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Anthony Asquith and Leslie Howard, PYGMALION (1938, 96 min)

Directed by Anthony Asquith and Leslie Howard
Written by George Bernard Shaw (play, scenario & dialogue), W.P. Lipscomb, Cecil Lewis, Ian Dalrymple (uncredited), Anatole de Grunwald (uncredited), Kay Walsh (uncredited)
Produced by Gabriel Pascal
Original Music by Arthur Honegger
Cinematography by Harry Stradling
Edited by David Lean
Art Direction by John Bryan
Costume Design by Ladislaw Czettel (as Professor L. Czettel), Schiaparelli (uncredited), Worth (uncredited)
Music composed by William Axt
Music conducted by Louis Levy

Leslie Howard...Professor Henry Higgins
Wendy Hiller...Eliza Doolittle
Wilfrid Lawson...Alfred Doolittle
Marie Lohr...Mrs. Higgins
Scott Sunderland...Colonel George Pickering
Jean Cadell...Mrs. Pearce
David Tree... Freddy Eynsford-Hill
Everley Gregg...Mrs. Eynsford-Hill
Leueen MacGrath...Clara Eynsford Hill
Esme Percy...Count Aristid Karpathy

Academy Award – 1939 – Best Screenplay
George Bernard Shaw, W.P. Lipscomb, Cecil Lewis, Ian Dalrymple


GEORGE BERNARD SHAW [from Wikipedia](26 July 1856 – 2 November 1950) was an Irish playwright and a co-founder of the London School of Economics. Although his first profitable writing was music and literary criticism, in which capacity he wrote many highly articulate pieces of journalism, his main talent was for drama, and he wrote more than 60 plays. Nearly all his writings address prevailing social problems, but have a vein of comedy which makes their stark themes more palatable. Shaw examined education, marriage, religion, government, health care, and class privilege.

He was most angered by what he perceived as the exploitation of the working class. An ardent socialist, Shaw wrote many brochures and speeches for the Fabian Society. He became an accomplished orator in the furtherance of its causes, which included gaining equal rights for men and women, alleviating abuses of the working class, rescinding private ownership of productive land, and promoting healthy lifestyles. For a short time he was active in local politics, serving on the London County Council. In 1898, Shaw married Charlotte Payne-Townshend, a fellow Fabian, whom he survived. They settled in Ayot St. Lawrence in a house now called Shaw's Corner. Shaw died there, aged 94, from chronic problems exacerbated by injuries he incurred by falling from a ladder.

He is the only person to have been awarded both a Nobel Prize for Literature (1925) and an Oscar (1938), for his contributions to literature and for his work on the film Pygmalion.
(adaptation of his play of the same name), respectively. Shaw wanted to refuse his Nobel Prize outright because he had no desire for public honors, but accepted it at his wife’s behest: she considered it a tribute to Ireland. He did reject the monetary award, requesting it be used to finance translation of Swedish books to English.


These experimental touches were generally attributed to Asquith rather than his codirector, and the film was greeted as a triumphant vindication of British Instructional's enlightened policy.

Asquith's first solo assignment followed the same year—a thriller centering on the London Underground, again scripted by the directors, and starring Brian Aherne and Elissa Landi. Like its predecessor, it made sparing use of titles, relying on the images to make its point. Critics had seen the influence of Eisenstein in some of the shots in Shooting Stars, but German Expressionism seemed to be the model for the chiaroscuro lighting and "weird effects" in Underground, which had a more mixed reception. One contemporary reviewer wrote that "Asquith is well soaked in German technique. What he has to learn is how to use it." All the same, a more recent critic thought that the film's "best parts have a likable bravura, especially the tautly shot and edited chases through the Underground and the climactic fight in the power station."

The Runaway Princess (1929), also known as Princess Priscilla's Fortnight, was the result of an arrangement between H. Bruce Woolfe and a German production company—a "charmingly quirky" romantic comedy that gave Asquith scope to indulge his fondness for location shooting when the princess (Mady Christians), escaping from an arranged marriage, runs away to London. Asquith's growing reputation was confirmed by A Cottage on Dartmoor (1930), adapted by the director from a story by Herbert Price. It is a study in jealousy, about an escaped convict who seeks out the woman he has lost. The last, best, and most successful of Asquith's silent films, A Cottage on Dartmoor in fact includes one dialogue sequence—a clip from a wittily parodied American talkie that the heroine and her future husband go to see on their first date. This is only one example of the film's inventiveness: it also makes masterly use of crosscutting, experiments effectively with the subjective camera, and at one point cuts straight to a flashback without the use of explanatory titles.

Asquith's first sound film was Tell England (1931), which he adapted from Ernest Raymond's novel and codirected with Geoffrey Barkas. Filmed largely on location in Malta and Britain, it is an indictment of the pointless Dardanelles campaign of World War I, contrasting the idyllic upper-class home life of its two young heroes with the insane slaughter of the Battle of Gallipoli. Asquith does not always escape the class-consciousness and sentimentality of the novel, but the film was universally praised for its imagination and power, and called "one of the two or three outstanding British talkies made so far." Paul Rotha thought its battle scenes the equal of those in Pudovkin's End of St. Petersburg and Milestone's All Quiet on the Western Front.

That Asquith should switch from the horrors of war to a ballet film called Dance Pretty Lady is not as surprising as it seems, since his intense interest in the integration of movement and music is evident in all his sound films. Dance Pretty Lady (1932), based on Compton Mackenzie's novel Carnival, tells the "rather insipid" story of an Edwardian ballet dancer (Ann Casson) who loves but almost loses a rich young artist (Carl Harbord). A gaslit London is attractively evoked by Ian Campbell-Gray, Asquith's usual art director at this time, and the ballet sequences were unsurpassed for many years. In this film, wrote John Grierson, "movement is laced

Scott Sunderland (September 19, 1883, Rock Ferry, Cheshire, England, UK – 1956) appeared in only one other film: 1939 Goodbye, Mr. Chips.

together with the feeling for movement which only half a dozen directors in the world could match.”

