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McCoy Rigby brings freshness to 'Evita'

By Frances Baum Nicholson
 Correspondent

OF all the things Andrew Lloyd Webber has ever written, "Evita," the last show he developed with original partner Tim Rice, has to be the most completely theatrical. It offers up a fascinating, if now familiar, story line, biting lyrics, the kind of music which rattles in your head for weeks afterward, and a chance for stellar performances. There are no wasted moments, notes or visual images. Few musicals have that strong a sense of purpose.

Now offered by McCoy Rigby Entertainment at the La Mirada Theatre for the Performing Arts, this "Evita" manages to find its own edge, bringing a freshness rarely found in this show anymore. Thanks, in large part, to the quality of the leads, who are intent on making the show their own.

Christa Jackson leads the cast as Eva Peron, the actress-turned-first-lady who became a symbol of Argentina, a virtual goddess to her people, and one of history's great opportunists. Jackson's Eva has the vibrant intensity, but also a more overtly calculating nature. You watch ideas form, rather than having the music simply draw them out of her. Only at the end, as Eva faces death by cancer, does she overdo. She becomes so haggard so early there is no place to go with it.

Eric Kunze matches her intensity as Che, the revolutionary based on Argentine-born Che Guevara, who questions Eva's every move and points out her more outrageous schemes.

Marc Cardiff does the barely imaginable, and manages to give considerable character to the usually fairly one-dimensional Juan Peron, the ambitious national leader Eva helped sweep into power.

In smaller, but memorable parts, Elisa Sagardia sings with sweet elegance as Peron's discarded mistress, and Alberto Stevans makes an attractively sleazy tango singer.

Yet, what moves the show forward, as always, is a lively ensemble. Director-choreographer Jon Engstrom keeps things moving, managing to make even this comparatively low-tech production flow. The dancing has energy and style, and the ensemble adds much to the entire piece.

In the end, as always, it's the show as a whole one remembers: the haunting musical moments which return at the most unexpected times, as well as the odd moral questions raised by Eva's approach to fame and fortune. There is, in that



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kind of celebrity, something almost accurate in the line "My people, they need to adore me, so Christian Dior me from my head to my toes," even today. If there wasn't, Mr. Blackwell would be out of a job.

-- *Frances Baum Nicholson is a free-lance writer based in Altadena.*

REVIEW

What: "Evita"

When: 8 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 2:30 and 8 p.m. Saturday, 2:30 and 7:30 p.m. Sunday; through April 8

Where: La Mirada Theatre for the Performing Arts, 14900 La Mirada Blvd., La Mirada

How much: \$35

Info: (562) 944-9801

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