

ETCETERA



Left and below: The cast of Evita, which runs at Regent's Park Open Air Theatre until Sept 21. Pictures: MARC BRENNER

Review: Evita at Open Air Theatre

★★★★☆

EVITA

Regent's Park Open Air Theatre

Following Jesus Christ Superstar's resurrection, another Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice musical gets the Park treatment.

Jamie Lloyd's stripped-down, super-sleek production ditches period trappings, and finds – via electrifying American actress Samantha Pauly – a diva dictator for 2019.

Dressed in a white slip and trainers, rather than wig and ballgown, Pauly's Eva convinces as a fiery, streetwise teenager longing for big-city adventure, while railing against snobs like those who shunned her lower-class family. Pauly blasts through opposition with powerful, wonderfully unforced vocals.

She has great chemistry with Trent Saunders' intensely physical Che, the challenger to Argentina's adored First Lady, while Ektor Rivera's Perón is an image-conscious chancer just like her.

Frances Mayli McCann brings stirring poignancy to "Another Suitcase in Another Hall", Adam Pearce's tango singer is amusingly cheesy (though his predatory behaviour is addressed by a female quartet), and Ellicia Simondwood is scene-stealing as the child used to whip up Saint Eva fever.

The sensational ensemble is an expressive force throughout, whether

Samantha Pauly convinces as a "diva dictator for 2019," as **Marianka Swain** reports back from Regent's Park

heightening emotional beats or creating explosive set-pieces. Crucially, Fabian Aloise's modern, innovative choreography always serves the drama.

The starkness of Soutra Gilmour's concrete bleachers reflects the Peróns' hollow rule; it's just good "stage management." Creatively, burst balloons signal death, and blue paint blood. However, repeated use of smoke and confetti feels like overkill.

Otherwise, Lloyd makes effective, surprising choices throughout, serving Rice's incisive lyrics and Lloyd Webber's indelible score. Even "Don't Cry For Me Argentina" feels fresh, restlessly

ambivalent about whether Eva buys into her own celebrity and fake populism, and if either satisfies her need for validation.

That brings to mind Evita fan Donald Trump, and Lloyd's production confronts the grim consequences of government by ego and deceit.

But it's cautiously empathetic towards the scrappy, ambitious woman at the dark heart of this still provocative show.

Evita continues at the Regent's Park Open Air Theatre until September 21. More details and tickets: openairtheatre.com



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