At this time, Asquith and Hitchcock were generally regarded as the two best directors in Britain, and they were endlessly compared. Grierson suggested that Hitchcock had the experience of life and the gusto that Asquith lacked, while Asquith had knowledge and taste—“he knows more in his head and less in his solar plexus….He has no feeling for people except as they can be observed from the outside. He is born and bred a spectator, capable of drawing people only as puppets. That is to the good; puppeteering is as great a trade as any, if you take it seriously for the satire, fantasy and poetry that is in it.” C.A. Lejeune decided that “Asquith lags behind Hitchcock in craftsmanship, comes very close to him in picture sense and passes him in fervency and conviction of thought. If he fails, as I sometimes fear he will fail, to get beyond the lyricism of his recent films, it will be because of a strong individualist strain [in]his work, a cultured uncommercial ideology that has little contact with the urgencies of the age and too fine a fibre for the method of the machine.”

In fact, with the absorption of British Instructional by British International Pictures and the departure of his friend and mentor Bruce Woolfe, Asquith entered upon an unsettled and relatively barren phase of his career, making only three films in six years. *The Luck Number* (1933). The first of Asquith’s movies not scripted by himself, is a comedy about a footballer and a French lottery ticket, produced by Michael Balcon for Gainsborough Pictures. The story is weak, but Basil Wright found “a firmness of touch about the main sequences” that Asquith’s earlier films had lacked, and an “extremely witty” use of music to comment on the action.

*Unfinished Symphony* (1934), the English version of an Austrian picture about Schubert was followed by a similar bilingual venture, the Anglicization of a French spy thriller, *Moscow Nights* (1935), with Harry Baur as a war profiteer and Laurence Olivier as an embittered soldier. Asquith was inactive for two years after that, until in 1937 he began preparatory work as coauthor and codirector (with Leslie Howard) on George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*. The producer Gabriel Pascal had persuaded Shaw to give him the rights to all his plays, but it was not until May 1938 that Pascal had found the necessary backing and production could begin.

Asquith had David Lean as editor, Laurence Irving as production designer, and Arthur Homegger as composer, as well as a splendid cast headed by Leslie Howard as Professor Higgins. The virtually unknown Wendy Hiller became an overnight star with her portrayal of Eliza Doolittle, and there’s a marvelous performance from Wilfrid Lawson as Eliza’s father. “The most important thing about *Pygmalion*,” wrote Basil Wright, “is that it represents a triumph for Anthony Asquith, whose sincere cinematic sensitivity has been all too neglected by producers in recent years….He brings to the film that warm sense of the humanities, and that feeling for composition which never descends to the artistic, which still make his early silent films….a vivid and abiding memory. To this he adds an almost incredible ingenuity of movement and editing which turns what might so easily have been a photographed stage play into something essentially filmic.”

A popular as well as a critical success, *Pygmalion* reestablished Asquith among the leading British directors. He had another hit with his next film—another adaptation of a stage play, Terence Rattigan’s *French without Tears*. Ray Milland stars in this likable farce about young English gentlemen at a cram school in the south of France, all lolling like hypnotized rabbits around a flirtatious sex-object (Ellen Drew). “The shadow of World War II looms over them,” wrote John Gillett in his notes for a 1981 Asquith retrospective, “and adds a touch of poignancy to the laughter. Roland Culver, as the only adult among them, is a wonderfully funny example of naval rectitude, and Asquith’s fluent and witty direction makes all the right point about the curious behavior of the pre-war Englishman abroad.”

The war had begun by the time Asquith made his next film, and *Freedom Radio* (1940) was his first response to it—a dramatic and well-characterized story about a Viennese doctor (Clive Brook) who broadcasts warnings about the Nazi threat on a hidden radio. The same year, Asquith confirmed his reputation as an affectionate satirist of the British way of life—a kind of René Clair—with *Quiet Wedding*, adapted from Esther McCracken’s play by Terence Rattigan and Anatole de Grunwald (who had also collaborated on the script of *French Without Tears*). A slight tale about a young couple (Derek Farr and Margaret Lockwood) whose romance is almost ruined by their parents’ elaborate plans for their wedding, it seemed to Bosley Crowther a “completely unpretentious and charming film, the component parts of which are as delicately balanced as the mechanism of a watch.”

Asquith made four short semi-documentary films for the Ministry of Information during the war, beginning with *Channel Incident* (1940), an unconvincing drama about a woman (Peggy Ashcroft) searching for her husband after the evacuation of Dunkirk. *Rush Hour* (1941) was more successful—a comedy about workers trying to cope with the British transport system that effectively illustrated the desirability of staggered working hours. In between came *Cottage to Let* (1941), a workmanlike but uninspired thriller about an inventor (Leslie Banks) working on a new bomb sight on a Scottish estate that has been infiltrated by a Nazi agent. That paragon of British patriotism, John Mills, is shrewdly cast as the Nazi, and there is a memorable performance from the youthful George Cole as the Cockney evacuee who unmask him.

Another routine war drama, *Uncensored* (1942), was followed by *We Dive at Dawn* (1943), a tense story in the documentary style about a British submarine assigned to pursue and sink a German battleship. …There was a generally warm reception also for *The Demi-Paradise* (1943) scripted and produced by Anatole de Grunwald. Laurence Olivier stars as a young Soviet marine engineer who, visiting England just before the war, is chided by the reserve and apparent chauvinism of the British, but learns to love them when he sees them girded for war on a second visit in 1941. The movie established Olivier “in the top flight of British film actors,” but now seems smug and patronizing. There is more charm and tact in *Welcome to Britain* (1943), an hour-long introduction to British people and institutions made as a guide for GIs stationed in England, with Burgess Meredith as codirector and interpreter, and guest appearances by Beatrice Lillie and Bob Hope, among others. …After two years in which the director worked on various aborted projects, he returned to the screen with *The Woman in Question* (1950), a modest thriller from an original script by John Cresswell. As Paul Dehn put it, “It shows Jean Kent (a garotted object) as sinister. Asquith and Howard—*PYGMALION*—4
was The Importance of Being Earnest, “an elegant and sparkling” version of Oscar Wilde’s play scripted by himself. Edith Evans’ reading of the role of Lady Bracknell is said to have left the rest of the cast “fighting for their lives,” even though they included players of the caliber of Michael Redgrave, Joan Greenwood, Dorothy Tutin, and Margaret Rutherford. This was, surprisingly, Asquith’s first film in color.

