

The Danger of Invention: Evita Then & Now

Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's *Evita* is a through-sung rock opera that tells the story of Eva Duarte, a young girl from Junín Argentina, who uses her beauty and charm to gain ultimate power. Early in the 1978 musical, Eva declares "Screw the middle classes, I will never accept them, and they will never deny me anything again." setting up the struggle between classes right from the beginning. Eva enters into a relationship with Army General Juan Peron; together they exploit the working class *descamisados* in order to gain the presidency. Throughout, counter Peron revolutionary, Che provides an outsider's view of events with such lyrics as "Sing you fools, but you got it wrong, Enjoy your prayers because you haven't got long, Your queen is dead, your king is through And she's not coming back to you" showing his ability to see the two populist leaders for who they really are.

The true story of Eva and Juan Peron is a classic example of the powerful exploiting the poor for their own personal gain. When Juan Peron rose to power in Argentina in 1946, the power divide between the bourgeoisie and the extremely poor working class was humongous. Juan and Eva used this to their advantage, stoking the fears and mistrust of the working class, leading them to reject the ruling class to elect Peron as president. While the Perons promised a better quality of life for all of the Descamisados--or the shirtless ones, a nickname used for the working poor--in truth the Perons used their power and influence to grow their personal wealth and standing. They did little to help Argentina, in fact they actually caused great harm to the nation. This all too common corruption of the ideals of a Marxist government was widespread at the time and helps to create the overly negative connotation given to Marxist based governments to this day. When Webber and Rice decided to bring the show to life with the help of iconic stage director and producer Harold Prince, they focused on this fascinating inconsistency of the Perons's use of Marxist ideas to gain power while still suppressing and taking advantage of the proletariat just ask Marx opposed. In this paper, I will explore how the original, Brecht inspired staging served to enhance the overall Marxist message of *Evita*, and if the removal of that staging diminished it in the revival.

When staging the original production of *Evita* in 1978 in London, Hal Prince brought a few ideas to the table that help accentuate the Marxist message in the plot. The first was to use a Brechtian style of production in which the stage settings are sparse, and much of the theatrical machinery is exposed. Bertolt Brecht tells us "Whatever is intended to produce hypnosis, ...has got to be given up." One of the ways Brecht tries to break the hypnosis on the audience is to remove many of the theatrical conventions that

help to create a transportive spectacle. Audiences are used to stages being fully dressed, with lighting instruments hung out of sight, and scenic designs meant to create realistic stage settings. So when they arrive at the theatre and see a set made of black steel scaffolding and a huge projection screen they are shocked and immediately aware that they are in for something different. This was exactly what was

