

STAR QUALITY

Marianka Swain was impressed by the central performance in *Evita* at the Dominion Theatre on September 22

Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice are renowned for their perverse subject matter, and *Evita* is no exception: a stylish, undeniably catchy musical extravaganza about the propaganda-toting wife of a 1940s military dictator who bankrupted Argentina. Of course, other shows pair sombre material with toe-tapping, but Lloyd Webber and Rice don't so much combine or juxtapose the two as hurry one off stage in order to indulge the other.

Bill Kenwright and Bob Tomson's operatic revival embraces this style-over-substance approach with a breathless production that keeps the anthemic hits coming. They get valuable assistance from Matthew Wright's set, its

sliding elements dancing almost as much as the chorus, and – crucially – from Madalena Alberto as Eva Perón, aspiring actress-turned-beatified First Lady.

Alberto has Eva's "little touch of star quality", and then some, impressing as the hungrily ambitious small-town girl, determined seductress, calculating power-dresser and eternally vulnerable waif struck down by cancer at just 33. Her pitch varies during the lightning-fast recitative, but she delivers the iconic "Don't Cry For Me Argentina" with exceptional skill.

Matthew Cammelle's sonorous, savvy Perón is a strong collaborator, and Ben Forster demonstrates unexpected comic chops as the self-indulgent singer who underestimates her.



Marti Pellow as Che and Madalena Alberto as Eva in *Evita*

Sarah McNicholas gives an exquisitely moving rendition of "Another Suitcase In Another Hall", reminding us of the consequences of Eva's opportunism, as well as the insecurity that drives it.

Conversely, Marti Pellow's stolid, humourless Che is a dead loss, unable to bring the necessary zeal to Rice's bitterly ironic lyrics. It fatally unbalances the production, as Eva's questionable behaviour goes largely unchecked, and Pellow distracts with his weak rasp, poor enunciation and awkward presence.

Bill Deamer wisely keeps him out of the way during big set pieces, trusting in Alberto and a lively company to deliver his exuberant choreography. His blend of tango, flamenco, jazz and Susan Stroman-esque Broadway results in exciting elevation, smart formation and partner work, and crisp storytelling.

This *Evita* fails to land the satire, nor does it address weaknesses in Lloyd Webber and Rice's rather ambivalent piece, but its dynamic delivery ensures Eva the diva lives on. ●