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Camelot Theatre's lively 'Evita' shows the importance of stories we tell ourselves

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By Bill Varble
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While many reviewers would deny the musical "Evita" a place among composer Andrew Lloyd Webber's and lyricist Tim Rice's best work, those who vote with their wallets beg to differ, turning out in adoring droves decade after decade.

It's not uncommon to meet fans who claim to have seen the thing five or 10 times on Broadway and/or the various revivals that are always cropping up.

The energetic new "Evita" that opened Friday night at Camelot Theatre shows that the pop-rock musical's charms are very much alive and well: a fast-moving rags-to-riches story, a generally strong score and a feeling of pulsing life missing from some of the overly sober-sided versions one has seen.

Directed by Livia Genise, the production features a five-piece orchestra that never misses a beat, terrific choreography and plenty of eye candy (old newsreel footage, projections on a large screen at the rear of a minimalist set that runs to flagstones).

For all its virtues, however, the production labors to overcome the miscasting of Rebecca K. Campbell as Eva Peron. "Evita" was a willowy ingenue type. Campbell is a full-figured belter. Evita spends much of the second act wasting away from the cancer that would claim her life at age 33.

But instead of the tragic vulnerability that is at the heart of Evita's appeal, Campbell projects a stolid strength.

Campbell is an accomplished performer and talented singer who delivers a lovely rendition of the musical's signature number, "Don't Cry for Me, Argentina." But try as I might, I simply could not see her as the lissome girl from the provinces who goes to the Big Apple at 15 to try to make it as an actress and sleeps her way to the top.

There is a lesser issue with the casting of Bob Jackson Miner as strongman Juan Peron. The physicality of a character doesn't usually make or break a part, nor should it. But sometimes, much as we try to ignore it, it insists on its relevance.

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In a culture in which physical appearance could be a real asset in a military career, Peron was a strapping 6-footer and an athlete (boxing, fencing, archery, skiing) who exuded a charismatic strength. Miner is thin as a rail.

And to represent Peron's trademark mat of black hair plastered straight back, Miner sports a wig that I defy you to look upon without thinking of Bela Lugosi as Dracula.

It is the show's third major character, Che (Erik Connolly, in a spirited performance in the role played by Mandy Patinkin on Broadway and Antonio Banderas in the 1996 movie with Madonna), who almost steals the show. From the early moment when he says of Eva, "She didn't say much, but she said it loud," he has our attention.

And this is appropriate, because the entire story comes to us not as events in the present but through Che's narration, as a flashback beginning with Eva Peron's death of cancer in 1952. Che moves in and out of the action, chorus-like, alternating between reportage, as when he introduces us to the teenage Evita on the brink of a sexual relationship with the tango singer Magaldi (Jonathan Matthews), and commentary, as when he accuses Evita of using the common people of Argentina for her own purposes.

Rice did not write the character as the Argentine-born Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara. He's sometimes played as that Che and sometimes not. Here, in fatigues, beret and combat boots, he is specifically that Che. Genise sees him not as the critic or scold he's sometimes played as but as Evita's conscience.

Connolly is a magnetic performer and singer. Under Genise's direction, Che, along with Evita, perhaps comes to some kind of epiphany in the end, although the script never vouchsafes the details.

"Evita" brims with musical styles from neo-classical ("Requiem for Evita") to pop ("Peron's Latest Flame") to Latin ("Buenos Aires"). The canny melding of lyrics and tunes by Lloyd Webber and Rice is on display in numbers such as "I'd Be Surprisingly Good for You." The takeaway number, of course, is Campbell's big "Don't Cry For Me, Argentina."

"Evita" is a remarkably economical rendering of a sweeping story, and it unfolds here with a certain clarity of vision. Much of Rice's story seems to have been drawn from a biography that painted an unflattering picture of Eva Peron and relied heavily on conservative, anti-Peronista (as Peron's followers were called) sources among Argentina's military and land-owning elite, who opposed Juan Peron's social reforms and despised Evita's common roots and outreach to Argentina's poor.

"We have declined to an all-time low," the aristocrats sing, "Tarts have become the set to know."

But while this "Evita" takes place against a background of politics, it is not about politics. It's about the importance of the stories we tell ourselves.

There's a story about a girl who sprang from the lowest levels of society by sheer force of will to become famous, powerful and beloved (the one in the song "Santa Evita"). That narrative competes with one told by Argentina's rich and privileged about a manipulative little parvenu.

But a rock opera isn't history, and Genise has her eye firmly on the secret of the enduring popularity of "Evita." Which is that it's a Cinderella story, but with a tragic twist that makes it all the more piquant.

Bill Varble writes about arts and entertainment for the Mail Tribune. He can be reached at varble.bill@gmail.com.

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