

## MY FAIR LADY

Book and Lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner

Music by Frederick Loewe

Virginia Stage Company

Sept. 16-Oct. 5, 2008

For tickets call: (757) 627-1234

Hello, I'm Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large.

We've now seen two productions by Amanda Dehnert at Virginia Stage Company. Last season she did the disappointing MAN OF LA MANCHA and this year we have the Lerner and Loewe classic, often called "the perfect musical", MY FAIR LADY. With superior music and George Bernard Shaw's play at its core, this effort is more rewarding by a long shot. A Dehnert production makes it very clear that she has control of every note, word and gesture. In the program her name, printed in very bold type, is the eye-catcher of the title page. She has top billing and is the star of this production.

She has come up with a hodgepodge rendition of MY FAIR LADY..It ends up being a big crowd pleaser. It's a like a pot luck supper. Some moments have gourmet brilliance while others are lacking in zest. On the basis of these two productions, one feels that Dehnert doesn't really like musicals. She tends to turn them into plays with music. She seems to cast actors who can sing adequately instead of real singers who can act. If you like the unique energy and breathtaking, spine tingling joy of a big hit Broadway musical (that feeling you get when you hear the overture to GYPSY, for instance) you'll be disappointed in her approach. She chooses to devote a lot of time to minor details, going beat to beat, moment to moment. Her all-over-the- place staging dilutes the bold, energetic, but truthful, life necessary in musical theatre.

Lerner and Loewe did the plural piano orchestration used in this version to enable small companies to do their show. Expertly performed by Bill Cocoran and David J. Hahn, it works very well indeed. So does David Jenkins sprawling set that is occupied by the entire company of almost two dozen performers most of the time. They either become part of the action or watch passively. On occasion they, and their various rather drab costumes clutter and distract. Most of the time, though, there is an effective bare boned theatricality about the staging that is enriched by Amy Appleyard's lighting. There is a pervasive darkness about everything, a sort of heavy air laden with coal smoke feeling.

Emerging from this dark hole is the splendid performance of the effervescent Jessie Austrian as Eliza Doolittle. She gets off to a shaky start as the Cockney flower girl but quickly gains control and progresses and blossoms into a lady that is lovely to behold. Timothy Crowe is a by the book arrogant Henry Higgins as is George McDaniel as Colonel Pickering. I don't think the cavernous set helps them. It negates the intimacy needed for their scenes. Mark Peckham comes up with a rousing but not visceral Alfred Doolittle. Not satisfied with Shaw's fatuous Freddy Eynsford-Hill as written, Dehnert has the talented Jamie La Verdiere play him as an insane clown who panders to the audience for laughs. There is an over all excellent ensemble who sing and dance with aplomb. Kelli Wicke Davis as choreographer puts them through some lively antics and manages to navigate around those two Steinways smack dab in the middle of the stage. I found the Ascot Gavotte staging and parts of "Get Me to the Church on Time" not right for the over all style that Dehnert establishes or for the show..

The potency of George Bernard Shaw's linguistic agility in PYGMALION augmented by Lerner and Loewe's wonderfully literate lyrics, book and score are sources of eternal pleasure. There is much to admire in this revised edition, even though it is a bit like the stock market. It has lots of highs but also a few lows.

This is Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large and I'll see you at the next opening.