EXPLORING

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW'S

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IRT MAINSTAGE

AN IRT STUDY GUIDE

Pygmalion is a mythological character from Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* a king who dabbled in sculpture. He made a statue of his ideal woman, Galatea, which was so beautiful that he prayed to the gods to give it life. His wish was granted. George Bernard Shaw in his famous play gives a modern interpretation of this theme.

Pygmalion takes place in London in 1912, a time when the rigid class structure of Victorian society, based on the age-old aristocracy of birth, is being challenged by the growing influence of wealthy merchants and industrialists, creating a new aristocracy of money. It is the first time in British history when a person can, through hard work and success, transcend the limitations of his birth class and rise to the top of society.

Money alone, however, is not enough to rise to the top. Those who were born poor and have acquired money must also acquire the manners and speech of the upper classes before they will be accepted. Professor Henry Higgins makes a handsome living by teaching the proper use of the English language to these *nouveau riche.* Higgins's teaching income supports his research in human phonetics, and he spends most evenings prowling the streets of London studying the many different dialects of its different neighborhoods.

On one such excursion, the subject of Higgins's study, a Cockney flower seller named Eliza Doolittle, mistakes him for a police detective and protests her innocence to the passers-by. Among them is Colonel Pickering, an expert in Indian dialects who has traveled to London to meet Higgins. Higgins invites Pickering to lodge with him, and as the two gentlemen depart, Higgins tosses a handful of coins into Eliza's basket. Pocket change to Higgins, the money represents a major windfall to the impoverished flower girl, and she devises a plan.

The next day, Eliza presents herself to Higgins as a new student; she knows that in order to get off the street and into a decent job in a flower shop, she must speak better English. In reality, she cannot afford Higgins's stiff fees; but Higgins is intrigued by the idea of transforming this young woman from a "draggletailed guttersnipe" to "a duchess" simply by improving her speech. Pickering wagers Higgins that he cannot effect the change by the ambassador's garden party six months hence, and Eliza's education begins.

We soon meet Eliza's father, a genial layabout who "touches" Higgins for money, and Higgins's mother, who hosts Eliza's first (hilarious!) foray into polite society. Ultimately, Eliza is a great success at the garden party; but she has learned much more than just the proper way to speak. The question of Eliza's fate is examined as we ponder not only the consequences of a society in which quality education is not available to all citizens, but also the dangers of a rigid class system which divides people from each other for arbitrary reasons. ★

Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, the first London Henry Higgins, as painted by Charles Buchel.

Mrs. Patrick Campbell created the role of Eliza Doolittle on the London stage in 1914.

George Bernard Shaw

George Bernard Shaw was born July 26, 1856, in Dublin, Ireland. The Shaws were an upper-middle class family; their relatives included agriculturists, lawyers, and sportsmen living pleasantly and in comparatively easy circumstances. Bernard's father, however, George Carr Shaw, was unsuccessful both as a breadwinner and a parent. He was an alcoholic throughout most of his adult life, a circumstance which influenced his son to be a lifetime teetotaler. The chief inheritance of Bernard Shaw from his unfortunate father was a sense of humor with a strong tinge of irony.

There was another strong male influence in young Bernard's life. George Vandeleur Lee was a singing teacher and leader of an amateur music society in Dublin. Sometime around Bernard's second year, his mother, Betsy, began vocal studies with Lee, who had developed a unique technique. She became Lee's chief assistant and, eventually, prima donna of Lee's now-semi-professional company. Young Bernard grew up in an atmosphere rich with music, which came to be one of his passions.

When Bernard was nine years old, Lee set up a joint household for himself and the Shaw family. This arrangement enabled both family and bachelor to live in finer circumstances than they might have alone; additionally, Betsy, who had lost interest in her husband, could live under the same roof as Lee with perfect respectability. Whether Betsy and Lee ever actually had an affair is unknown; nonetheless, in his later years Shaw would go to great pains to prove that his birth was legitimate.

