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## Kultur Fest's 'My Fair Lady' proves delightful

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The cast of *My Fair Lady* in concert at this year's Kultur Festival at Florida Atlantic University included, from left, Om Jumarali, Wayne LeGette, Michael Focas, Lindsey Corey, Aubrey Elson and Jesse Veliz.

(Photo by Dale King)

By Dale King

When the Florida Atlantic University Libraries and the Jewish Cultural Society join forces to put together their annual Kultur Festival, they always come up with a fascinating sample of musical theater to kick off the event on FAU's Boca Raton campus.

The co-sponsors' selection of *My Fair Lady* to open this year's 10th annual celebration of Jewish music and arts was an excellent, elegant and entertaining choice. As many as 19 actor/vocalists ringed the stage in the massive Carole and Barry Kaye Performing Arts Auditorium and seemed to just let the performance flow – with first-rate accompaniment by the Klezmer Company Jazz Orchestra, conducted by Aaron Kula.

By way of introduction, Kula dedicated the performance to André Previn, "the iconic 20th century musician" who died a few days before the festival began.

*My Fair Lady*, the 1956 Alan Jay Lerner-Frederick Loewe musical derived from George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, featured an outstanding array of performers. The show was presented in concert format, so the focus was clearly on the melodies that have all become standards.

Actors and actresses dressed in black gowns or suits stood at microphones and read their lines and sang to recreate the story of a Cockney flower girl transformed into a lady of grace and manners by an erudite but harsh and vain phonetician.

Their vocals were easily attuned to the finely crafted melodies from the Klezmer Orchestra right behind them. The ensemble of three professional leading actors performing side by side with 16 students from FAU's Department of Theatre and Dance and two from FAU's Department of Music made the two-hour show fly by.

Most everyone knows the story of Eliza Doolittle (Lindsey Corey), first seen on stage selling flowers in Covent Garden. She meets Professor Henry Higgins (Michael Focas) and his friend, Col. Pickering (Om Jumarali). After some gentle prodding from Pickering, Higgins takes a bet that he can transform the waif into a well-spoken, well-heeled lady.

Even in this 1956 show, Eliza quickly learns she is being used to boost Higgins' ego – and finally, she snaps back at her mentor. Relegated to the background, she is particularly riled as Pickering, Higgins, Mrs. Pearce (Aubrey Elson) and the servants laud the professor for winning the bet in the bouncy tribute tune, "You Did It."

"This musical score is filled with many familiar songs," noted Kula. And each tune seems to fit the personality of the characters.

Wayne LeGette, a true veteran of the local stage, seemed to have a great time as Eliza's father, Alfred Doolittle, who, as his name clearly says, does little. He lacks money, but is quick to order drinks at the bar and put it on someone else's cuff. LeGette performs two of the best songs in the show, "With a Little Bit of Luck" and "Get Me to the Church on Time."

The performance was particularly entrancing because all the players maintain their respectable English accents.

Before the show, Kula explained why *My Fair Lady* is actually a Jewish performance. Lerner and Loewe, he said, both spoke Yiddish. One evening, while they were "looking for a story

with meaning,” they got together with Leonard Bernstein, and spent the night telling jokes in Yiddish about people with Cockney accents. That became the basis for the play.

Though performed as a concert, this version of *My Fair Lady* did maintain much of the dialogue. Character development might have been a bit delayed, but it happened.

Throughout the show, images of *My Fair Lady*'s various incarnations — Broadway and film — flashed on screens on either side of the stage, reminding us of folks who filled these shoes before: Rex Harrison as Higgins; Julie Andrews and Audrey Hepburn as Eliza.

Focas, another veteran of the local stage and a Carbonell Award winner, played Higgins more as a jolly good Brit and less as a cad. It's not until he clearly starts taking advantage of Eliza that Higgins' dark side shows.

By keeping his emotions inside, Higgins gives Freddy (Jesse Veliz) free rein to make a move on Eliza. The youngster pours out his heart in “On the Street Where You Live,” which he deftly reprises in Act II. Eliza valiantly urges Freddy to express himself with “Show Me.”

Corey brought inner elegance to her role as Eliza since she had no costume changes to reflect her ongoing conversion. Her emotions glided smoothly from the confusion of being moved quickly from the street to a charming Wimpole Street flat to the fury of being slighted.

Luckily, the music remains the gentle, untouched pleasure of this show. As Higgins, Focas hits all the marks with “Why Can't the English?” “I'm an Ordinary Man,” “A Hymn to Him” and, of course, “I've Grown Accustomed to her Face.”

Corey's soaring vocals carried such songs as “Wouldn't It Be Lovely?” “Just You Wait,” “The Rain in Spain” (with Focas and Jumarali) and “Without You.”

Coincidentally, a revival of *My Fair Lady* is entering its second year at Lincoln Center in New York.

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