His own favorite among his later pictures was Orders to Kill (1958), scripted by Paul Dehn, and centering on a young ex-pilot (Paul Massie) sent to France to kill an enemy agent who turns out to be an apparently harmless old man. One critic wrote that “Asquith evades none of the implications (the actual killing is hideously difficult) and uses all his cinematic skills to convey the killer’s agony of conscience.”

The majority of Asquith’s other postwar movies were adaptations of plays, including two by George Bernard Shaw, The Doctor’s Dilemma (1959) and The Millionaires (1960). The latter, called a “fairly radical version” employing “a whole battery of technical tricks to drive the romp along at a lively pace,” has Sophia Loren as the formidable Epifania, who meets her match in a gently idealistic Indian doctor (Peter Sellers). Asquith also made two more films from Rattigan scripts, The VIPs (1963) and The Yellow Rolls Royce (1964), said to possess “a faded elegance which recalled the appeal of best films but which was out of key with audiences of the sixties.” The latter was the last picture he made before his death in 1968.

As John Gillett has said, the “lively experimental sense” that distinguished Asquith’s earliest films soon evaporated and he moved into “safer, more conventional territory” from which he “viewed the various strata of English society with a kind of bemused affection which eschewed both malice and real analysis. In fact, he belonged to the long tradition of ‘liberal’ artists which is part of Britain’s cultural legacy.” And Asquith’s obituarist in the London Times suggested that perhaps he “always remained a straightforward and old-fashioned romantic, with a romanticism which underlay his essentially kindly and good-natured comedy and came unashamedly to the surface in his dramas. His control over his medium was complete, to such an extent that his unusual skill and stylistic polish were...too often called in to produce workmanlike versions of stage plays which allowed him little freedom for personal creations.”

“Puffin” Asquith was a shy and self-effacing man who avoided publicity of any kind. He was devoted to music and the theatre arts, especially ballet, and his later work included documentaries about the Glyndebourne Opera and the Royal Ballet. After his death, the Society of Film and Television Arts established an annual Anthony Asquith Memorial Award for the year’s best film score. His other passion was for the well-being of his fellow-workers in the film industry. He was first president of the Association of Cinematograph, Television, and Allied Technicians, and gave much of his time to trade union work and related political and social activities.


Leslie Howard. Actor, director, producer, b. Leslie Stainer April 24, 1893, London, to Hungarian Immigrants, d. 1943. Ed. Dulwich College. Suffering from shell shock during WW I action on the Western front, he was encouraged to take up acting as therapy. He made his professional debut in London. But it was in the United States, first on the stage, then in films, that he became established as a star. Blond, blue-eyed, and extremely charming, he represented the perfect Englishman to American audiences, a combination of romantic poet and incisive intellectual. During the 30s he costarred with some of Hollywood’s most glamorous leading ladies in a succession of popular films, occasionally also appearing in British films. At the outbreak of WW II he returned to England, where he began directing and producing films in addition to his acting. In 1943, while he was flying back to London from a secret mission to Lisbon, his plane was shot down by Nazi raiders, who erroneously had suspected that Winston Churchill was among its passengers.

David Ehrenstein on Pygmalion (Criterion notes)

“I wish to boast,” Bernard Shaw wrote, “that Pygmalion has been an extremely successful play, both on stage and screen, 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 great art can never be anything else.”

The playwright had a point. His story of a cockney “guttersnipe” rescued from a life of Covent Garden flower-mongering by a professor of phonetics who teaches her “proper” English—so perfectly as to have her mistaken for a member of the European nobility—has a clear lesson to teach all who care to listen. Class distinctions are completely artificial in nature, and the only thing separating a dustman from a duchess is an easily learned, appropriately accented use of the language.

But convincing as the great playwright’s argument may be, it hasn’t stopped audiences from overlooking it nonetheless. Pygmalion is subtitled “a romance” and it is this aspect of its story that—in better or worse—most enchanted audiences. It was in fact Pygmalion’s romantic underpinnings that made it world-famous musicalization My Fair Lady possible.

There’s a saying that goes: A definition of an intellectual is someone who can listen to Rossini’s “William Tell Overture without thinking of “The Lone Ranger.” Were that notion expanded to include anyone who can experience Shaw’s Pygmalion without humming the melodies of “I Could Have Danced All Night” or “I’ve Grown Accustomed to Her Face,” millions would fail the test. But it’s a tribute to this 1938 non-musical adaptation of Shaw’s play that we aren’t likely to think of its musical version too much. This film’s great cast, headed by Leslie Howard as Professor Henry Higgins, and Wendy Hiller (in her film debut) as Eliza Doolittle, make Shaw’s great lines ring with crackling wit and sparkling intellectual clarity.

Howard, who co-directed this production with Anthony Asquith, found in Pygmalion one of the finest roles of his career. He captures every nuance of this witty, infuriating man whose
indifference to social “niceties” and hatred of cultural hypocrisies mark him as a rebel to his own class. As he takes charge of Eliza’s education, he shows a clear sense of pride and a lack of sentimentality towards the “less fortunate.” But there’s an arrogance to this attitude that Eliza sees through, even as she benefits from his teaching skill. Higgins’s failure to take her humanity into account is his sole failing. It also provides the linchpin of romance between teacher and pupil that has sparked audience affection for Pygmalion against the grain of Shaw’s intent.

Shaw, who saw film as the ideal medium for the piece, claims he never intended a romantic hookup for Higgins and Eliza. He even wrote a prose addendum to the script in which Eliza married and set up a flower shop, her antagonism toward Higgins continuing unabated. But he never wrote this epilogue as dialogue, and productions of Pygmalion, this film included, have always seen fit to end things on an upbeat note with a tantalizing hint of a budding love affair between master and pupil. But perhaps in the last analysis it’s just as well that things turned out as they did. After all, romance has its didactic side as well.