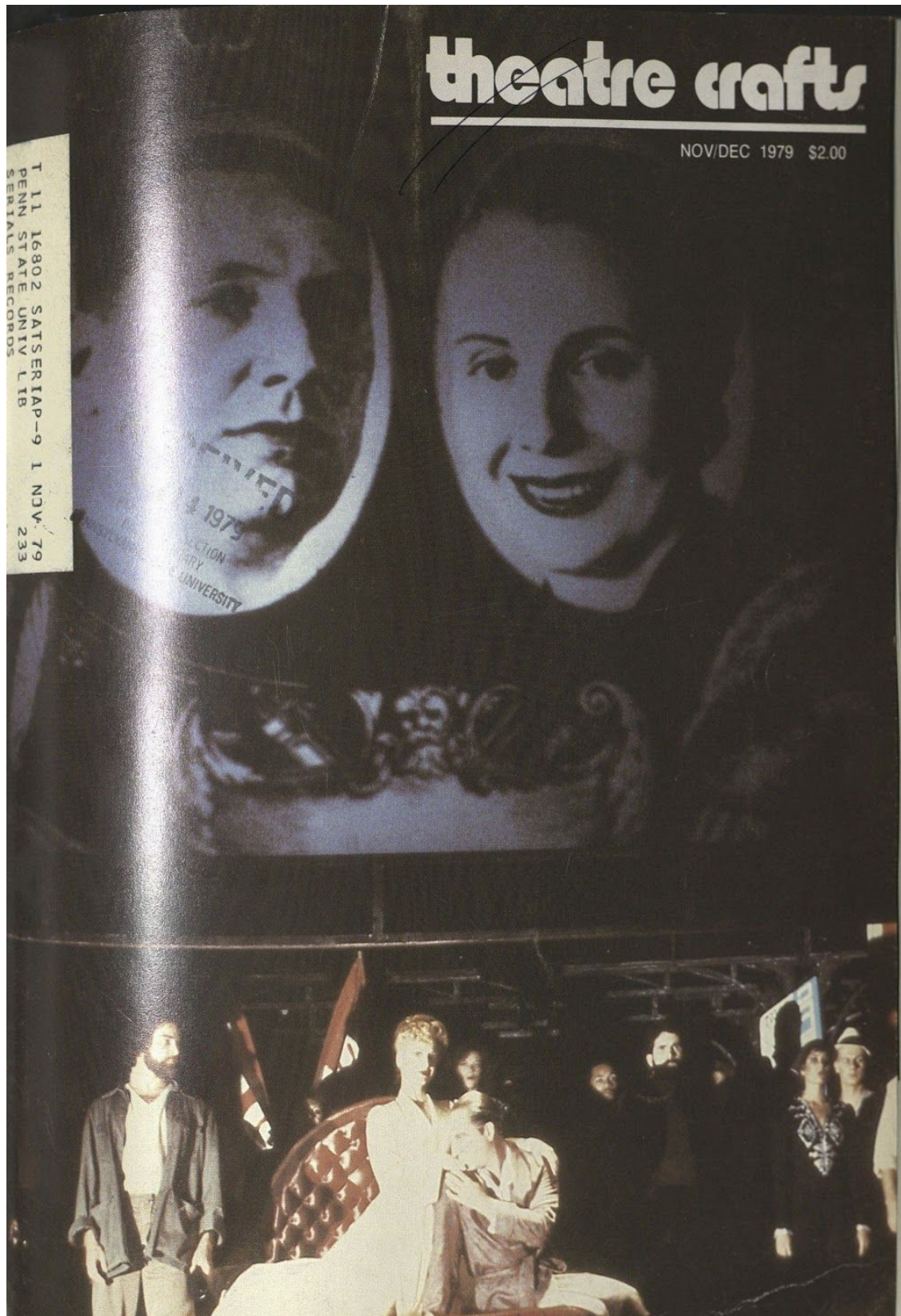


presented to the audiences of the original production of Evita.

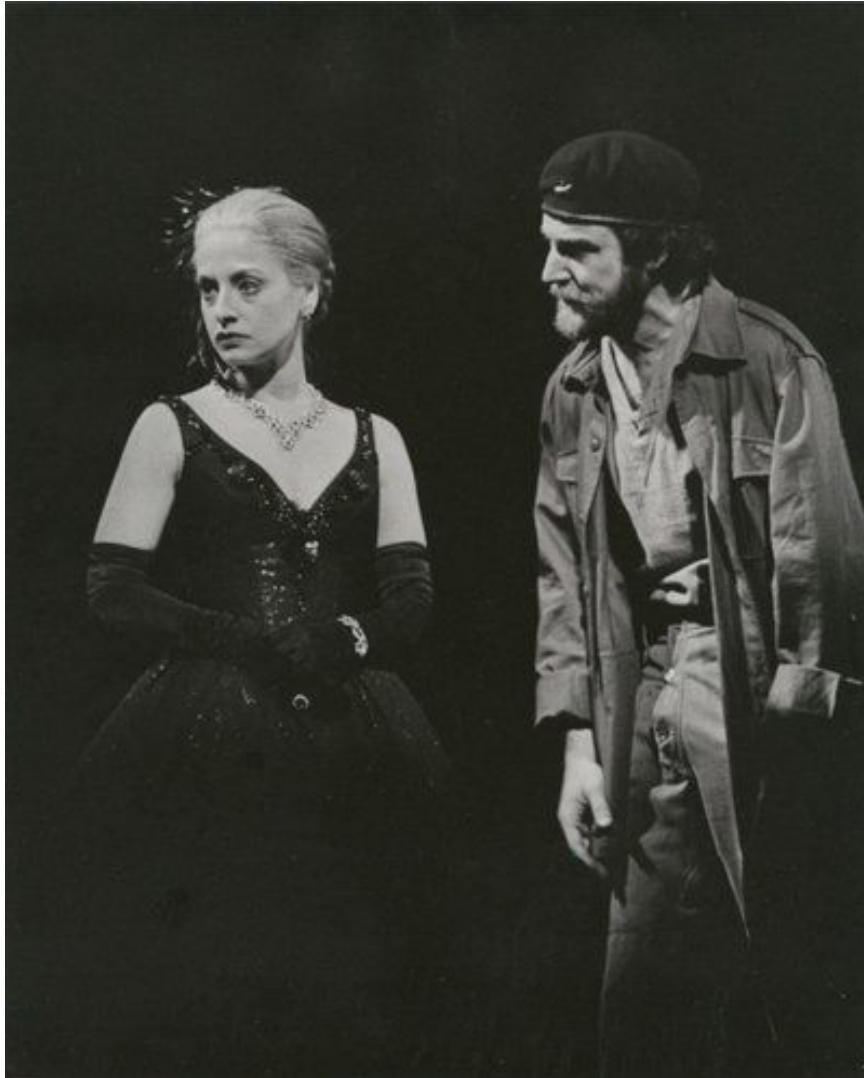
Using a scaffolding bridge that traversed the whole stage, there was no other permanent scenery present. Very few physical pieces were ever used aside from the large, lavish bed and a collection of chairs and tables. Taking up much of the visual space of the stage is a large projection screen. The original production's design is cold and harsh, often leaving the performers in a vast dark space with little

evident scenery. This is consistent with Brecht's desire to take away the frills of theatrical performance that can remove an audience from thinking critically about the larger messages contained. The images projected onto the screen in the back of the stage were actual photos of Eva, Juan Peron, and other historical events and figures. This only helps to continue to break the theatrical illusion, when a real

picture of Eva is projected on the screen it becomes very clear the actress playing her is just that.



