

Evita - Chelmsford Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society at the Civic Theatre (26th September 2019) Review by Cheryl Jennings

Evita is a much acclaimed musical by Andrew Lloyd-Webber and Tim Rice. It was first performed in London in 1978 starring Elaine Page and David Essex winning the Laurence Olivier Award for best musical and later transferred to Broadway to become the first British musical to win a Tony award. This success was eventually followed by a film in 1996 starring Madonna and Antonio Banderas and there have been regular revivals over the intervening years to the present day.

This outstanding musical is set in Argentina and tells the story of the life of Eva Duarte, from age fifteen in 1934. She was one of five children from a poor background who basically slept her way to the top, finally ensnaring Colonel Juan Perón, an ambitious military colonel and eventually becoming First Lady of Argentina when he is elected president. On the way she wins the adoration of the poor, who she supports and finances, practically bringing the country to bankruptcy in the process. The story is told through the cynical eyes of Che, an activist member of the public.

The whole musical is what's known as a sung-through, there is no spoken dialogue so it's an extremely difficult task to make sense of the complicated plot. This is a huge undertaking for an amateur society and CAODS certainly made a good fist of it. The set was effective with excellent lighting, making it all look very atmospheric. This show is one big sing for Evita, played by Sammy-Jo Evans and she certainly had the voice to carry off this iconic role. Her songs were sung with vigour and confidence, she managed 'Don't Cry for Me Argentina' effortlessly, and gave excellent renditions of all the numbers that fans of this musical love so much and know so well. I felt that her acting was not as strong, the manipulative nature and seductive charisma of Evita was not shown to full effect in this portrayal, though whether this was down to the inexperience of Sammy-Jo or the direction, it's difficult to say. It is without doubt a demanding role for an amateur. There was no such problem for David Everest-Ring who took the part of Che. He was on stage practically the whole way through and had an enormous amount of music to learn. He was spot on with his timing and singing, I enjoyed 'High Flying Adored', always a favourite with the audience, and he gave the role his own touch. Undeniably the best performer in this production, he deserved his appreciative applause at the end and the praise for his performance that I heard many people express afterwards. John Sullivan as Juan Perón had obviously worked hard on his character, I especially enjoyed 'Dice Are Rolling' ('The Money Kept Rolling In'). Natasha Lesley, as the mistress of Perón, also gave a very nice performance of 'Another Suitcase, Another Hall'. Michael Bardo sang well as Magaldi, the heartthrob tango singer. The chorus sounded good and coped with singing the difficult music in Spanish and Latin apparently with no problem, their voices blended beautifully in the harmonies.

I wasn't sure about some of the dancing, the tango moves weren't quite convincing when done by the chorus and needed to be more seductive when danced by Perón and Eva. The

way that 'The Art of the Possible' was staged, to portray Perón competing for power with the generals, was certainly different but didn't quite come off, being a little on the slap stick side.

All in all though this was a very watchable production and it was a joy to hear all the fabulous music. CAODS made a good job of presenting this difficult show and while those of us who are familiar with the stage and film versions might be a little more critical of certain aspects, there's no denying the enjoyment that the audience and cast derived from this performance and congratulations must go to the company for taking on such an ambitious show. We are fortunate that we have a local amateur company that will take on a challenge, it can never be said that CAODS shirk at something demanding and Shrek is their next production which promises to be very exciting!