Sara Martin: Resistance and Persistence: Pygmalion and My Fair Lady, Two Film Versions of G. B. Shaw’s Pygmalion

The Chocolate Soldier, a musical based on G. B. Shaw’s anti-militaristic play Arms and the Man which was made without the author’s permission, “annoyed Shaw tremendously.” The realisation that others could do as they pleased with his own plays was the reason why Shaw absolutely refused to have one of his most popular plays, Pygmalion (1914), ever turned into a musical, whether for the stage or the screen. As he argued, for him the play was good enough “with its own verbal music.” He agreed, though, to the making of, among other films based on his plays, Pygmalion (1938), the remarkable adaptation produced by Gabriel Pascal and directed by Anthony Asquith. Today few people are aware of the existence of Asquith’s adaptation and, ironically, Shaw’s play is mostly known as the source of one of the most popular stage musicals of Broadway’s golden 1950s—My Fair Lady—and its sumptuous screen adaptation of 1964 by George Cukor. Shaw, who died in 1950, did not live to witness this metamorphosis but if he had, he would have been doubtless mortified by the fact that his trusted producer, Gabriel Pascal, was the man who planted the seeds from which the stage musical and Cukor’s film would grow.

Two main issues are addressed here through the account of how Shaw’s Pygmalion and My Fair Lady are linked: first, the process by which the will of authors to protect their work is contradicted by others, and, second, the pragmatics of the screen adaptation, aspects which are in fact closely linked. As is well known, once the rights over a literary text have been secured by a producer or a studio, the author of the original source relinquishes his or her hold on the fate of the literary text on the screen. Money is expected to soothe any anxieties regarding authorship and most authors are happy enough to cash the cheque and let others work on the actual screenplay. In contrast, whenever the author is directly involved in the writing of the adaptation, caring more for faithfulness to the literary original than for financial reward, difficulties are certain to arise. In any case, once s/he is dead, as Pygmalion’s case suggests, adapters feel licensed to work with fewer restraints on the original source.

In the transition from Shaw’s Pygmalion to Cukor’s My Fair Lady, Gabriel Pascal’s persistence went well beyond G. B. Shaw’s resistance, if only because Pascal survived Shaw. Of course, nobody—save possibly Shaw—would regret the existence of a film such as My Fair Lady, but the question is that Pascal’s persistence leads inevitably to a paradoxical celebration of the betrayal of the original author’s will. Screen adaptations in general should perhaps be best approached as the only artistic space that allows for a creative breakdown of the otherwise sacred notion of literary authorship. Nobody can deny Shaw the authorship of the play Pygmalion, but nobody can deny, either, the fact that if Pascal had respected his will, Broadway and Hollywood would have missed the chance to offer the world My Fair Lady.

Pygmalion

Curiously enough, the first film adapting Pygmalion was a German production directed by Erich Engel in 1935; the second was Dutch (1937, directed by Ludwig Berger). The persistent Gabriel Pascal—an Hungarian émigré attached to the circle of his fellow countryman, the influential producer Alexander Korda—convinced an initially resistant Shaw to let him film Pygmalion, which would be his third British film, practically twenty-five years after its opening in a British theatre. Shaw, who was quite dissatisfied with the British screen versions of his plays How he Lied to her Husband (1931) and Arms and the Man (1932) in which he had been closely involved, apparently allowed Pascal to make this first English film version of Pygmalion because the sly Hungarian assured Shaw that his text would be respected and he would retain full control of the film’s ending, a point that deeply concerned the dramatist. Shaw even accepted Pascal’s offer to write himself the screenplay, “having loathed the sentimental German and Dutch film adaptations.” The credits for this screenplay went finally, however, to a team of four writers including Shaw himself: Cecil Lewis—author of the screenplays for How he Lied to her Husband and Arms and the Man—W. P. Lipscomb and Ian Dalrymple; the two latter seem to have been employed to revise the final version of the script, a quite habitual practice, without actually collaborating with Shaw. Whatever were their exact contributions, the four of them were awarded an Oscar for best screenplay adapted from other materials. Shaw rejected his, feeling that the award was an insult to the author of the original play.

Pygmalion was made at the British Pinewood studios but distributed by Hollywood’s MGM. “Everywhere the film was shown,” R. J. Minney notes in his biography of director Anthony Asquith, “its reception was rapturous and the box office takings...
something which makes him far more sympathetic than Rex Harrison’s Professor in Cukor’s film but also less formidable. Shaw resented the tenderness Howard added to the role, finding his characterisation excessively romantic. As shooting was in progress, a desperate Shaw wrote to Pascal: “It’s amazing how hopelessly wrong Leslie is. However, the public will like him, and probably want him to marry Eliza, which is just what I don’t want.”¹¹ Fearing Shaw’s reaction, Pascal did not tell him that the chosen ending pointed in that direction. Two days before the release a puzzled Shaw saw in a press pass how, soon after leaving Mrs. Higgins’s house with Freddy, Eliza returned home to Higgins.¹² Far from welcoming her with loving arms, she is received by his tart “Where the devil are my slippers?” Not quite a romantic ending, but clearly a long way away from Shaw’s intended open end.

*Pygmalion*, the film, should be read, therefore, as a critical version of Shaw’s play. Despite Shaw’s close involvement, the film is an interpretation, rather than a faithful copy, and this is due to Pascal’s, Asquith’s and Howard’s interventions, not to mention those of the other three writers. The film does follow to a great extent Shaw’s play, with little variations on Shaw’s original dialogue, but, inevitably, it is just one of many possible versions of the play, never the play, as Shaw surely would have wished. Perhaps the aspect that is more questionable in this otherwise fine reading, is the displacement of the time location of Eliza’s metamorphosis from the original 1910s to the 1930s when the film was made. The costumes by Professor (sic) L. Czettel clearly indicate the time lapse, yet the script ignores the implications that the chronological displacement should have had in Eliza’s story. Pre-World War I working-class women like her had a far more limited horizon than their 1930s counterparts, who had massively entered the work force replacing the men fighting in the trenches, had abandoned traditional occupations such as domestic service for the higher wages of factory work, and had also gained the vote. In the 1930s—a decade of manifest political agitation—Eliza’s social naiveté would and should have been replaced by a better defined outlook on the issue of women’s employment. Yet, the film eschews the matter of how to employ the new Eliza by implicitly marrying her off to Higgins, as suggested by the slippers scene.

