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Pygmalion.

Mann, Klaus

Rom, 1945-11-00

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PYGMALION

Shaw's master comedy, Pygmalion, is so cleverly constructed and so rich in simple human drama that most audiences are inclined to ignore its "intensely and deliberately didactic" character. "I wish to boast," the author says in his Preface, "that Pygmalion has been an extremely successful play all over Europe and North America as well as at home. It is so intensely and deliberately didactic, and its subject is esteemed so dry, that I delight in throwing it at the heads of the wiseacres who repeat the parrot cry that art should never be didactic. It goes to prove my contention that art should never be anything else."

The "dry subject" handled so amusingly by the Irish wit is the social significance of phonetics. Shaw wrote Pygmalion in order to demonstrate the vital bearing of linguistics on the social question -- and also in order to prove that decent speech and correct pronunciation can be scientifically taught and systematically acquired. Of course, in developing and dramatizing his thesis the author could not but touch various other problems of a different nature -- for example, the "Pygmalion complex:" that is to say, the psychological and emotional conflict ~~and~~ between the creator (Pygmalion, the sculptor: in this case, Professor Higgins, Professor of Phonetics) and his created work (in this case, Liza, the flower-girl). But the main theme of the play, according to Shaw's expressly stated intention, remains the problem of speech as a social criterion. The case of Liza Doolittle is not presented as an exceptional or farcical incident. On the contrary, the author emphasizes, "for the encouragement

of people troubled with accents that cut them off from all high employment," that "the change wrought by Professor Higgins in the flower-girl is neither impossible nor uncommon. But the thing has to be done scientifically..."

The world-wide success of this "scientific" extravaganza is indeed remarkable -- not only because of the play's didactic impact and purpose. There is another complicating factor -- implicit in the very theme and leading thought of the comedy. Shaw's Eliza of the first and second acts -- the flower-girl who has not yet been linguistically purified by the phonetic magician -- speaks the kind of gibberish known as "cockney;" the bewildering, yet expressive idiom of the London Eastend. In the book edition of his play, Shaw tries at first to communicate the eccentricities of Liza's speech through the medium of the printed word; but after a few lines he observes with resignation: "Here, with apologies, this desperate attempt to represent her dialect without a phonetic alphabet ~~is~~ must be abandoned as unintelligible outside London."

How can any actress "outside London" -- or outside England -- represent Liza's peculiar lingo?

The answer is simple enough -- and, incidentally, was given by Author Shaw himself whenever Liza-playing actresses approached him with this particular question. Naturally, any actress impersonating this ambitious daughter of London's slums has to use her own native dialect -- if possible, the dialect of her own country's capital. For there is a certain principal difference between provincial, regional dialects, on the one hand, and metropolitan slangs, on the other. Clearly, Liza Doolittle is not a peasant girl but comes from

the social underworld of a big city.

A flower-girl speaking some kind of artificial dialect -- a deliberate, wanton distortion of her native tongue -- would not be the bright and sympathetic, if uneducated, girl as which Shaw has depicted the Eliza of the opening scenes: she would be a freak or a half-wit. With a Liza speaking a made-up fancy slang, the didactic comedy loses its sense and savour.

I have seen Pygmalion ⁿ in many different countries and translations. To me, the story of Eliza Doolittle remained always enjoyable and instructive -- whether Paule Wessely played the role in Viennese dialect, or Tilla Durieux in Berlin slang, or Edwige Feuillère in Paris argot, or Lilly Bouwmeester with a hearty Amsterdam accent.

Now I am looking forward to making the acquaintance of a new Liza Doolittle -- or rather, to meeting an old friend in a new national disguise. Anna Magnani's savoury Roman idiom will be most suitable and effective, in this particular context. This truly popular actress who commands also all the shades of refinement and sophistication should be able, if anyone, to make Liza's career and conflict plausible and moving.

Of course, there are difficulties. To pick just one of the minor problems: There is the scene in Act III when Miss Doolittle -- still in the process of being phonetically trained by her "Pygmalion" -- goes out for the first time and attends an intimate reception in Mrs. Higgins' drawing room. When she is ready to leave, an admirer asks her: "Are you walking through the Park, Miss Doolittle? If so..." Whereupon she answers, haughtily: "Walk! Not bloody likely. I am

going in a taxi."

After the word, "bloody," Shaw notes, "Sensation." One of the gentlemen in the room "gasps and sits down," while one of the ladies "suffers from shock." For some mysterious reason the word "bloody" was considered unspeakably rude, almost obscene, in Victorian England. What Roman expression will Anna Magnani choose to interpret Liza's scandalizing faux-pas with adequate vigour?

Never mind. She will find the right word.

KLAUS MANN,

Rome, November 1945