(It is interesting to look at *Pygmalion* in light of this unusual family situation. Higgins, like Lee, is the creator of an unusual technique which he teaches to a female pupil, thus largely transforming her life. Scholars have speculated that Shaw's insistence that Eliza does not marry Higgins in the end may be based on Shaw's own belief (hope?) that his mother never strayed from her marriage vows.)

At the age of 15, after several brief and haphazard attempts at formal schooling, Bernard became a junior clerk in a real-estate office. He filled the post so well that he was promoted to the position of cashier after just a year. Though he remained in the office four and a half years, he for the most part hated it, valuing only the opportunity it gave him to talk with the university men about opera and other cultural topics.

Shaw abandoned Dublin for London in 1876. There he continued his process of self-education in the reading room of the British Museum, in hopes of becoming an author.

In 1882, Shaw heard by chance the American orator, economist, and reformer Henry George speak on the Land Question: George proposed a single tax based on the value of land. With such a tax, society could eliminate poverty, which was the result, George believed, of too many taxes. This experience changed Shaw's life. Though he did not join the 'Single Taxers,' he was interested for the first time in economic questions.

In 1884, Shaw joined a small group of radical thinkers in organizing a Socialist group known as the Fabian Society. The name came from a Roman statesman, Quintus Fabius Maximus, known as the "great delayer" because of his reluctance to fight in the war against Carthage. The Fabians believed in the equal distribution of wealth and in equality of income from birth to death, a revolution which they intended to bring about by gradual change through the use of ballots, not bullets. Shaw's writing and speaking for the group were an important part of his literary 'apprenticeship'; he learned to write with clarity and grace.

From 1879 to 1883, Shaw attempted to establish himself as a novelist. His first novel was entitled (as he later said, "with merciless fitness") *Immaturity.* After four more novels, each unsuccessful, he ended his efforts as a novelist.

George Bernard Shaw, photographed during the dress rehearsal of Pygmalion *in 1914.*

For almost a decade Shaw devoted himself to reviewing art, music, and drama. In 1892, he attempted to launch a career as a playwright with the manuscript *Widower's Houses.* Like Shaw's novels, however, the play was a failure. His second dramatic effort, *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, was highly controversial. Focusing on a "woman who owns and manages brothels in every big city in Europe and is proud of it," the play was considered offensive and revolting.

These failures were trying to Shaw, but did not bring him to despair. He never lost faith in himself or his mission. (As he said of his failed novels, "Fifty or sixty refusals without a single acceptance forced me into a fierce self-sufficiency.") Eventually, however, he did resolve to stop writing "unpleasant" plays that would surely be rejected. His next plays, *Arms and the Man* and *Candida*, were his first successes.

George Bernard Shaw married Charlotte Townshend, a young Irish woman of great wealth, on June 1, 1898. The bridegroom was forty-two; the bride, forty-one. From all accounts, it was a happy marriage, although Shaw was rumored to have had a few romances, notably with the star of *Pygmalion*, Mrs. Patrick Campbell. Shortly after his wedding, Shaw completed *Caesar and Cleopatra*—ironically, a play whose theme is the denial of romantic love. This play was followed by a steady stream of dramatic successes—including *Man and Superman* (1903) and *Major Barbara* (1905).

Despite a certain degree of critical acclaim, and widespread acceptance on the European continent, in his home of England Shaw was still considered a playwright for specialized tastes. This assessment changed upon the London premiere of *Pygmalion* in 1914. The play was hugely successful and established Shaw as a comic master. To this day it is still Shaw's most popular work. Lerner and Loewe's *My Fair Lady*, the 1957 musical based upon the play, has even further popularized the story; but the romantic implications of its ending have also further obscured Shaw's intentions.

Shaw originally wrote a deliberately ambiguous ending for the play, suggesting that Eliza and Higgins go their separate ways. Audiences and actors through the years, however, have disagreed. Even in the first British production, which Shaw himself directed, the actors managed on opening night to suggest a romantic ending. Despite the author's protests, several more explicit rewrites, and an extensive epilogue in which Shaw insists Eliza marries Freddie, the debate continues. (The IRT production uses Shaw's original 1914 ending rather than the more commonly used 1939 revision).