The film manifests, in any case, a deeper understanding of Eliza’s outward transformation than the play. The scene in her dingy lodgings shows her looking at her face in the mirror, gazing dreamily away as if wishing to see something better than her poorly-looking self. This scene is mirrored, if the pun is allowed, by the bath scene at Higgins’s in which Eliza is terrorised by the large mirror threatening to reflect her so far unknown naked body. When Eliza takes the first lesson, after this symbolic cleansing of her working-class impurities, she has also started wearing make-up, a clear sign of her taking on a new identity. The second sequence showing her training, right before the Embassy ball, has her learning from both Higgins and her other benefactor Colonel Pickering how to use her body for polite intercourse. She is taught to curtsy and dance and during the breaks she avidly teaches herself etiquette from a book. But the clearest image of how Higgins’s teaching affects her body as much as her mind is the shot of Eliza surrounded by, in her teacher’s words, the parasites—dressmakers, hairdressers, beauticians—who prepare her for triumph at the ball following the directions of a highly amused Higgins.

Shaw’s ‘neglecting’ to write the ball scene for the play—how else can Eliza’s triumph be made fully visible?—may be an indication of his own realisation that Higgins’s teaching is just one...
ingredient in Eliza/Cinderella’s success. Hiller’s majestic appearance at the embassy, her greatly improved looks, and the fact that her words are hardly heard at all, suggest that her extraordinary new physical appearance, which both discovers her natural beauty and covers it with a mantle of artifice, is at the core of her metamorphosis, not just phonetics. Yet, language must still play an important role. In the modified play Eliza thinks that she has lost the bet because a lady tells her that she speaks like Queen Victoria, but the point in either play or film is that Higgins partly loses the bet he entered with Col. Pickering—a partial failure the full meaning of which he never even considers. As it happens, Higgins bets he can teach Eliza to pass herself off as an English duchess in six months but ironically he only succeeds in convincing the upper classes gathered at the embassy that Eliza is a foreign aristocrat.

Higgins’s star pupil, the Hungarian Karpathy, declares that Eliza must be a Hungarian princess of royal blood, since only foreigners speak such perfect English. The joke is intended to stress Karpathy’s gullibility but may also point at Pascal, since he shared Karpathy’s nationality, and the scene, it must be remembered, was written for the film. Karpathy’s conclusion heavily undermines Shaw’s own message against the social discrimination that English working-class people suffer on linguistic grounds. His remark indirectly questions Higgins’s ability as a teacher of phonetics, for, far from succeeding in raising Eliza socially, Higgins turns her into an outsider in her own country. The remark also deconstructs Shaw’s social message, since he wilfully allows Higgins to give Eliza a kind of tuition that is completely useless for her goals, namely, employment as a shop assistant in a respectable flower shop.

Shaw himself could not come up with a solid ending for the play which could make the best of Eliza’s newly acquired social graces. He abhorred the happy ending most performers and audiences favoured—the suggestion that Eliza and Higgins would eventually marry—but could not find a suitable alternative ending. In the ‘Epilogue’ that he added in the 1916 edition of Pygmalion, which is a sort of report on Eliza’s imagined future rather than a new scene, he supposed that Eliza finally marries her penniless but pretty suitor Freddy (as his preferred ending supposed) and that together they run a flower and vegetable shop financed by Pickering, as they enjoy Higgins’s long-lasting friendship. Shaw’s adapters disregarded this rather implausible ending and chose for the film the obvious romantic option, also favoured by the very title of the play. This, as is well known, refers to the myth of the Greek king who fell in love with a statue he had himself made and who was granted by Aphrodite his wish that the statue became his flesh and blood wife.

In the film, the final scene with Higgins’s peremptorily demanding his slippers as Eliza smiles clearly shows that Pygmalion has once more succeeded in turning his work of art into the perfect wife, though in this case she’ll be an upper middle-class rather than a royal consort. Whether their marriage will turn out to be a failure or a success is mere speculation, but it is hard to see what else she could do—unless, that is, she opened her own school to teach working-class women like her to catch a wealthy husband. From a contemporary, feminist point of view, this is as disappointing as Shaw’s solution (why would Freddy be necessary in Eliza’s life?), since only marriage gives Eliza access to a higher social status. Still, given the evident attraction between Higgins and Eliza—an attraction Shaw stubbornly denied—the happy ending makes complete sense. As Nicholas Greene observes, “the final unresolved conflict between the two is the right ending for the play because it is the ultimate expression of the inalienable individuality of each.” Happy, thus, does not mean sugary, for love needn’t soften the strong personalities of Higgins and Eliza. The film’s happy ending announces the beginning of yet another battle in the war of the sexes rather than the end of the war, though the faces of Howard’s immature Higgins and Hiller’s serene Eliza also announce that she will eventually impose peace on her terms.

My Fair Lady

A play with music is, technically, a melodrama. It might well be that what concerned Shaw so much as regards the possible adaptation of Pygmalion as a stage musical was the imposing shadow of the popular 19th century melodrama, from which Hollywood musicals actually descend, via the music-hall and other popular forms of theatre. Shaw emerged as a critic and playwright in the 1890s defending the idea that naturalism and Ibsen’s work should be the paths to follow in the construction of a new serious literary theatre. This would move far beyond the restrictive models offered by the popular melodrama and the late 19th century society play, and would address a selected, educated audience, which would be the foundation for a complete upheaval of British theatrical life.

Shaw, however, did not fulfil his own Ibsenian ideal. In fact, his ‘problem plays,’ as he called them, are far more indebted to the more naturalistic, socially-oriented aspects of the kings of melodrama, Dion Boucicault—an Irish fellow countryman—and Tom Taylor than to Ibsen. Shaw presented himself as an avant-garde playwright in perpetual war with the censor because of the social issues he dealt with, but he had a popular—or populist—vein that Ibsen and the other main naturalists lacked and that he had clearly learned from the 19th century popular English stage. As it happens, from the 1920s onwards Shaw’s plays tended to be as popular in terms of attracting large audiences as the far more conformist West End society plays of other contemporary authors. And as popular plays, they may have become associated in the mind of Gabriel Pascal with other popular genres both on the stage and on the screen. It must be remembered that Pygmalion, the film, was distributed by MGM, a studio that would make a series of successful musicals in the 1940s and 1950s. The 1930s, when Pygmalion was made, were also the heyday of Warner Studio’s early musicals, and this was the same company that would eventually film My Fair Lady. Pascal probably thought that Pygmalion would double the benefits it had already brought in by being recycled as a stage and screen musical, a genre to which its romantic story was close enough. It might be argued that the story of Pygmalion, the play, and its film adaptations is, thus, the story of how Shaw failed to escape the shadow of popular theatre and of how the melodrama (and I mean here the play with songs and not the lachrymose film genre) eventually conquered the film screen through the genre of the musical.

