

Small-scale *My Fair Lady* has unexpected charms

Dominic Papatola, St. Paul Pioneer Press, May 3, 2010

If you like your big musical classics glamorous and pretty, be warned that Ten Thousand Things Theater's staging of "My Fair Lady" is neither the fanciest nor the best-sung iteration. Small-scaled and disarming, this staging offers a different set of pleasures, leavened with intelligent awareness while still finding the fun.

New York director Lear deBessonnet, making her Ten Thousand Things debut, slims the show down in all sorts of ways. A cast of five takes on all the major roles and acts as the chorus. Though almost all of the songs in Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe's score have been preserved ("I'm an Ordinary Man" has been excised without damage), the tunes have been truncated by a verse or two and are given diverse but bare-bones musical arrangements.

Occasionally, deBessonnet and musical director Peter Vitale eliminate music altogether: "Show Me" and "I've Grown Accustomed to her Face" are mere recitations of the Lerner's lyrics, with no instrumental underscoring and the characters not even attempting to sing. That's an interesting and valid choice, but it's a well deBessonnet visits too often to be consistently profitable.

That, though, is pretty much the director's only misstep. This staging doesn't so much deconstruct the tale as it drills down into it. Kate Eifrig's tall, dark-haired, alto-voiced Eliza isn't your standard Julie Andrews-issue Eliza, but when she sings "Wouldn't it be Lovely" early on, there's a hint of wrenching want that goes along with the whimsical wish. [Steve Hendrickson](#) is more conventionally cast as the supremely self-important Henry Higgins, but he, too, finds little hints of vulnerability and doubt in the role.

Which is not to say the whole of the show is colored in somber hues. Luverne Seifert's Alfred Doolittle is rambunctious and rowdy. The sly gender-bending



(Kimberly Richardson blusters charmingly as Colonel Pickering and a pillow-packed Bradley Greenwald hoots and hovers as the maid, Mrs. Pearce) earns laughs as it gently underscores the show's more serious themes of class and gender inequity.

And in the musical's always-problematic final scene — in which a newly independent Eliza returns to her mentor, deBessonnet has concocted a nifty, ambiguous but still satisfying bookend that mirrors her opening image.

The singing skills of four-fifths of the cast range from passable to decent, so if you want to hear that Lerner-and-Loewe score in all its glory, this isn't the show for you ... with the exception of Greenwald's soaring version of "On the Street Where You Live." Accompanied simply but sweetly by Vitale on the accordion, it is an anticipated highlight in a staging filled with unexpected charms.