In the year 1920, Shaw wrote what many consider to be his masterpiece, *Heartbreak House.* In 1924 he launched the play that was to be the climax of his career, *Saint Joan.* Though he lived on for more than a quarter of a century, nothing Shaw wrote afterwards was of comparable importance. Joan is one of Shaw's great characters. "She is," as one critic declared, "the last and most radiant in the long gallery of women that testify to his deep reverence for the high function of the feminine element in life."

One year later, Shaw received the Nobel Prize for Literature. Though many honors had been offered to him, this was the first he accepted. He accepted the prize money in order to establish a foundation to encourage understanding and interchange of literature and art between Sweden and the British Isles. One accomplishment of this was the translation of some of Strindberg's plays for the first time into English.

In the twenty-five years remaining to him, Shaw wrote a dozen plays, although none matched his work prior to 1925. He also wrote nonfiction books and a religious tale and lectured on a wide range of public issues.

Shaw died on November 2, 1950, at the age of ninety-four. Following the announcement of his death, all the lights of Broadway were dimmed for five minutes. Shaw left the largest literary estate in English history. He continues to live as an author and to survive on the stages and screens of two continents almost half a century after his death. ★

Respect

George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* is not only a story about a young girl's transformation and social status shift, but it is also a story about human relations. Eliza Doolittle is searching for a new way to live her life. When she discovers there is a possibility to do this by improving her language skills she seizes the opportunity. She goes to Higgins simply for language lessons, but instead finds herself involved in an experiment which involves a number of elements she doesn't fully understand. At first this move may seem strange—that she undertakes this journey without fully comprehending the consequences involved—but in fact isn't this situation familiar? Haven't we all at one time or another been so intrigued about an outcome that we forget to consider the steps it takes to reach our goal?

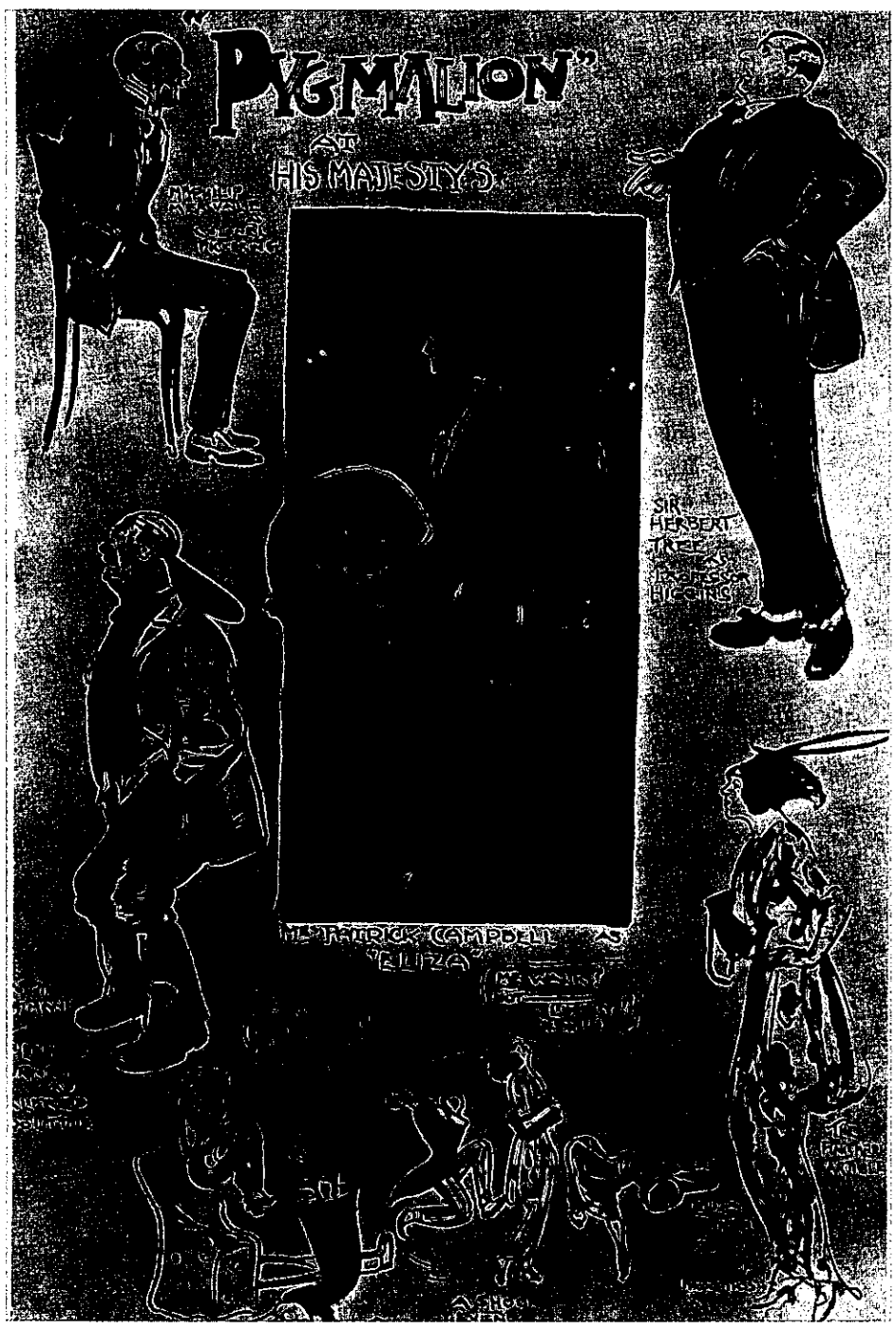
In America, most of us are striving to obtain the American Dream. Key elements of this dream seem to be personal improvement and financial independence. We improve ourselves through education (much as Eliza does through studying "language skills." Education allows us an opportunity to gain financial independence; through that independence we gain power, thus reaching the American dream. Even though this formula doesn't always work; it is something we as a culture believe.