Helped by the rather lax attitude of Shaw’s heirs regarding his artistic will, Pascal set in motion his long-cherished dream of transforming Pygmalion into a stage and screen musical. Failure and success in Pascal’s career had become inextricably linked to Shaw’s plays and he may have thought that a new Pygmalion would lead him to a second, more lasting success in Hollywood. Shortly after Shaw’s death and already at work on the Hollywood production of Androcles and the Lion, Pascal met Alan Jay Lerner, who was working then on the film adaptation of his popular Broadway musical Brigadoon. He took the chance to ask Lerner to take up Shaw’s Pygmalion but Lerner declined and suggested instead that Pascal approach Richard Rodgers and Oscar
Higgins, Harrison was hired for only $200,000, whereas Audrey was slighted by the Academy, Andrews won the same year an Oscar as Best Actress for her role in Disney’s *Mary Poppins*. With fine English irony, in her acceptance speech Andrews thanked Jack Warner for having made her triumph possible. As regards the male lead actor, Warner wanted Cary Grant for the role of Higgins, whereas Peter O’Toole was the choice favoured by Lerner and Cukor. The role went finally to Rex Harrison when Grant, ridiculing Warner’s choice, sent him a letter claiming he would not even see the film unless Harrison was cast.

Despite the stage expertise he brought to the role of Higgins, Harrison was hired for only $200,000, whereas Audrey Hepburn was paid $1 million. This, in itself, a curious reversal of the roles in the play, since the female star commanded a far higher salary than the male star, something unusual then and now. The reason why Hepburn’s choice was problematic was her singing voice, or rather, her lack of one. She took singing lessons and, as can be seen in the documentary accompanying the DVD version of *My Fair Lady*, she managed to sing reasonably well, though, clearly, not up to the standard the film required. Warner decided to have her voice dubbed by Marnie Nixon, who had been the singing voice of Deborah Kerr in *The King and I* (1956) and Nathalie Wood in *West Side Story* (1961) and *Gypsy* (1962). This decision was devastating to Hepburn, who seems to have missed the Oscar nomination on this account.

What comes as a surprise when watching Asquith and Howard’s *Pygmalion* and Cukor’s *My Fair Lady* is how similar they are. Entire sections of dialogue are identical, the basic lines of production design remain the same from one film to the other. The explanation for this is twofold. On the one hand, Lerner and Loewe used Shaw’s screenplay—the text published in 1941—as the basis for their Broadway musical. “We,” George Cukor recalls, “used even more of Shaw’s screenplay than the stage version did.” On the other hand, the Shaw estate insisted on the musical adhering as much as possible to the original play, which is curious enough considering they had no objection at all to the production of the stage musical itself, something that Shaw would have profoundly disliked. Since the text could not be excessively tampered with, the songs act as a running commentary on the events as Shaw envisioned them. Cukor, a man who had a low opinion of musicals, agreed to direct this one precisely because for him *My Fair Lady* was “a play with music” and not a typical musical.

The conditions imposed by the Shaw estate as regards the integrity of his work and the difficult relationship between MGM and designer Cecil Beaton made the high budget of $17 million for *My Fair Lady* and Cukor’s direction shine less than expected. Still today, this musical looks imposing on the screen, but it is hard not to notice its “impersonal, oddly perfunctory quality, as if Cukor, stuck with Lerner’s rigidly adherent adaptation and all the production difficulties, simply shrugged it off.” Nonetheless, *My Fair Lady* reaped eight Oscars for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor (Rex Harrison), Best Art Direction (Cecil Beaton, Gene Allen, George James Hopkins), Best Costume Design (Cecil Beaton), Best Cinematography, Best Sound and Best Music (André Previn). Lerner was nominated for Best Writing based on other Materials and so were Stanley Holloway (Doolittle) and Gladys Cooper (Mrs. Higgins) as Best Supporting Actors.

While the shadows of Marnie Nixon and Julie Andrews hover over Audrey Hepburn’s brilliant performance, nothing—not even Leslie Howard—obscures Harrison’s: he is Higgins. Far from Howard’s tender professor, Harrison’s Higgins is an insufferable bully constantly provoking Eliza. Cukor greatly appreciated Harrison’s work, but the actor was concerned by a difficulty that Hepburn needn’t face: Harrison couldn’t help structuring his performance in front of the cameras on patterns from his theatrical performance of Higgins. “I was always conscious of this,” he writes in his autobiography, “and fought it continuously.” He succeeded, though he may have been helped in this by the theatrical feel of the film. This often seems too stage bound, too subservient to the Broadway show, possibly because Cukor felt the heavy weight of its success on his shoulders. The imprint of Harrison’s theatrical acting on the film is most evident in his singing. His particular style of delivering the songs through speech rather than actual singing meant that he could not act to a prerecorded version of the song, as was usually done, for he did not follow a fixed tune.
Instead, Harrison sang live on camera, using a microphone concealed under his tie, as if he were performing on the stage. For all its charm, My Fair Lady is a relic of a bygone age. It could have easily become a lost relic if a campaign run by the unfailing Martin Scorsese hadn’t saved the film’s delicate 70mm SuperPanavision negative from total destruction. A print restored thanks to expensive infographics was re-released by 20th Century Fox in 1994 to celebrate the film’s 30th anniversary. The fascinating documentary made to publicise this artistic restoration has an unsettling effect. Clearly, My Fair Lady seems worth preserving for posterity, if only to document the rich connections between Broadway and Hollywood. Yet, especially in contrast with the more naturalistic British Pygmalion, My Fair Lady appears to be a sample of an old-fashioned style of American filmmaking based on stressing the artificial atmosphere of the studio set. Cukor’s film eschews all attempts at being realistic, thus indirectly emphasising Shaw’s sense of what he called romance, that is to say, an exceedingly improbable story.

