

Anima of the People: "Evita," at the Prospect Park Auditorium through August 17

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 13 August 2008 02:51



In its opening minutes, Quad City Music Guild's *Evita* is so thrilling that even though the production begins with a funeral, I found it nearly impossible to stifle my giggles.

Talk about good first impressions! After actor Jason Platt's announcer informs us of the death of Eva Perón - wife of Argentina dictator Juan Perón, and icon to the working class - the first, mournful strains of Andrew Lloyd Webber's score are heard, the ensemble files in, and before two minutes have passed, *Evita's* effect is utterly magical. C.W. Howard's modernist, impressively utilitarian set looks spectacular under the evocative lighting of Steve Parmley and Kevin Pierce, and arriving in the first of many, *many* sublime Peggy Freeman costumes, some two dozen cast members perform Eva's requiem with somber, impassioned ache. Their complex harmonies are so fine, and music director Gregg Neuleib's orchestra is so glorious, that you shiver with happy anticipation at the two-plus hours that lie ahead. (Almost entirely free of spoken dialogue, Webber's and lyricist Tim Rice's compact musical clocks in at just under 130 minutes.)

Director Wayne Hess stages this preface with skillful deliberateness and a superb eye for composition, and once Bryan Tank appears, *Evita's* introduction becomes even *more* inspiring. As Ché, the omnipresent revolutionary who serves as a Greek chorus of one, Tank is beyond outstanding. That he's in incredible voice is to be expected; with his daunting range, the performer boasts one of the strongest tenors

and

baritones in area theatre. Tank's Ché, however, is as much an acting triumph as a vocal one. Incredulous at the public's blind adoration of Eva, and delivering sardonic observations with thinly veiled disgust, Tank brings intense feeling and sly humor to Ché's rants, and his phrasing is irreproachable - from the first lines of the "Oh, What a Circus" preamble, the actor reveals both the emotion and the

meaning

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behind his lyrics.

Yet with the arrival of Sheri Hess' Eva, Music Guild's latest becomes greater *still*. Like Tank's, Hess' vocals are gorgeous and almost ridiculously intimidating; the ravishing, regal Hess knocks both her soaring soprano notes and plaintive low tones out of the park. As an actress, though, she also exudes an aura of dazzling stillness, showing the unwavering, steely will behind Eva's claims to influence - she takes to power as if by birthright. In the show's spirited "Buenos Aires" number, it makes perfect sense when the ensemble performs energetic choreography (courtesy of Sarah Garvey) while she performs the same movements with more economy and less surface exuberance; this Eva doesn't have to exert herself for *anybody*



Evita's marvelous portrayals don't end with Hess and Tank. Dave Arnold performs Juan Perón with authority and splendid understatement; the actor delicately shows how Juan's infatuation with Eva morphs into deep love. Todd Weber, whose ever-increasing comfort and confidence on the Prospect Park stage is a joy to witness, enacts Eva's crooning meal ticket, Magaldi, with exceptional panache. And with only one scene to do it in, Andrea Kapusinski leaves an indelible impression as Juan's discarded mistress. Radiantly pretty and heartbreakingly soulful on her "Another Suitcase in Another Hall" solo, Kapusinski makes you long for a Webber & Rice sequel that follows this sad, poignant figure after Eva tosses her to the curb.

It's a sterling production ... and presentationally, also a really *strange* one. Like the composer's *Joseph & the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*,
and
Cats
,
Evita

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is structured into two acts that are only interrupted by an intermission; the relentless melding of one locale and song into another is what gives the work its rhythm and momentum. (With its musical passages oftentimes ending on intentionally anticlimactic notes and lyrics, the show isn't

designed

to elicit applause after every number.) Director Hess, however, has opted for scene-capping blackouts throughout both acts, as if to break Webber's & Rice's operatic challenge into more manageable pieces, and it's not a decision I'm particularly crazy about.

Evita

's

emotional impact is lessened when reduced to a series of scenes

à la

a traditional book musical or revue; the frequent breaks have the effect of turning this musical - which isn't very trenchant to begin with - into a pleasantly trivial greatest-hits collage.

But the friend I saw Friday's opening-night performance with wasn't at all distracted by this choice, and even those of us who were probably weren't *terribly* bothered by it, as the production features continually magnificent solos (Tank's "High Flying Adored," Hess' "Eva's Final Broadcast"), ensemble routines (especially the invigorating "And the Money Kept Rolling in"), visuals (the breakaway unit that formed the Peróns' balcony was

fantastic

), and even satisfying laughs for frequent Prospect Park patrons. (I look forward to those Vegas lights that flash along the proscenium's edge the way I do the director's cameos in Alfred Hitchcock's films.) And Act I's "A New Argentina" finale, with the ensemble moving in victorious slow motion while the Peróns solidified their union, was astounding - perhaps

Evita

's most stunning moment, but far from its

only

one.

For tickets, call (309) 762-6610.