

'Evita' Is Stunning As Garde's Latest Flame

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New London

IT'S AMAZING HOW FRESH, three decades later, "Evita" can still feel.

The Troika production that started a two-day stand Friday at the Garde Arts Center shined up and showed off the musical's considerable merits. The songs by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice still exhibit a complexity and emotionalism that critics often accuse Webber's creations of lacking. The staging was inventive, creatively conveying the story's epic sweep.

The large cast was powerful, overflowing with strong singers. The show certainly had the deepest bench of most touring productions that have come to the Garde.

And yet Cameron Leigh Wade was miscast as Eva Peron. It was like sending a girl to do a diva's work. She was a likeable presence but couldn't capture Eva's edge. Wade's voice was sweet but without the kind of character or fierceness one would hope Eva would possess.

Omar Lopez-Cepero, meanwhile, brought gritty energy to Che. He sang with a muscular strength and pop-opera sensibility perfect for the Webber-Rice numbers.

Philip Peterson portrayed Eva's prey and eventual husband, Argentine dictator Juan Peron, as a formidable man with a distinct Evita weakness.

A quick "Evita" timeline: It began as a concept album in 1976. The stage musical opened in London in 1978. It hit Broadway in 1979, where it starred Patti LuPone and won Tonys for best musical, score, book and director. The movie starring Madonna bowed in 1996.

This tale of power and greed, love and wealth apparently continues to exert a pul.

The stage production, which was still running at deadline, was as stunning visually as it was aurally. The sets were minimal, but the use of a screen to project black-and-white photographs was evocative — photos of the trauma in the streets of Argentina in "Peron's Latest Flame," for instance, and of the balcony during "Don't Cry for Me, Argentina."

The lighting was phenomenal. Shafts of lights created atmosphere and focused the audience's attention, always adding something quite striking to the proceedings.

One of the most dramatic sequences, though, remains the combination of the driving rhythms of "A New Argentina" and the people of the country rallying, waving signs and torches. It is unbeatable.

"Evita" is also performed at 3 and 8 p.m. today at the Garde, 325 State St., New London. Tickets range from \$39 to \$52. Call 444-7373 or visit [gardearts.org](#).

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