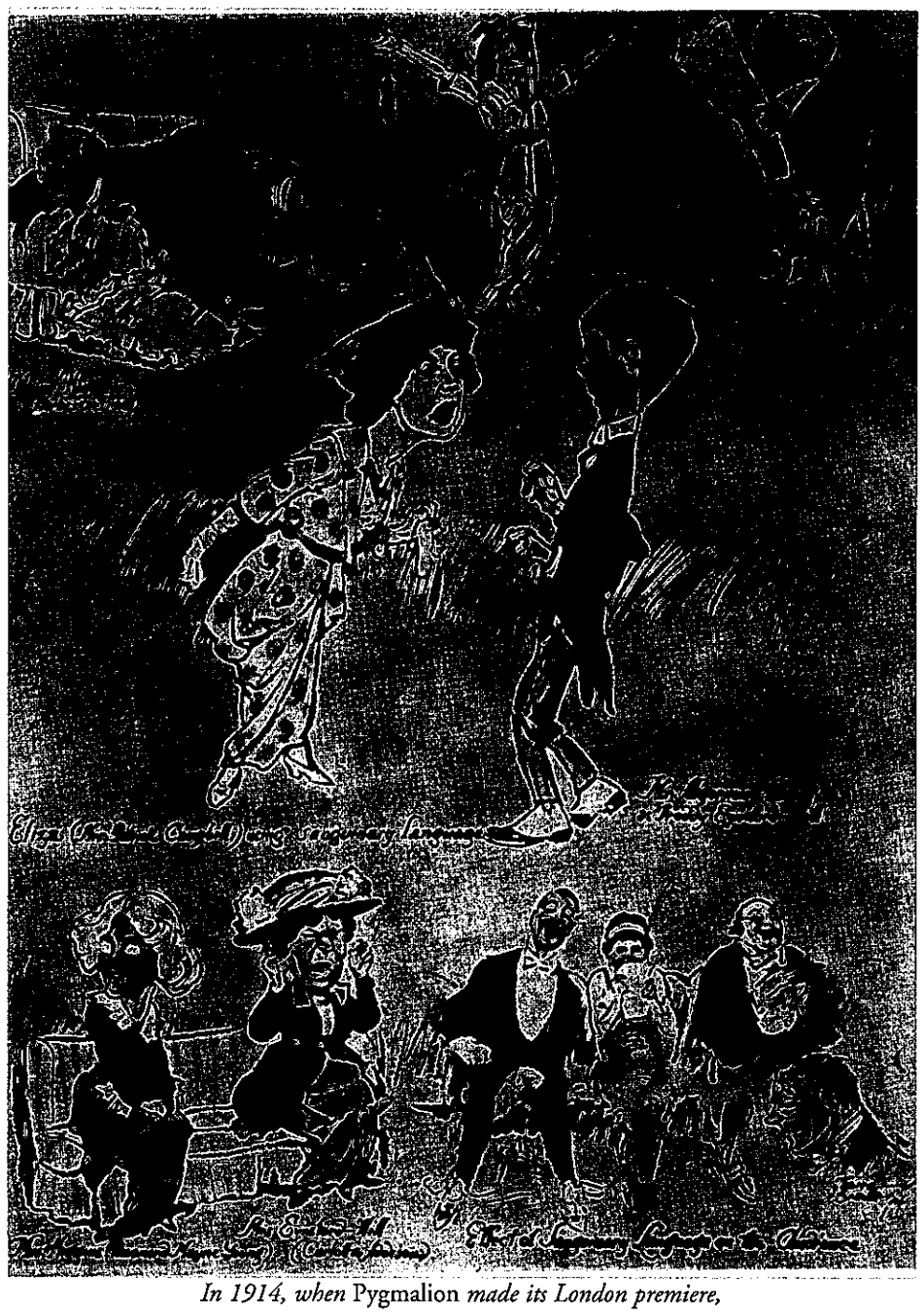
This idea was also true for English society during Eliza's day. "Anybody could become an aristocrat in England," according to Avery Gillian in *Victorian People in Life and Literature;* "and hitherto the English common man had not opposed the aristocracy because there were many who hoped that perhaps one day they might accumulate enough wealth to enter that charmed society themselves. The average member of the English middle class was immensely proud of any dealing he might have with the nobility and boasted about it."

