



By the time Jack Warner's super production of Lerner and Loewe's Broadway smash *My Fair Lady* (1964) reached the big screen, going to see it was not so much a casual night out at the movies as it became something of a religious pilgrimage. The most successful retelling of Shaw's *Pygmalion* – this time set to music – the film was one of the studio's biggest and brightest moneymakers and dazzlingly regal spectacle besides.

Warner paid \$600,000 for the rights to produce it under an exclusive agreement with CBS. But beyond that, he could not see the logic in hiring Broadway's original cast to reprise their roles on film. After inquiring as to whether Cary Grant would be interested in playing Professor Henry Higgins, Grant reportedly told Warner that not only would he not do the part, but to consider anyone other than Rex Harrison (Broadway's original) would be akin to painting a moustache on the Mona Lisa.

Warner eventually relented, but on the prospect of Julie Andrews as his Eliza, he absolutely refused. She was then an unknown quantity. Ultimately Audrey Hepburn won the role, and although an inspired second choice – she became the victim of undue controversy when it was exposed that her singing vocals had been dubbed by Marni Nixon.

Director George Cukor, who only ten years earlier had vowed to never work for Warner again after the disastrous way his *A Star Is Born* had been mangled without his artistic consent, discovered that on this occasion pretty much whatever he said went. Together with production designer Gene Allen and costume designer Cecil Beaton, Cukor's pacing and staging could not have been more on point. The result was a movie of charming well-mannered spectacle peppered in a great good sense of timing, star caliber performances and overwhelming elegance to boot.





**PLOT:** Professor Henry Higgins (Rex Harrison) is a confirmed old bachelor and likely to remain one. A curt, stuffy and determined academic of phonetic speech theories, Higgins meets his idol, author Colonel Pickering (Wilfred Hyde-White) and a wayward cockney flower girl, Eliza Doolittle (Audrey Hepburn) on the steps of Covent Garden. After some benign banter about how language determines one's class, on a whim, Pickering bets Higgins that he cannot transform Eliza into a lady of culture simply by training her to speak properly.

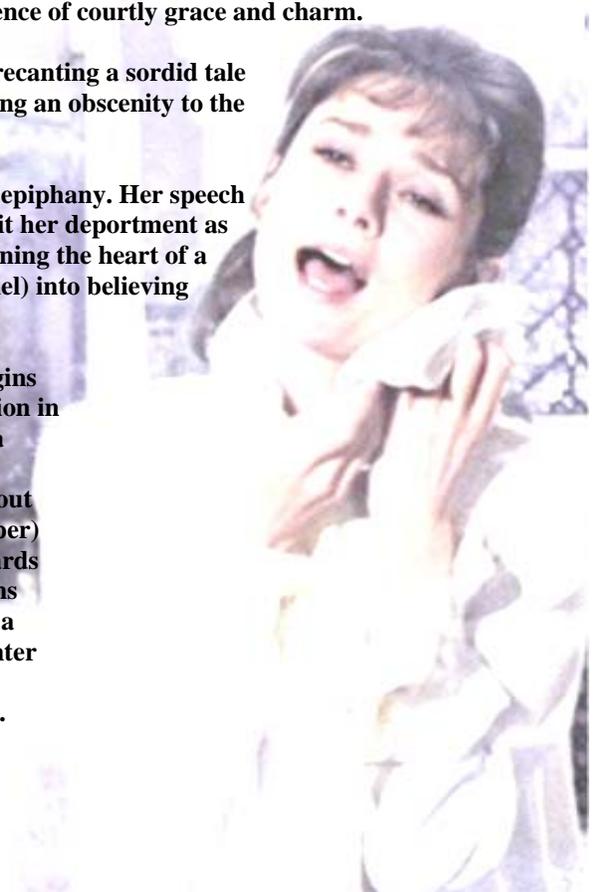


The wager accepted, Higgins sets about to do just that. Intolerant, insufferable and a damn nuisance, Higgins wills Eliza into the very essence of courtly grace and charm. The experiment, however, is not without its minor setbacks. At Ascot, Eliza forgets herself, first by recanting a sordid tale about her aunt whom she believes was murdered – then, later by blurting an obscenity to the horse she has bet on who is sadly coming in dead last.