Prince also decided to take the narrator-like character of Che in a decidedly Marxist direction. Superimposing the communist revolutionary, Che Guevarra onto the everyman narrator of Che brings a new level of historical commentary to the musical.



While the real Che Guevarra had very limited interaction with the Perons, the character presented in the musical shares constant observation and objection to the proceedings. The way Che interacts with the unfolding story provides for the audience a true Marxist eye on the production. It is Che who calls out the Perons hypocrisy, as they claim to be the saviors of the Descamisado's while taking advantage of them in the same way as the bourgeoisie they replace. From the very top of the musical, Che tries to tell the audience of the faults of Evita. Che implores us that

“Instead of government we had a stage. Instead of ideas, a prima donna's rage. Instead of help, we were given a crowd. She didn't say much, but she said it loud.” Unfortunately, his declarations fall on deaf ears, and we have to watch as all he has warned us of comes true. This choice of crossing the character with the historical figure adds a new level of Brechtian distance to the performance. Che Guevarra was a believer in the true power of a Marxist government, and throughout the musical, we see him as he is forced to watch another nation use the ideas of Karl Marx for greed and corruption and not for the desired equality promised in Marx's writing.

There is an inevitability in musical theatre that every moderately successful show will one day have a revival, or two. *Evita* saw its first large scale revival on Broadway in 2012. The show departed from the original in many ways from its casting of an actual Argentinian actress in the title role to its star power move of casting Ricky Martin as Che.



But the most jarring move in the production was the complete removal of the original Brechtian staging. The blank stage, harsh scaffolding, and iconic singular bed were replaced by a hyper-realistic Argentinian courtyard.



The two-story set was all-encompassing and beautiful. Using historically accurate Argentinian

architecture and specific locations, the ambiguity and illusion-breaking efforts of the original are absent. Gone were the projected images of historical figures, replaced with representative and realistic character in the performance. The staging is drastically changed as well. In the original staging, most scenes played out in an overlapping sense with no changes in scenery to help create division. In the iconic end of act one number “A New Argentina”, the original production has Eva and Juan spends the majority of the number on their large luxurious bed, in silky pajamas, while Che and the protesters come bursting through their space, filling the stage.



The stage picture created is an interesting juxtaposition of the rich politicians reveling in luxury while the common people are revolting all around them. In the Revival we see a much more realistic story play out of, going as far as to show Peron out leading the revolutionaries himself.



Instead of the original staging, the revival plays out the linear story showing Peron rallying upvotes, marrying Eva and eventually being elected President.

The character of Che is also quite drastically changed. Gone is the trademark beret and beard of Che Guevarra, replaced by the originally intended everyman of Argentina. This changes the way we



perceive Che's interjections on the show. No longer is he watching as the Marxist system he believes in is abused and destroyed, but we instead see a simple man watch as his country is ruined. The change in the framing of his criticism, changes the overall tone of his words from a comment on the abuse of the ideals of Marxism, to the more realistic plight of the actual people of Argentina.

Some people might look at the differences in the original production and the revival and not see a conflict in the story they tell. But the message delivered to the audience is quite different. The removal of the Brechtian staging style is a large departure from one of the key facets that tied the musical to Marxist roots. Watching the original production play out in it's harsh, the bare setting creates a very different idea

in the heads of the audience than watching the much more realistic revival. The change of the characterization of Che is the strongest difference between the two productions when it comes to their relating of Marxist ideas to the audience. In the original, we see a true believer of the Marxist system watch as it yet again is corrupted and fails. In the revival, we see a simple man of the proletariat forced to watch as his country is torn apart from the inside, not reliant on any form of government or system, simply through the acts of uncaring populist politicians.

It is not proper to say one production or the other is a more correct way to present the story of Eva and Juan Peron. Instead, the differences between them raise some important questions. Is the original Brechtian staging necessary to truly convey the relation to Marx's principles in the story? Does the historically inaccurate but theoretically convenient inclusion of Che Guevarra enhance the story or hold it back? Does presenting this true story in a realistic way make it more easily relatable to a modern audience to show the dangers of a populist leader? I feel these are just the beginning of a few questions Directors and Designers must ask themselves and each other before tackling the next production of *Evita*.