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Theater: Do Cry for *Evita*

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EVITA * 1/2 out of ****
MARQUIS THEATRE

Broadway fans can go see *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Evita* back to back and appreciate anew how the team of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice were growing by leaps and bounds even as their collaboration was coming to an end. (They reunited over the years, including writing some songs for a London production of *The Wizard Of Oz* that opened last year.) Compared to

Superstar, this musical about the life of Eva Peron is the height of sophistication, though Rice's lyrics remain blunt and banal. Lloyd Webber has remained cursed with poor lyrics his entire career (not counting T.S. Eliot, mind you).

Taken on its own terms, however, my first brush with the show on stage (I saw the film version with Madonna) leaves little impression. Most of the numbers blend together and the strongest melody is reprised throughout beginning with "What A Circus," the famed peak "Don't Cry For Me, Argentina" and the finale. This unfolding of a melody throughout a show can climax with a powerful "reveal" of the number. Here it simply feels like leaning on a good tune too often.

Still, this is a handsome production with a full orchestra sounding marvelous. One can imagine a hungry, attention-grabbing actress like Patti Lupone making the most of the spotlight. Unfortunately, the acclaimed actress Elena Roger can barely hold the stage. Her voice is not remotely equipped for the part and her stage presence is minimal. You look at the spectacle of this *Evita* when you should be riveted on Eva Peron herself. An entire nation prostrates itself at her feet? You doubt they'd even notice her.

The story is simple: Eva is a young girl in the provinces who hitches her star to a singer so she can get to the big city. The should-be amusing "Goodnight and Thank You" shows Eva working her way through lovers and up the social ladder until she's a famous entertainer and can meet the rising political player Juan Peron (Michael Cerveris). Together, they become a dynamo and rocket to power, though illness will quickly undermine the noblesse oblige of Evita, who likes to help the little people when it suits her. She dies tragically young, almost a saint to the downtrodden but despised by the wealthy class she both yearned to join and hated. It's all narrated by Che, of all people (Ricky Martin), who cynically reminds the

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audience of the poor peasants forgotten along the way.

Evita should be a fiercely ambitious character as embodied in her singing. But Roger's voice is so thin and small (she played Edith Piaf in another hit show in London) that it simply disappears in the higher register. You're more worried for her than intimidated or magnetized. Her best moments occur when she can stay in that lower register and speak-sing a song, such as the duet "I'd Be Surprisingly Good For You," with Cerveris. He, by the way, is a marvelous performer, but paired with Roger and singing what is essentially a dull and uninteresting role, even Cerveris can't do much. Also less demanding vocally (though during this song she's dancing quite a bit) is "Buenos Aires" with Martin. He's an amiable presence on stage albeit with little of the ability to give Che the edginess and cynicism the role desperately needs.

When it comes to that iconic number "Don't Cry For Me Argentina," Roger simply makes you feel nervous. It works better at the end when her frail voice can be seen as in character, since Evita is dying when she reprises the tune from her deathbed (where, frankly, it makes more emotional sense than it does on the balcony anyway). She's especially exposed on "You Must Love Me," the ballad written for the film which she sings alone on a stage with Cerveris. Without sets and dancing and other cast members to distract, you have nothing to focus on but her unconvincing vocals.

Frankly, it's difficult to understand why she was cast in London, much less here, where the standards for musicals are and should be the highest in the world. Roger unquestionably does not possess the pipes to sing this part. Since this isn't a dance show where dancing might be the most important talent and she certainly doesn't act anyone off the stage, why would her ability to -- at best -- get through the big numbers rather than nail them be acceptable? The entire show is built around what should be the fiery performance at its heart, making this *Evita* very cool indeed.

That said, it looks great. Director Michael Grandage and choreographer Rob Ashford keep everything moving smoothly and the storyline is clear from start to finish. The sets and costumes by Christopher Oram are very good, with the central set serving among others as the framework for a cafe, a city square and the presidential palace for the balcony scene. They lean a bit too much on some stills and video footage from real life, which soon lose their immediacy. The opening with mourners and dancers hidden in darkness and fog at the news of Evita's death is eerie. But that fog never seems to dissipate; it returns again and again throughout the show, demonstrating a lack of imagination that the lighting by Neal Ostin can't overcome. What was at first effective ultimately becomes too familiar and -- like the documentary footage of Evita -- loses its power.

Cerveris as mentioned makes little impression, which should tell you how emotionally flat this show is since Cerveris almost always makes an impression. Martin's return to the stage is not bad and it would be interesting to see him in a lighter, romantic part where he might work well. Max Von Essen has fun in the small role of Evita's first love, Magaldi. And Rachel Potter is a blessed oasis performing one of the show's strongest tunes "Another Suitcase In Another Hall." You're tempted to assume that the main reason Evita tosses out this mistress of Juan Peron is simply because Potter has a much better singing voice.

Nonetheless, with *Joseph & The Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* and *Superstar* back on Broadway several times over the years and now, finally, *Evita*, one has to ask: is it time... dare I wonder if they're planning to revive... *Cats*?

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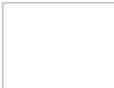
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feliciaday

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Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of *Showbiz Sandbox*, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's [available](#) for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his [website](#) and his [daily blog](#). Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called *Popsurfing* and also [available](#) for free on iTunes. Link to him on Netflix and [gain](#) access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review.

