹¹ But it seems that Loesser was unwilling or unavailable (perhaps because he was preoccupied with his next show, *The Most Happy Fella*); on January 4, 1952, Langner reported that he had now contacted Cole Porter about writing the show, and said that he would meet him on January 8.¹² Again, though, the Theatre Guild had drawn a blank, because, as Langner suggested, Porter “anticipated difficulty in writing ‘English’ lyrics.” So on February 15 Langner wrote to Pascal with a list of composers they would be happy to employ, in order of priority: Irving Berlin, Frank Loesser, Gian Carlo Menotti, Harold Rome, Frederick Loewe, Harold Arlen, and Arthur Schwartz.¹³ Conveniently, Langner was about to leave for the Bahamas, where their first choice, Irving Berlin, happened to be vacationing. But he, too, evidently declined. Nevertheless, the *New York Times* had reported on January 27 that the Theatre Guild was likely to produce the show, and the public announcement of their interest shows the seriousness with which they were pursuing the project.¹⁴

Langner and Pascal now turned to Lerner and Loewe, who had written four Broadway shows together: *What's Up?* (1943), *The Day Before Spring* (1945), *Brigadoon* (1947), and *Paint Your Wagon* (1951). The timing of the first three of these is ironic, since it reflects that of Rodgers and Hammerstein's first three shows together, and the fates of their respective shows were opposite: *What's Up?* was a flop that opened in the same year as their record-breaking *Oklahoma!*; *The Day Before Spring* fared only slightly better than its predecessor and has fallen into obscurity, unlike the contemporaneous *Carousel*; and Rodgers and Hammerstein's third show, *Allegro*, was their first critical and financial disappointment, opening in the same year as *Brigadoon*, Lerner and Loewe's first great success.

Without *Brigadoon*, who knows what may have become of the Lerner and Loewe partnership. Neither *What's Up?* nor *The Day Before Spring* produced anything approaching a hit song, and indeed much of the score for the former is lost.¹⁵ Lerner and Loewe had also collaborated on *Life of the Party* in 1943, and this piece did not even make it to Broadway, so by 1947 they were badly in need of success. Thankfully *Brigadoon* became one of the longest-running musicals of the decade and gave birth to a number of standards, including “The Heather on the Hill” and “Almost Like Being in Love.” It took four years before the pair teamed up again for *Paint Your Wagon*, and here a troublesome rehearsal and tryout period led to a disappointing show. Even though a number of the songs became well known, including “They Call the Wind

Maria” and “Wandrin’ Star,” the Wild West setting was a poor fit for Loewe, and Lerner failed to resolve numerous problems with the book.

The team’s track record is ample demonstration of the reason they were included on the list of possible collaborators for the *Pygmalion* musical and also why they were not at the top of it. To turn to the old pros Irving Berlin and Cole Porter first was natural, since they had each had relatively recent smash hits with *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946) and *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948), respectively; Berlin was also represented on Broadway with *Call Me Madam* (1950). Since the task consisted of adapting a classic of English literature, one can see in particular why the composer of *Kiss Me, Kate* (partly based on Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*) would be asked: obviously, a lyricist of sharp wit and a composer with a lightness of touch were needed. Although less experienced as a composer-lyricist—his early years were spent writing lyrics to other composers’ music—Frank Loesser was also an easy fit, given the artistic brilliance and box office success of *Guys and Dolls*. On the other hand, the triumph of *Brigadoon* had established Lerner and Loewe’s credentials, and the European pedigree of both composer (who was born in Berlin) and lyricist (who was educated in England) must have seemed an obvious fit for Gabriel Pascal and the Theatre Guild.

Pascal met with Lerner and gained his assurance of the *Brigadoon* team’s interest in the project during the time they were in Hollywood filming that particular show. It is certain, according to David Drew, that Lerner had earlier considered setting the play with Kurt Weill during the 1940s, so the material was not unknown to him.¹⁶ Lerner’s memoir leaves out the Theatre Guild and suggests that Pascal approached him of his own accord, but in her memoir about the Pascal-Shaw relationship, Pascal’s widow, Valerie, writes more credibly that Lawrence Langner proposed Lerner and Loewe as the creative team. After a private screening of the film *Pygmalion*, she adds, they became enthusiastic about it. She then states that Lerner and Loewe “came to our house in California on March 21, 1952. During lunch they seemed very eager to tackle the musical, provided Mary Martin would accept the role of Eliza Doolittle. Without her, they felt the musical would not stand up.”¹⁷ However, a telegram of March 22 in the Theatre Guild papers shows that it was only at this point that Langner wrote to Pascal to arrange the screening of his film for them, also making reference to having had a “very successful meeting with Lerner and Loewe” and having “succeeded in getting them very interested and excited,” so the film was probably not the start of their fascination with the project.¹⁸

In May, serious talks took place about casting for the part of Eliza Doolittle; at this point, Eliza rather than Higgins was thought of as the lead role,