

Tekst 7

THEATER

'My Fair Lady's' Facelift

The '50s musical strikes a chord in Blair's Britain

BY CARLA POWER

1 **I**S "MY FAIR LADY" a period piece? At first glance the Lerner and Loewe musical, now enjoying a sumptuous revival at Britain's National Theatre, seems anachronistic. Based on George Bernard Shaw's 1913 play "Pygmalion", the musical chronicles how, through the power of elocution, Eliza Doolittle is transformed from a common cockney girl to a society lady¹⁾. The play's obsession with niceties like rounded vowels seems antique in a Britain where aristocrats like Guy Ritchie (better known as the man who married Madonna) mask their privileged roots by affecting gangsta slang.

2 Yet Trevor Nunn's marvelous new staging, which opened in London last month, makes the play seem fresh. Earlier Elizas like Julie Andrews and Audrey Hepburn had to disguise their cut-glass accents during the first few scenes, putting on faux cockney during Eliza's "squashed cabbage" phase. But Nunn cast Martine McCutcheon, a British soap-opera and pop star – and a genuine working-class actress – as his Eliza. Orchestrator William David Brohn has trimmed the swooping strings from Frederick Loewe's score; the result is a bolder, funkier sound, even for numbers like Henry Higgins's misogynist rant, "I'm an Ordinary Man". Choreographer Matthew Bourne makes the toffs paw and whinny like horses at



Elocution:
Cockney comes easier to McCutcheon than it did to Andrews



Ascot, and rescues the cockney partying number – "With a Little Bit of Luck" – from cheeky cuteness by rendering it as a raucous garbage-can tap dance.

3 In some ways Britain hasn't changed much since the era depicted by Shaw. In economic terms, the Victorian story of Britain as not one but two nations – one rich, one poor – rings truer than ever. The gap between the incomes of the richest and the poorest has again begun to widen in the last five years. A 1999 study by the London School of Economics found that child poverty has increased dramatically since the 1960s: as many as one in three children live in poverty, compared with one in 10 in 1968.

4 But in so many other ways Britain has been transformed. Status consciousness has replaced class rivalry as society's driving force. Titles

no longer dazzle: stale chronicles of blue bloods are strictly for the blue-rinse set. The tabloid industry thrives on tales of aristocrats in rehab and royals on topless beaches. For the young, people like singer Posh Spice and her husband footballer David Beckham are the new royalty, envied not for their breeding but for their money and celebrity. The Duchess of York was reduced to doing Weight Watchers ads to keep her in the style to which she's grown accustomed.

5 What changed Britain? Compulsory education, immigration and a competitive job market have helped break down class divides. In 1926 the BBC set up a committee to standardize an "educated" English for broadcasters; today the deregulation of the airwaves has brought a host of accents – and languages – to British ears. The demise of heavy industry in favor of a service industry means that working behind a desk instead of at the coalface doesn't necessarily make you middle class. But while the old codes are fraying, the obsession with one's standing sticks: when the BBC added a "Check your class" link to its Web site last month, thousands of people jammed onto the site to do just that.

6 Thanks in large part to the media, a new sort of meritocracy has replaced the aristocracy. For the better part of the last year, the country has been gripped by "Big Brother," the TV show in which ordinary Britons are transformed into celebrities by living together on camera and periodically voting to evict one of their housemates. Last month the corollary show was aired: on "Celebrity Big

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Brother”, a range of B-list TV personalities are confined to a house and humiliatingly evicted just like ordinary folks. In the whirl of the modern British status system, Eliza wouldn’t have had to bother with all those elocution lessons; she’d simply have auditioned for reality TV.

7 “My Fair Lady” is fundamentally a play about

transformation and, as such, is perfectly in tune with the mores of Tony Blair’s Britain. George Bernard Shaw’s faith in the make-over and the fresh start is spookily similar to Blair’s vision of society. Blair may be a Third Way politician, and Shaw may have been a socialist, but they share a belief that the hardworking individual can triumph over

hidebound social systems. At the end of both Shaw’s play and the musical, there is a sense that Henry Higgins has created a misfit: a woman who can’t go back to her working-class roots, but is too independent to don the society-lady straitjacket. Pity she wasn’t born in Blair’s Britain: she would have fit right in.

Newsweek

Eliza Doolittle was transformed to a society lady by Henry Higgins, Professor of Phonetics

■ Tekst 6 Bush's legs rile Russia

- “Bush's legs rile Russia” (kop tekst 6)
2p **21** Welke twee redenen noemt de tekst hiervoor?

■ Tekst 7 ‘My Fair Lady’s’ Facelift

- “IS ‘MY FAIR LADY’ a period piece?” (first sentence)
- 1p **22** ■ Which of the following does Carla Power put forward in connection with this question?
A No one seems to be interested anymore in the way aristocrats behave.
B Public attention nowadays seems to go to popstars instead of the aristocracy.
C The traditional upper-class accent no longer seems to be a relevant asset.
- 2p **23** Geef van elk van de volgende beweringen aan of deze wel of niet overeenkomt met de inhoud van alinea 2.
1 Both the music and the choreography have been given a makeover.
2 The star actress's background makes her eminently suitable for the part of Eliza.
3 In spite of a successful modern staging, the musical's theme remains outdated.
4 By reducing the importance of other characters, Nunn directs all attention back to Eliza.
Noteer het nummer van elke bewering, gevolgd door “wel” of “niet”.
- 1p **24** Geef de hoofdgedachte van alinea 3 in je eigen woorden weer.
- 1p **25** ■ What is the last sentence of paragraph 4 (“The Duchess of York ... accustomed.”) meant to exemplify?
A The fact that even royalty is attracted to commercial adventures.
B The fact that fame and material prosperity are considered signs of distinction.
C The hardships that social celebrities have to cope with nowadays.
D The sort of royalty news that old ladies are particularly interested in.
- 1p **26** ■ What is the point made in paragraph 5?
A In Britain language and accent are still indications of class.
B Social and economic change have turned Britain into a prosperous middle class society.
C Though British class distinctions have blurred, people's class consciousness still seems strong.
- 1p **27** ■ Which of the following could be added after “reality TV” (end of paragraph 6)?
A to gain social prestige
B to get publicity for *My Fair Lady*
C to learn to speak standard English
- The subheading reads “The '50s musical strikes a chord in Blair's Britain”.
- 1p **28** ■ What is meant?
The musical *My Fair Lady*
A forces Britain to admit that the class system has not really changed.
B has been superbly adapted to modern circumstances.
C is relevant to the present state of Britain.
D reminds Britain of the rich tradition that has been lost over time.