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Fern Siegel: Stage Door: *Evita*

The Broadway revival of *Evita* at the Marquis Theater may have star power, but it lacks sizzle.



Henry Freeman: Ricky Martin in *Evita* on Broadway: Loved It -- Can Puerto Rico Rise Like Eva Peron?

When one leaves the Marquis Theatre in New York after watching Elena Roger, Michael Cerveris and Ricky Martin perform their art, it is hard (I'd even say impossible) to find any unhappy faces.



Chuck Gomez: *Evita* Hits Broadway: Can a Revival Possibly Compete With the Original?

I saw *Evita* in 1979 and remember being so stunned by the production that I sat motionless for several minutes when it ended -- not quite believing what I had witnessed.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER

fredimessina
285 Fans

09:58 AM on 04/12/2012

I don't understand why they cast for the Broadway run. She got the same exact reviews in the London stint. There are so many talented ladies that can sing the hell out of this part! I know cause I've seen some of them and they are equity members. It just seems like such a mistake.

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3fingerbrown
608 Fans

08:50 AM on 04/12/2012

We've gotta come to terms with the fact that Lloyd Weber/Rice's work simply isn't that good. *Evita*, like *Superstar*, has its moments -- but not nearly enough of them to sustain a full evening's entertainment or justify obscenely high ticket prices.

The original production became a huge hit thanks to a stunning staging by Hal Prince (perhaps the best work of his career) and the lightning-in-a-bottle casting of Lupone, Mandy Patinkin, and Bob Gunton in the leads. But when you replace all that with a merely good staging and just serviceable performances, it exposes the score for the shallow, curiously undramatic claptrap it is.

I usually don't begrudge a theater writer any success, even if their work isn't my cup of tea. I know how hard it is to succeed in the theater, and I respect anyone who can break through.

But in Tim Rice's case, I make an exception. Oy, those school-musical lyrics! Oy, those flatfooted rhymes that go thud in the night! "Adore me/Dior me!" -- give me a break.

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Joseph Schmoe
338 Fans

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08:31 AM on 04/12/2012

This is maybe the 10th review I've read of the restaged Evita that mentions Roger is simply unable to carry the role of Evita. I dunno, I haven't seen the show. But I have to ask: don't they have auditions? Wouldn't it be obvious to someone with trained ears at some point early in the process? Wouldn't the ability to, um, carry the part be part of the qualifications?

What do I know. I'm no Broadway impresario.

;-)

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Michael Giltz

freelance writer

127 Fans

01:09 PM on 04/18/2012

As you suggest, this isn't the case of a famous star being cast to draw in crowds despite their technical proficiency. It's an unknown. I honestly have no idea what convinced them to cast her, but you can read many reviews and they're fairly consistent in saying she has a weak voice. You'd think that would be job one, but apparently not.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER

Steamboater

Forget hope. Agitate.

3112 Fans

08:09 AM on 04/12/2012

There 's just something unseemly about a musical about Evita Peron. What next, 'Eva Braun--The Musical'?

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Joseph Schmoe
338 Fans

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08:33 AM on 04/12/2012

You're no patron of the arts, that's for sure. I saw Evita the first go-round. Excellent. Good art provides context and understanding. Maybe you should stick to TVLand reruns, steamer.

;-)

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER

Steamboater

Forget hope. Agitate.

3112 Fans

10:10 AM on 04/12/2012

Oh please. The music is wonderful and it's only the subject that presents a problem of sorts. I would have rather seen Evita done as a straight play where getting at the real Evita would have been much more fascinating. The musical arena just isn't the right setting for a tyrant, unless it's satire or farce.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER

JimmyD

66 Fans

She was incredible the night I saw the show.
Looking at your past ratings, you don't like much, do you?

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Michael Giltz

freelance writer

127 Fans

03:25 AM on 04/12/2012

Hi Jimmy, Glad you enjoyed the show. Broadway is an expensive proposition, so it can be a real bummer to fork out money and not enjoy the show. Even a bad movie can feel like a rip-off. I'm hardly alone in criticizing the performance of Elena Roger. Almost every review (even the ones that liked her acting and dancing) conceded her voice is not strong; most were much harsher. But even if I were alone in my opinion, naturally I'd still back up what I said. I'm not sure what you mean about my past ratings. Of course I like some shows and dislike most. Most plays and musicals, just like most movies and books and albums and TV shows, are not great. Far from it. That's why we love the ones that do succeed. Here's a link to my favorite shows of 2011, so no one thinks I poo-poo everything.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-giltz/theater-the-best-shows-of_b_1176809.html

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Michael Giltz

freelance writer

127 Fans

03:30 AM on 04/12/2012

It's only April, but here's a list of shows I raved about in 2012: UK comic Daniel Kitson's wonderful *It's Always Right Now Until It's Later*; a revival of a show about acclaimed director Robert Wilson called *Bob*; the revival of *Porgy & Bess* with Audra McDonald; the opera *Ernani* at the Met with Angela Meade; the excellent Off Broadway play *Tribes*; and the excellent Broadway transfer of my favorite musical of 2011: *Once*. That's six shows worth rushing to see, which is probably more than most people catch in a year. So even if we disagree on *Evita*, I hope that won't dissuade you from seeing some of these others.

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Joseph Schmoe

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08:34 AM on 04/12/2012

Methinks thou dost strive to CYA too much.

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