This artificiality is especially noticeable in the famous Ascot sequence. With its stunning costumes and controlled used of colour—black, white and grey dominate—Beaton’s production design for the scene underlines the idea that Eliza and Higgins’s world is not the real England of the 1910s. The Ascot scene couldn’t be realistic, Cukor agreed. “Nor could the picture as a whole,” he added. “It had to take place in a kind of dream world. You couldn’t show the real Covent Garden, or the real Wimpole Street—you had to get the essence of things rather than the actuality.”

Nothing prevented the cameras from filming real London; but what Cukor possibly hints at is that, beyond the close allegiance to the stage show, which so strongly conditions the film, the relationship between Higgins and Eliza could only be retold in the 1960s from this dream world perspective. If the gap between the 1910s of the original play and the 1930s of Asquith’s Pygmalion is perceptible, the gap between the 1910s and the revolutionary 1960s is a chasm. My Fair Lady was not alone in this strange dislocation. Other sentimental musicals like The Sound of Music (1965) might also seem now unlikely products of the supposedly countercultural 1960s, especially if compared to more modern films like West Side Story (1961).

Shaw would be probably appalled to learn that the verbal music of his play was not, after all, enough. Running to 170 minutes, My Fair Lady is 75 minutes longer than Pygmalion. Much of that extra time—if not all—is taken by up by Lerner and Loewe’s eighteen memorable songs. In fact, a spectator seeing Pygmalion after seeing My Fair Lady cannot help noticing how conspicuous the absence of the songs is in the former. One is tempted to stop the VCR and burst out singing to make up for that absence, certainly the highest tribute that can be paid to Lerner and Loewe’s work. Their successful contribution is based on their realisation that Shaw could not comment on his characters’ intimate feelings. Only monologues and aside to the audience could do this but would feel completely out of place in Pygmalion, the play. Wisely using the poetic licence that the conventions of the musical granted them, Lerner and Loewe felt free to comment through the songs on the characters’ emotions in a way that Shaw could not. And since the essential aspects of Shaw’s texts are maintained, My Fair Lady turns out to be a richer version of Shaw’s own Pygmalion, a compound of the text and a highly intelligent extended commentary.

In fact, despite lacking the lavish dance scenes of most musicals, My Fair Lady can be said to be typical of its genre. This is especially so as regards the use of the songs, for, as Martin Sutton explains, the aim of the numbers in a musical is to relieve the tension between the realistic plots and the “romantic/roguish imagination” at battle with the restraining social order which the plot reflects. As he further explains, “the musical finally turns its wayward dreamers into conformists,” so that “women, for example, are forced to accept male heterosexual society’s definition of themselves.” This applies to Lerner’s lyrics, in which, essentially, what is commented on is what Shaw excludes from his text, namely, romance. The conventions of the musical thus make the covert battle between reality, personified by Higgins’s adamant stance towards his pupil, and Eliza’s imagination more explicit in My Fair Lady than in the original play. This does not mean, however, that the musical allows for a less ambiguous ending than Shaw’s play, since, paraphrasing Sutton’s comment, both aim basically at subordinating Eliza to Higgins’s view of herself.

Hence, the importance of the apparently trivial matter of the slippers. By the end of My Fair Lady the conflict between Higgins and Eliza is practically at the same stage as in Pygmalion, the film. Harrison’s Higgins is so stubbornly set against marrying Eliza that audiences know he will no doubt marry her. There is no tension in that sense, since the narratives codes of the Broadway and Hollywood musical point invariably towards the conventional happy end. Apart from the fact that Eliza never seriously considers going away with Freddy in My Fair Lady, the main difference with Pygmalion the film, is the impression that in Asquith’s version Higgins and Eliza may come to an eventual understanding sooner than in Cukor’s film. Harrison’s mordant Higgins and Hepburn’s impetuous Eliza make peace between them less certain. When he demands Eliza to fetch his slippers the spectator smiles, anticipating a formidable battle that will last for years, maybe their whole life together. This effect is stressed by the songs, which display a wide range of feelings otherwise kept under control by Shaw’s characters, as has been noted. Eliza goes from the anger of “Just you Wait Henry Higgins,” which includes a daydream in which she has a tyrannical Higgins executed, to “I Could have Danced all Night,” when she celebrates her newly discovered passion for Higgins. Shaw’s Eliza cannot reach these extremes. And in any case, Hiller’s Eliza just needn’t, for her Pygmalion is far less excessive than Harrison’s.

An overlooked aspect that problematises the relationship between Higgins and Eliza in My Fair Lady is the physical appearance of Rex Harrison and Audrey Hepburn. In comparison to Leslie Howard’s youthful Professor, Harrison’s looks stress his status as a confirmed bachelor; Hepburn—twenty years younger—looks in fact young enough to be his daughter, which is not the case at all in the 1938 Pygmalion. Although there are plenty of real-life couples with even bigger age differences, for Shaw the gap between the Professor (a man in his forties) and Eliza (a twenty-year-old girl) is, simply, too wide: hence Freddy. “Unless Freddy is biologically repulsive to her,” he writes in the Epilogue, “and...
Higgins biologically attractive to a degree that overwhelms all her other instincts, [Eliza] will, if she marries either of them, marry Freddy.”33 Shaw’s coy use of the word “biologically” instead of “sexually” does not essentially alter the meaning of his sentence. Shaw believed that the Life Force controls the evolution of the human race, which thrives thanks to appropriate breeding brought about by natural forces, that is to say, by sexual or “biological” attraction. Higgins’s higher intellect may make him “more suitable breeding material than Freddy”, but Shaw seems to favour a quite pragmatic view of sexual attraction by which women select their mates following sheer biological rules aimed at improving the ‘race’.34 The young, handsome Freddy should be, according to Shaw’s logic, the natural eugenic choice for a twenty year old girl who, moved by the Life Force, would look for a physically rather than an intellectually fit mate.