Forced to the point of break down in her training, Eliza instead has an epiphany. Her speech is miraculously transformed from cockney to proper English and with it her deportment as an elegant aristocratic lass. At an Embassy Ball Eliza scores big by winning the heart of a prince and fooling rival speech expert, Zoltan Karpathy (Theodore Bikel) into believing her a lady.



The victory is bittersweet, as Eliza learns that Higgins regards it as all his doing. Departing their association in the middle of the night, and seriously considering a proposal of marriage from the elegant playboy, Freddie Eynsford-Hill (Jeremy Brett), Eliza hides out for several days at Higgin's mother's (Gladys Cooper) apartment. Forced into the realization that he regards his trainee as more than an amiable puppet, Higgins returns home alone to lament his loss. He turns on a phonographic recording of the first time he encounter his fair lady and is shortly thereafter moved to acknowledge that Eliza has in fact returned to him.



## Fun Facts

- My Fair Lady is based on Pygmalion, a smash play introduced by masterful playwright George Bernard Shaw in 1912 and turned into a non-musical film in 1938, starring Leslie Howard and Wendy Hiller.
- Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, the skilled songwriting team responsible for such hits as Oklahoma!, The King and I, and The Sound of Music first undertook to transform the play into a musical. But after only a few months of consternation they announced to the trades that the prospect “can’t be done!”
- Alan Jay Lerner and Fredrick Loewe, collaborators on Brigadoon and Paint Your Wagon finally wrote the book and lyrics for My Fair Lady.

Debuting in March 1956 My Fair Lady was an instant intercontinental smash, charming critics and audiences alike.

- That same year Lerner and Loewe were commissioned to begin work on transforming the skilled authorship of French writer Colette into another stage musical – Gigi. Launched on Broadway briefly, MGM producer Arthur Freed bought the play and transformed it into an Oscar-winning movie in 1958. Though one critic of the day loosely dubbed the film “Eliza goes to Paris”, for the parallels in plot, song and staging were undeniably evident, the New York Times was more forgiving with its own accolade, stating, “There’s really no point in bringing ‘My Fair Lady’ to the screen because Freed and company have already done it with Gigi.”
- The final deal brokered between CBS, Jack Warner and Irving ‘Swifty’ Lazar was \$5.5 million – the biggest price yet paid to produce a stage property at that time.
- My Fair Lady went on to win 8 Academy Awards including Best Director, Best Actor and Best Picture.
- In 1972 the rights to Warner’s grand masterpiece reverted back and exclusively to CBS.
- In 1993 film restorers Robert A. Harris and James Katz gave new life to the film by restoring and remastering it in hi-definition, then transferring the image to a new 65mm fine grain film stock. The results were astonishing.





## MORE LOVERLY THAN EVER on DVD

Warner Home Video presents a deluxe 2 disc special edition of this timeless Oscar winner. Remastered from the 1993 restored elements, *My Fair Lady* sparkles with a vitality and brilliance not seen on the screen since 1964. The anamorphic Panavision image gavottes forth with deeply saturated colors, brilliant whites, deep blacks and a minimal amount of film grain. Fine details are prevalent throughout. Film grain is practically non-existent.

There are several minor occasions where edge enhancement and pixelization momentarily break apart background detail – but these are few and far between in an otherwise pristine visual presentation. The audio has been remixed to 5.1 surround. Though dated, and in some cases a tad more strident than one might expect, the overall characteristic is generally pleasing on the ears.

Extras include a through and engaging audio commentary, the hosted by Jeremy Brett “More Lovely Than Ever” that is both a “making” and “restoration” of documentary, biographies on the stars, original press book and promotional art and theatrical trailers – “charming, absolutely charming!”

**BOTTOM LINE** *My Fair Lady* is one of the fairest ancient flowers from the fading golden age of Hollywood. It’s impeccably crafted entertainment carried off par excellence, and with tunes that will leave you humming all the way to the races. Get thee to the video store on time!

