

## Review:

### Everything is suddenly 'lovely' in fair Aurora

## THEATER REVIEW: "My Fair Lady" at the Paramount Theatre in Aurora ★★★½

September 19, 2011|Chris Jones | Theater critic

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If you are the romantic type — someone who likes to see grand, old vaudeville houses packed to the rafters and chaser lights cutting through the gloom of a struggling Midwestern downtown — then Friday night in Aurora was an evening to remember. As I headed out of town, a seemingly perplexed Aurora police officer asked me what had suddenly filled the sidewalks with people.

"A show," I said, in my best can't-believe-you-didn't-know tone, "My Fair Lady."

After becoming disheartened with cheap bus-and-truck tours, with their just-out-of-school casts and computerized orchestras, the board and staff of the Paramount Theatre in Aurora decided to take the

bold move of staging their own Equity musical productions in the historic, gorgeous 1800-seat venue on the banks of the Fox River, just across from the Hollywood Casino. The Paramount placed a very big bet on the Chicago talent pool — there are 31 mostly union actors in the cast here and a head-turning, ear-thrilling, live orchestra of 23 union musicians playing the glorious numbers of Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe.

I've no idea if what happened Friday night can be sustained, and some industry insiders are marveling at the economics that makes such a huge cast and orchestra possible, but this was, to say the least, a very auspicious debut for the Paramount. It easily eclipsed some of the non-Equity tours that have showed up recently in downtown Chicago, never mind Aurora. For those who live in this area and want to take their families to a fully professional and beautifully crafted rendition of a grand Broadway musical, it is hard to imagine that any reasonable expectations won't be far exceeded.

For a venue with no recent history of self-production and an infrastructure that was basically created from scratch, director Jim Corti's "My Fair Lady" is quite remarkable. The setting from Jim Dardenne is expansive and quite lovely and the transitions are elegant. The sound — often a problem in venues like this — was near flawless on opening night. And Corti, who keeps pushing his production out toward the audience, perching Eliza on whatever wheelbarrow or other projection he can, has found a pair of terrific principals in Andrea Prestinaria and Nathan M. Hosner.

Prestinaria acts and sings like she's been waiting for this chance for years — which is no doubt precisely the case. Her Eliza has a number of notable assets. In the early Covent Garden scenes, she has that crucial feral quality that actually gives the famous flower girl somewhere to go. And later on, as Hosner's appropriately smug and suitably irritating 'enry 'iggins treats her like a human lab rat, you sense her vulnerability. But aside from a big set of pipes (which Prestinaria surely has), the one thing that Eliza needs above all else is passion. And that, frankly, is what lifts this performance and, by extension, the entire show.

Long and talky as musicals go, "My Fair Lady" never works unless Eliza's desire to *be* someone motivates every darn scene. So it goes here. The capable likes of John Reeger (who plays the solid Colonel Pickering), James Lee Glatz (an amusingly needy Freddy Eynsford-Hill) and Mary Ernster (Mrs. Higgins) just have to cue her up and watch her fly. And so she does. All the way to the back of the house.

I've seen Higgins breakdowns and self-realizations that go deeper than the one Hosner provides, but it's still a very effective performance. You see why Eliza goes for him and you see why that's mostly a shame. At the end, Corti has an intriguing take that doesn't bring the two necessarily closer, but suggests that Higgins has perhaps just found a different role. You both fear and hope for Eliza. As George Bernard Shaw would have wished.

Similarly, the famous specialty numbers are appealingly and cleverly rendered. In Andrew J. Lupp, Corti

has a legitimate dancer for his Alfred P. Doolittle. You'll have seen more broadly comic versions, but rarely one that lifted up his feet on "Get Me to the Church On Time" with quite such elegant desperation; there's a sadness to Lupp's Doolittle, which adds texture.

The best moment of the night actually came during that very number: it was the huge wall of sound that emerged (Shawn Stengel is the musical director) when this ensemble starting harmonizing on "There's just a few more hours," Doolittle musical lament at the impending loss of his freedom.

Well, that moment and the overture, when the lights in this beautiful theater went down and all those musicians struck up one of the great Broadway overtures of all time. They ushered in a thrilling new era in Aurora.

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**When:** Through Oct. 2

**Where:** Paramount Theatre, 23 E. Galena Blvd., Aurora

**Running time:** 3 hours

**Tickets:** \$34.90-\$46.90 at 630-896-666 or [paramountaurora.com](http://paramountaurora.com)