Shaw’s somewhat bizarre philosophy of reproduction clashes with Hollywood casting policies in My Fair Lady with an intriguing result. The romantic ending of the film has in fact an anti-romantic sting hidden in its tail. In Pygmalion, the film, the sexual competition for Eliza’s favours between Leslie Howard as Higgins and David Tree as Freddy is won hands down by Howard’s smooth Higgins. Tree, an attractive man who plays Freddy as a fatuous young man too fond of sniggering, has little to do with My Fair Lady’s Jeremy Brett, a more mature, much less foolish Freddy. When Brett/Freddy sings “The Street where You Live” as he waits for a glimpse of his beloved Eliza he appears to be the quintessential romantic lover, far above the play’s original Freddy, a silly boy devoted to writing bad poetry. When Hepburn/Eliza sings “Show me” to him, openly asking for love, it is evident that Hepburn and Brett make an attractive couple. Since Freddy’s glaring defects are smoothed out by Brett’s dandy looks and romantic performance, Harrison’s fatherly bachelor appears to be a far less likely choice for young Eliza than in the play or in Pascal’s film. The happy ending of My Fair Lady acquires thus strange overtones. Why, indeed, would Hepburn/Eliza feel an overwhelming ‘biological’ attraction for Harrison/Higgins, preferring him over Brett/Freddy?

When Eliza sings “I could have Danced all Night,” after discovering her passion for Higgins, contemporary spectators must suspend their disbelief to accept that she does love dull, old Higgins.35 Unless, that is, we assume that she was so terribly starved for affection as a child that she seeks it now in Higgins seen as an idealised father figure—or that the play Pygmalion, despite its problematic ending, is nothing more than the sexual fantasy of a middle-aged man. Classic Hollywood films, of course, tended to please male cinema goers by offering them fantasies in which middle-aged men seduced young women. Such films include other popular stage and screen musicals such as Gigi (1958)—actually a variation on the Pygmalion theme also scripted by Lerner—or Funny Face (1957), also starring Audrey Hepburn. Whatever audiences may have felt in the 1960s, in our ironic, post-post-modern 21st century, in which films are fantasies addressed to younger audiences, Eliza’s meek return to Higgins at the end of My Fair Lady manifests how unlikely the romance between these two persons is. Even though this is precisely what Shaw wanted the audiences to feel, the impression that Higgins and Eliza are mismatched is, ironically, a side-effect of the accidents of casting and of film history rather than a carefully considered choice. Suddenly, the Eliza of Shaw’s preferred ending—the girl who chooses to marry and support useless Freddy rather than serve authoritarian Higgins—seems far more real than the artificial Eliza of this charmingly artificial musical film.

In a sense, Eliza had to undergo yet another transformation to leave romance behind. The film based on Willy Russell’s stage play Educating Rita (1980, film 1983)—a text clearly inspired by Shaw’s Pygmalion—significantly alters the terms of the Freddy-Eliza-Higgins triangle. Rita—Eliza’s successor—is a dissatisfied woman in her mid twenties, a hairdresser by profession, married to an uncareing young man who wants her only to fulfil his sexual needs and become the mother of his children. Rita seeks a solution to her dissatisfaction in education, meeting her Pygmalion when she enrols in the Open University. Her tutor there, Frank, is a dejected, alcoholic version of Higgins, too much in need of Rita’s help for her own good. She succeeds with his help in extricating herself from her working-class empty life to embark on a quite idealised life as a Literature student while Frank’s career and private life collapse under the pressure of his self-pity. As Shaw wanted, romance is avoided and Rita sends Frank off to a new life in Australia in a gesture intended to show how close they have been and how far they drift apart, once she becomes her own woman. Rita, more truly Shavian than Pascal’s or Cukor’s Elizas, shows in this way she would never fetch Higgins’s slippers.

Gabriel Pascal’s film Pygmalion, Alan Jay Lerner’s stage musical My Fair Lady and George Cukor’s film version are, as I have shown here, not just mere copies of G. B. Shaw’s play Pygmalion but texts engaged in an active dialogue with Shaw’s original play, especially as regards Eliza’s fate. The main bulk of the dialogue deals, in any case, with the tension between author and adapter for the control over the screen adaptation, a tension which is unavoidable in the cases in which the original author understands, as Shaw did, that the adaptation must respect its literary source a point which is, clearly, debatable. Shaw’s authorial resistance simply slowed down an unstoppable process that Pascal’s persistence had set in motion when he first thought of filming Pygmalion, and that gathered momentum once Shaw died. Lerner’s and Cukor’s works combined the fidelity to Shaw’s text imposed by his legal heirs with the breach of trust opened by Pascal’s idea of turning Pygmalion into a musical despite Shaw’s dislike of the genre. The success of My Fair Lady simply proves that the concept of literary authorship has been deeply questioned in the 20th century by the pragmatics—the business practices—of filmmaking and that authorial resistance will never prevail over the adapter’s persistence. This persistence, to conclude, must not be seen as betrayal but just as another source of artistic creativity. Perhaps the literary author’s deepest anxieties should not be aroused, after all, by the fear that the adaptation will betray its literary source, but by the fear that the film might be artistically superior to its source. Had Shaw seen My Fair Lady this might have been his main worry.

Notes
Grandmother Fa in Disney’s Mulan is still an active singer. She has recently played the role of Holloway because C Preferred to Stanley Holloway; in the end, the role went to James Cagney, who was by then retired, to play the role of London, too. The play opened at the Drury Lane theatre in 1958, under declaration of love for Higgins in My Fair Lady, but it seems quite clear now that he attributed to himself the production design actually carried out by George Allen, which caused constant tensions on the set (see Lambert, 241). See McGilligan, 292. Harrison, 209. Lambert, 242. Martin Sutton, ‘Patterns of Meaning in the Musical’ in Genre: The Musical ed. Rick Altman (London: BFI, 1981), 191. Ibid., 195. Rex Harrison (56) and Audrey Hepburn (35) were too old for the roles. Leslie Howard (41) and Wendy Hiller (26) were closer, though Hiller was still 6 years too old. Curiously enough, Hepburn looks younger than Hiller. In any case, Mrs. Patrick Campbell first played the role of Eliza, which Shaw had written specifically for her, aged 47. Bernard Shaw, Pygmalion: A Romance in Five Acts ed. Dan H. Laurence (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), 138. Arthur Ganz, George Bernard Shaw (London: Macmillan, 1983), 180. On the three occasions I have taught the play my students, mostly undergraduate girls of Eliza’s age, have steadfastly refused to believe her declaration of love for Higgins in My Fair Lady, preferring Freddy. When reading the play, their opinions about the ending were sharply divided, though. Only a few dared voice the opinion that Eliza should remain single and happily independent at the end of the play against the majority’s preference for romance with either Higgins or Freddy.