

Ambitious 'Evita' at Marietta's Susquehanna Stage opens Friday



- JANE HOLAHAN | Entertainment Reporter
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Julia Tighe Hoewy is Eva Peron in "Evita," opening Friday at Susquehanna Stage in Marietta.

Eva Peron had ambition, drive and passion.

For a woman in Argentina in the 1930s and 1940s, especially a poor woman, this was a problem.

But nothing was going to stop her.

In “Evita,” which opens at Susquehanna Stage on Friday, we see the rise of young Eva Duarte, who is only 15, but will use any method needed to leave behind her poor, anonymous life in the small town of Junin and head to Buenos Aires.

Once there, she becomes an actress and a radio star. During a charity event for earthquake victims, she meets Gen. Juan Peron (Kevin Ditzler).

“She found a way to rise above what she was born into,” says Julia Tighe Howey, who is playing Eva. “It was very much a man’s world, but she found her place in that world.”

“She used sex to get where she needed to be,” says Jim Johnson, who is directing the show.

“If she was climbing to power, her sexual experiences don’t define her,” Howey says. “What I see is a strong woman who made choices for a purpose.”

After Eva and Peron married and he became president of Argentina in 1946, she begins working with the poor.

“I think her intentions were pure,” Howey says. “But I think there’s a point when she gets caught up in the power and wants to stay on top no matter what.”

Eva’s popularity in Argentina grows. She is beloved by the masses.

But behind the scenes, the Perons are getting wealthy and people are questioning her commitment to the poor.

That includes a young, then-unknown revolutionary named Che (Jared Korb).

“I think of Che as her conscience,” Howey says. “He challenges her, pushes her. In my head, I am justifying what I am doing and Che becomes my (conscience).”

“So much is about image,” Johnson says. “The clothes, the hair. The glamour.”

“Her image definitely helps,” Howey says.

Her early death from cancer seals the deal for many in Argentina. Despite the corruption, she becomes a martyr for the masses.

“Even in death, she doesn’t want to be seen as weak,” Howey says. “Nothing is going to stop her, even in death.”

“Evita” was first written as a concept album by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber in 1976 and was turned into a show in 1978 in London’s West End. Patti Lupone made it her signature role on Broadway.

“‘Evita’ is a monster,” Johnson says. “The music keeps coming and there is no time to regroup.”

“There are 29 numbers in the show, and I sing in 27 of them,” Howey says. “It’s difficult to block a show that’s all music and it’s difficult to bring out the emotions.”

The costume changes are fast.

“I’ve got about 60 seconds,” she says. “And I’ve got lots of changes and several wigs.”

But Howey isn’t complaining. This is a bucket list role for her.

“She has the pipes and the emotional reservoir to play Eva,” Johnson says. “They wrote a powerhouse show. I told Julia (after the audition) that she owned Eva.”

Howey is on the board of Susquehanna Stage and is secretary and marketing co-chair, but she began performing after a long hiatus when she played Diana in Susquehanna Stage’s production of “Next to Normal.”

The songs in both shows are demanding to sing and the songs in “Evita” are some of Rice and Webber’s best, including “High Flying Adored,” “And the Money Kept Rolling In (And Out),” “Buenos Aires” and, of course, “Don’t Cry for Me Argentina.”

“It’s such an iconic song,” Howey says of the last song. “I’ve known the show since I was young, but I have made a point of not listening to that song. I want to make it my own.”

And it brings up the dilemma of playing a role that itself is iconic.

“You have to honor the original intent,” Johnson says. “We have the white dress and the arms out and the row of microphones.”

But this is Howey on stage, not a carbon copy of anyone else.

It marks the first show in Susquehanna Stage's main theater.

Last summer, the company moved into an old stone church in the heart of Marietta. The space is huge, and many plans were made to convert it into a theater and education/community center.

The sanctuary of the church is now the main stage.

"I'm amazed at all the stuff we have accomplished," Johnson says.

That includes creating a stage, putting a pass-through behind the stage, putting in new electrical, painting some windows black and putting sound barriers in. And air conditioning units.

"We picked 'Evita' for the first show because we thought a converted church would work so well," Johnson says. "There is so much Catholicism in the show, so much atmosphere."

Indeed, at the beginning of the show, Eva's casket is brought down the aisle of the church as they sing a "Requiem for Evita."

"It's all coming together," Johnson says with a smile.¶