

Wednesday, 03 December 2014 [Home](#) [Contact](#)

search...

ARTS AND CULTURE

09
SEP

EVITA IN/AND SOUTH AFRICA



FIRST APPEARED

Thursday, 09 September 2010

The [FINANCIAL MAIL](#)

Montecasino is not known as a hub of 'political' theatre. Indeed, when producer Pieter Toerien and director Paul Warwick Griffin decided to stage *Evita* as the latest of their 'bonsai musicals' (grand shows on a relatively small stage with a comparatively small cast), they could hardly have foreseen that its opening would coincide with the tail-end of the most devastating strike this country has seen for some years. Yet the social and political fault-lines so clearly manifested in the strike are also evident in *Evita*, giving it a renewed relevance to South African audiences.

Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's masterpiece depicts the life and death of Eva Peron, wife of Colonel Juan Peron, who took power as Argentinian president after the Second World War. *Evita* ('little Eva') is still venerated in Argentina today; when Madonna was cast to play her in the film version of the musical, there were protests at the prospect of the 'material girl' tainting a national icon.

As we hear sung in *Evita*, however, Eva was "a cross between a fantasy of the bedroom and a saint"; she slept her way from the provincial life of a bastard child to the big city glamour of Buenos Aires, attaining popularity as a model, actress and radio star before her liaison with Peron gave her direct access to the corridors of power.

Eva was such an enigma because, despite her professed connection to and passion for the *descamisados* or 'shirtless' poor of Argentina – "Screw the middle classes! I will never accept them!" Rice has her declare – she managed to accumulate substantial personal wealth. Critics of the Perons would argue that they traded on Eva's working-class roots, securing the support of the populace, only to enrich themselves. Perhaps this is not enigmatic at all; in fact, it sounds strangely familiar.

Zuma as *Evita*? If we push the comparison with the herdboy-from-Nkandla-turned-president, only one major difference emerges: Eva used sex to obtain power, whereas Zuma's power seems to have promoted his sex life.

If we are to read the story as a political fable applicable to South Africa, however, identifying the main characters isn't straightforward. In *Evita*, the Perons' marriage is one of mutual convenience – "I'll be good for you," they sing to one another – so perhaps Juan is the ANC and Eva represents the alliance partners, bringing in votes while benefitting from the perks of rule.

Evita is, in many ways, a warning about the perils of populism. For those who seek power through the support of the masses, there are many dangers inherent in the (figurative and literal) back-stabbing "art of the possible" that is politics. For the masses themselves, there is the likelihood that the promises made to them will not be kept – and that, worse, they will find their liberty further curtailed.

It's not simply that workers are left chanting for "shorter hours, higher wages" after the populist leader comes to power, no less than they did before. There is also the inevitable corruption and mismanagement ("accountants only slow things down, figures get in the way"). Moreover, criticism is not tolerated. Lloyd Webber and Rice's neat trick in *Evita* is to invoke the figure of Che Guevara as chorus and narrator, commenting sceptically on the action and expressing disillusionment with the Peronistas; but Che is muscled offstage, because there is no place for dissent in 'populist' regimes. The acronyms POIB and MAT come to mind.

The curious thing is that, despite this, as audience members we are lured into the mystique of *Evita* and we are touched by the pathos of her demise. Their politics notwithstanding, the Perons are depicted sympathetically – they did love each other after all. So, too, with our politicians: when we read about their misadventures in the newspapers, they seem undeniably a bunch of sleazebags; but when you meet them in person, it's difficult to dislike them.

[HOME](#)[ARTS & CULTURE](#)[TRAVEL & LEISURE](#)[POLITICS & COMMENTARY](#)[MY BOOKS](#)[ACADEMIC ARTICLES](#)[LATEST TWEET](#)

Of course, this production of *Evita* can be enjoyed not as political allegory but as sheer escapism. The costumes evoke a vivid sense of period, the staging is imaginative (if, at times, somewhat affected) and the music is memorable. The vocally impressive Angela Killian quite simply *is* Eva Peron and James Borthwick gives unexpected substance to the figure of Juan Peron. Kenneth Meyer's Che lacks a certain revolutionary anger, but Anton Luitingh revels in his turn as the unctuous tango singer Magaldi and Lynn Thompson has a touching cameo as the spurned mistress.

As 'bonsai musicals' go, this is a good one.

COMMENTS (0)

Leave a comment

You are commenting as guest.

 Name* E-mail* Website

LATEST FROM ARTS & CULTURE



Column: "Artists have no fucking respect"



Column: Exact Imagination



Column: Reading the rain and St John Fuller



Column: Rachel Corrie and Gideon Mendel

Copyright © 2013 Chris Thurman