Though Eliza isn't of the middle class, she shows a great amount of courage by wanting to change her life and entrusting her future to a stranger. She also learns a great deal about human relations. During this process she is treated with respect by all those around her except Higgins. She realizes that moving up in society also allows one to gain respect—respect she didn't receive as a flower girl. This transformation gives her something more than just improved language, new clothes and status; it gives her self-respect.

Higgins, though unwilling to admit it, has changed as well. When the experiment is complete, he realizes that Eliza has become a strong independent woman. Though neither Eliza or Higgins know what will happen in Eliza's future, they both know she can not return to the life of a flower girl. She has been changed forever. We see Higgins gloating at the end of the play because he takes partial credit for the change that has taken place—in his eyes she is his masterpiece. He has not only been successful in his experiment, but has also gained a new found respect for Eliza. He too has gone through a transformation. Higgins has learned the key ingredient to human relations—respect. ★

—Annélisa Blake-Wasden, Dramaturg





In 1914, when Pygmalion *made its London premiere, theatrical cartooning was at its height, as can be seen in these two examples.*

Vocabulary

Act I

"Oh, sir, don't let him charge me. You dunno what it means to me. They'll take away my character and drive me on the streets for speaking to gentlemen."—Eliza is afraid she will be charged with prostitution when all she was trying to do was sell flowers.

"I can tell where you come from. You come from 'Anwell. Go back there."—Hanwell was the site of a mental hospital. The bystander is joking that Higgins is insane.

Act II

"Take her away and clean her, Mrs. Pierce. Monkey Brand, if it won't come off any other way."—Monkey Brand was a strong cleaner with a monkey on the label.

