

Hanoi's Biggest Hit?

With the spring show just a few weeks away, Sarah Gray checks in with the cast and crew for My Fair Lady — a musical dubbed as HITS' biggest production yet

Written by Sarah Gray. Photos by Dominic Blewett

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HITS Rehearses My Fair Lady

The My Fair Lady cast seems to be having almost too good a time. The show's choreographer, Helen Cruikshank, leads 15 Hanoi residents of varying ages and nationalities through a warm up of jumping, strutting and wriggling, frequently punctuated by giggles and general silliness.

Outside of the main rehearsal room, directors Kai Borchert and Rebecca Heavey guide the three leads through one of the play's pivotal scenes, where the arrogant Professor Higgins takes on cockney flower girl Eliza Doolittle as a student at the behest of his friend and fellow linguist, Mr. Pickering. The actors, joking, laughing and mostly nailing their lines, are clearly enjoying themselves.

But tackling one of the best known musicals of all time is no small feat, and the 29 cast and additional 30 crew members are taking it seriously, devoting long hours outside of their day jobs in the hopes of pulling off one of the Hanoi International Theatre Society's (HITS) biggest productions ever.

For those of you with only a fuzzy memory of some song about "the rain in the Spain," My Fair Lady is a musical based on George Bernard Shaw's play Pygmalion (1912). It's about a phonetics professor who bets his friend that that he can train a flower girl to speak well enough to pass her off as a duchess within six months. The musical, which premiered on Broadway in 1956, was the longest running for decades and was made into an Academy Award winning film in 1964, starring Audrey Hepburn and Rex Harrison.

But how does a British musical from the 1950s about a flower girl and an English professor have anything to do with life in Hanoi?

To Kai, putting on a musical comedy showcasing the English language makes complete sense.

"I think that both Vietnamese and international audiences can really appreciate the struggles of trying to learn the English language," she says. "Also, I think this *Pretty Woman*-like story, where a professor takes a girl and turns her

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into a kind of queen, appeals to people here.”

Trials and the Odd Tribulation



It’s a big moment for HITS, which is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year. Started in 2001 by a group of expatriate “theatre enthusiasts”, it has grown into a non-profit group that has put on plays as varied as the *Wizard of Oz* and *Murder on the Nile*, all in the spirit of “community theatre”.

But working with an all-volunteer staff poses certain challenges.

“It’s difficult working with expats, because although their dedication is brilliant, we have people who get called away by their jobs,” Rebecca explains. “It’s quite scary actually, because we have people in the main cast who could get taken away at any moment for work... And we have no back up for that,” she adds with a nervous laugh.

Another challenge is the musical element. It’s one thing to get people to try their hand at acting, but singing on stage strikes a particular fear in the less experienced.

Both Rebecca and Kai, who studied singing and teach it in Hanoi, say that about 70% of those who auditioned could sing. They struggled, though, to find “their Eliza”.

But in walked Wendy Conway Lamb, who says she has sung a little before because it was “just something fun to do sometimes”. Wendy, who works on climate change when not submerged in her lead role, says she went to the last audition thinking she might just join the chorus. To her dismay, she landed the role of Eliza.

Although she finds it a “daunting prospect” to be on stage in front of an anticipated 1,000 theatergoers, she’s enjoyed getting to know her character, partly because her background parallels Eliza’s — but with a twist.

Raised in a middle class English family, Wendy describes how she moved to a more diverse part of England, where people considered her accent “too posh”. As children do, she quickly learned to adjust her accent to match her new surroundings. She later moved to Australia, where again her accent was distinct.

For her, the perception of different accents will resonate with a mixed audience here.

“Although some might consider it an old-fashioned play from a far off time in England, the theme of judging people by how they speak is still really relevant,” Wendy explains.

“So many people here are communicating in English as their second language, and that affects how they are perceived by others,” she says. “That’s definitely something a modern day audience can understand.”

The Local Touch

But it’s not only the English language that is on display in *My Fair Lady*. For the first time ever, HITS will feature Vietnamese subtitles projected on a screen above the stage — part of the society’s growing effort to attract and encourage Vietnamese participation.

“It’s harder to attract the Vietnamese community because they’re not as familiar with the material,” explains Steven

Tait, the show's producer. "But over the years, we've tried to find ways to make it more accessible, and the subtitles are a big part of that."

In fact, two local sponsors are playing large roles behind the scenes. Both Raffles International College and the London College for Fashion Studies are contributing in-kind by designing and making more than 100 different pieces for the costumes. The costumes for My Fair Lady, which hark to the 1920s jazz era for inspiration, are HITS' most grand and ambitious to date.

Managing Director of the London College for Fashion Studies, Ha Thi Hang, says they wanted to contribute because the play provides a very life-like project for their students.

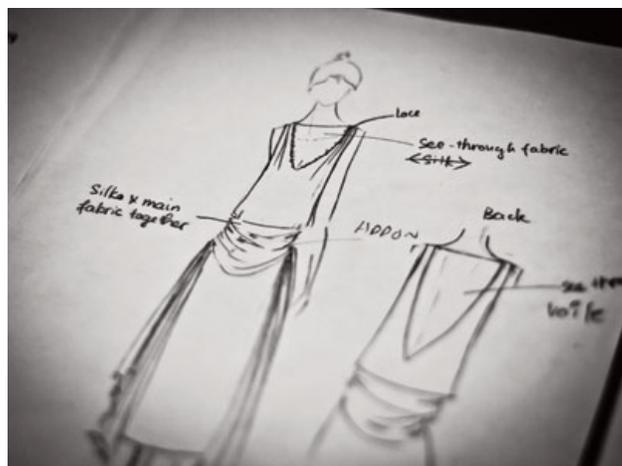
"It's very good practice for them because they have to create costumes for the theatre from a different time period on a limited budget, not to mention on a very tight deadline," Ha says. "We'll work from 8am to 8pm every day if we have to."

The students won't be the only ones toiling away to make sure everything is ready on time. With only a few weeks before opening night, there's a feeling of excited frenzy among the cast and crew.

And if we listen to Seamus Doran, who plays the all-knowing Professor Higgins, audiences "should leave what they know about the play behind".

"We haven't just memorized the script," Seamus says. "See if you can pick up on how it's different. Come see what we've done with it."

THE DETAILS:



HITS' production of My Fair Lady will open on Friday Apr. 1 at Hong Ha Theatre, 51 Duong Thanh.

Showtimes:

8pm, Friday 1st April

2pm, Saturday 2nd April

8pm, Saturday 2nd April

All proceeds from My Fair Lady will be donated to HEDO (Highlands Educational Development Organisation), a local NGO working to improve children's education in mountainous provinces throughout Vietnam.

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