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Scintillating 'Evita'

SHOW: Evita
DIRECTOR: Paul Warwick Griffin
CAST: Angela Kilian, Kenneth Meyer, James Borthwick, Anton Luitingh, Lynn Thompson
VENUE: THEATRE ON THE BAY until January 8
REVIEW: PETER TROMP

Having never seen 'Evita' before, I have to say, what a strange and perplexing musical. Usually musicals are about escapism and the fantastical, with only the most threadbare connection with the real world, and people seem to prefer it that way. 'Evita' is all about political intrigue and context.

"Context" is perhaps the least sexy word most people would want to hear associated with a mass entertainment product, but here I believe it facilitates one's engagement with and enjoyment of the musical. Here "context" applies to Eva Peron's motivations, her reasons for pulling her native Argentina out of the doldrums of poverty and inequality that had plagued it for so long.

"Context" also applies to how we might modify our feelings of an almost deity-like political figure when we are confronted with the reality of the person and their often selfish reasoning.

It's almost as if the creators really tried to get behind the pitfalls, but also necessity of political ambition, and the moment it turns into cynicism, i.e. politics for its own sake. I find Andrew Lloyd Webber's musicals unbearably cartoony at most times, but I would almost go so far as to call 'Evita' grownup.

That's not to say it isn't fun. Director Paul Warwick Griffin revels in the almost archetypal back-story of a girl from the wrong side of the tracks determined to pull herself out of her squalor. If that means courting the fancy of powerful men so she can position herself to realise her own ambition, so be it.

With the exception of 'Don't Cry For Me Argentina' and 'You Must Love Me,' both scintillatingly performed with body and soul by Angela Killian, there aren't that many catchy tunes in the show, but they are nonetheless marvellously realised by the impeccable cast. I have always enjoyed Griffin's "intimate" staging of biggish musicals at the relatively small Theatre On The Bay, but 'Evita' represents a new pinnacle for him. It is simply sublimely executed.

Killian gets the force of Peron's political persona across very successfully, but goes deeper than that. She manages to very convincingly portray the doubt that can exist in even the most single-minded individuals, and there's no myth construction on her part either. It is a performance of rare emotional economy; she is simply fantastic. I don't think I have ever seen James Borthwick deliver a bad performance. As Juan Peron, Eva's presidential husband, he isn't on stage all that much (the show is called 'Evita,' after all), but he makes every moment count.

Newcomers Kenneth Meyer and Lynn Thompson also make their presences felt and are definitely two performers to look out for in the future. Expect them to be leading productions in the not too distant future.

Tickets for 'Evita' might not be cheap, but considering what you are getting, namely a world class musical almost literally at arm's length away from you, consider it a bargain.

* Book at Computicket.



Angela Kilian And James Borthwick In 'Evita'

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