"Put her in the dustbin." ... "There's a dustman downstairs, Alfred Doolittle, wants to see you."—In the days when homes were heated by wood and/or coal, a great deal of ash or "dust" was generated. As the servants cleaned the fireplaces and stoves, the ash was stored in the dustbin until the dustman arrived to haul it away.

"...there is a certain word I must ask you not to use. The girl used it herself when she began to enjoy the bath. It begins with the same letter as bath."—The word which Mrs. Pierce cannot bring herself to say is *bloody*, a word which was exceptionally shocking to the British at the time this play was written. Etymologists suggest that the term is a corruption of a medieval curse, "by our Lady" (i.e. the Virgin Mary). Eliza causes a sensation when she casually uses the word in Act III amongst polite society. The shock of hearing this word on stage—which stopped the show for what was then considered to be the longest laugh in theatrical history—was one of the reasons for the play's success in 1914.

"Send the blackguard up."—A blackguard (pronounced *blaggard*) is a person considered to be a scoundrel or villain.

"Morning, Governor."—*Governor*, sometimes shortened to *Guv*, was a term of respect, equivalent to *sir*.

"His proper trade's a navvy."—A navvy was a ditch digger or common laborer.

Act III

"It is my at-home day."—Fashionable ladies announced certain days when they were "at home" to casual visitors, who came for tea and a chat. Clara points out that social climbers especially made the rounds of these gatherings: "We have three at-homes to go to still."

Act IV

"Only circulars, and this coroneted billet-doux for you."—Higgins's mail contains only advertisements and a love letter from a member of the nobility in an envelope embossed with the image of a coronet (a small crown). Higgins discards the letter unopened as from a "money-lender."

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Pygmalion AT THE IRT

I always begin by searching for the core idea of the play," says IRT associate artistic director Risa Brainin, director of the IRT's season opener. George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* tells the well-known tale of phonetics professor Henry Higgins who, through speech training, transforms Eliza Doolittle from a penniless flower seller to an elegant lady.

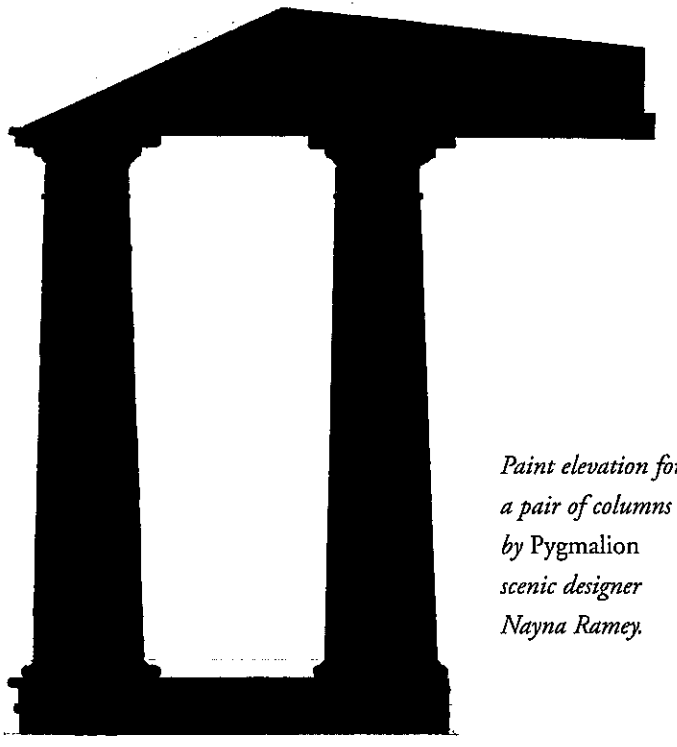
Brainin is discussing the design process for a theatrical production. This process usually begins with a two-day design conference during which the director meets with all the design team. For *Pygmalion*, that group includes scenic designer Nayna Ramey, costume designer Devon Painter, and lighting designer Michael Klaers—the same team Brainin worked with on last season's *Noises Off*—plus dramaturg Annélisa Blake-Wasden.

"In preparing for that first conference I read the play many times in all its versions" continues Brainin. "Shaw frequently revised his plays. After the original production of *Pygmalion* in 1914, the play was published in book form in 1916. Concerned about avoiding romantic interpretations of the ending in particular, by the 1920s Shaw was advising translators to add a line at the end of the play in which Higgins celebrates both his creation of Eliza and his liberation from her. He revised the script yet again for the film version in 1939.

"So after reading all these revisions, I try to discover what the play is about to me and potentially what it could be about for our audience. Why do *Pygmalion* in 1999? How is it relevant to our lives? How can we make it even more relevant?"

Since *Pygmalion* deals with class issues, at their first conference, the group talks a lot about how we relate to the idea of class. "We have a myth in American culture that there is no class system here, but of course there is," says Brainin. "How do we break out of the boxes we live in and see beyond the limitations placed on us by society or the limitations we place on ourselves? That's what happens with Eliza and Higgins. Through their tumultuous relationship, Eliza finds a whole new world of possibilities for her life, and Higgins's tidy, unemotional world begins to crack as he recognizes Eliza as his equal."

Brainin notes that on this project the team looks at a lot of art as part of their research process. "Nayna tends to gravitate towards a particular artist whose work seems to speak to the play, to reflect the mood, the feeling we want to create. In this play we started with John Singer Sargent. Shaw himself suggests Piranesi etchings for Higgins's study, and a Rosetti portrait for Mrs. Higgins's home. Devon will research the period of the play and bring lots of pictures to stimulate our imaginations. I listen to a lot of music, music from the period, music that evokes the mood—anything that piques my interest and somehow relates to the play. In this case I landed very quickly on the solo piano pieces of Erik Satie. I also read a lot of criticism, finding out what scholars have said about the play. Michael breaks the play into tiny lighting moments. Annélisa provides us with a context though research materials about British society in 1911.



Paint elevation for a pair of columns by Pygmalion *scenic designer Nayna Ramey.*

"Ultimately, together, we figure out what we as a team want to say about the play, and what design choices will best help us say that. At this early stage we try to avoid talking about the literal requirements of the play. That kind of conversation can be limiting. Instead, we allow ourselves to imagine any and all possibilities—plenty of time to get pragmatic later."

Generally, a design conference is a two-day event. "We get together and read the play, we go to lunch and talk about the play, we come back and talk about the play some more. We're together for ten to twelve hours a day. Through the course of the weekend we begin to identify themes and ideas that resonate for us.

"We know we want a nonrealistic set. The play has three different locales: the rainy Covent Garden where they meet, Higgins's airless laboratory, and Mrs. Higgins's wonderfully open living room. We think it could be interesting to find a series of paintings that embody these qualities. But that's as far as we go at the first conference.

No one has put pen to paper yet.

"Then we all go off and do our individual work. I continue my research. Nayna, who works in models rather than sketches, begins to build a model of what the set might look like. Devon does character sketches of various costumes for each scene in the play. Some weeks later, we all get together again, and the conversation this time becomes much more specific. How will we use the space? What do the characters wear? What will the stage look like? what is the feel of the lighting?

"Then it's a process of refining the ideas and setting up a language the audience can follow. If they walk in and see a realistic set, that creates certain expectations. A non-realistic set like this one lets the audience know to expect the unexpected.

"Nayna's final design, with a series of large framed paintings which are suggestive of both setting and character—Piranesi and Rosetti, as well as George Elgood and van Gogh—has the audience looking at the stage through a giant broken frame. This device highlights another major theme of the play: you can't judge people by their appearance. The broken frame pulls the audience inside the picture; you can't just look at the surface.

"It's especially important for this play that we create a world that is not simply romantic. Unlike the musical *My Fair Lady*, the play *Pygmalion* does not end with a suggestion of romance between Higgins and Eliza. Theirs has been a very intense relationship, as those between mentors and students often are. There are strong emotions, perhaps even love, but it is not romantic love. Shaw was adamant about that idea, and we will be true to his vision." ★