

EVITA (1996)

by

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Evita. Directed by Alan Parker. Screenplay by Alan Parker and Oliver Stone. Based on the book and lyrics by Tim Rice. Music by Andrew Lloyd Webber. Costumes by Penny Rose. Released by Hollywood Pictures. 1997.

INTRODUCTION

Maria Eva Duarte is one of five illegitimate children born to peasants in a small Argentine village. At age 15, she goes to Buenos Aires to find her fortune. Pursuing a theatrical career, she has little luck: walk-on parts, fashion modeling, small roles in forgettable productions. When she turns to radio, however, she finds her place. In 1943, at age 25, she is a radio soap opera star and uses her position to climb a political and power ladder consisting of various men. In January 1944, she meets Colonel Juan Peron. In some mysterious way, a synergy between the two propels him to be a populist leader who survives several military coups and imprisonment to become president. She, in turns, becomes the most politically powerful woman in the world. She starts the Eva Peron Foundation which is responsible for homes for the aged, school, clinics, and housing projects. When she runs for vice president during her husband's second term, her nomination is blocked by the military. A year later, at age 33, she dies of uterine cancer. Hundreds of thousands of mourners stand in a downpour to see her body. In 1955, during another military coup, her body disappears and travels around the world for two decades. In 1974, when her remains are finally returned to Argentina, her cult grows to enormous proportions and her bones are venerated like those of a saint. (PG-13)

This plot summary is not that of the movie *Evita*, which is often too disjointed to follow from a historical point of view, but that of the real Evita (and therefore I have not appended the actor's names: Evita is played by Madonna, Che by Antonio Banderes, and Juan Peron by Jonathan Pryce). The story has had many transformations from history to the musical stage to film. This is quite an odyssey for any legend. Evita goes from a peasant/activist to a stage singing star, to what some people claim to be a peasant/activist. The story surrounding *Evita* is not only circular, but linear and spiral all at the same time. It is very complex and not quite understandable (for many reasons, not the least of which is that "the winners write history" which here translates into "money writes history" or "movies rewrite history"). However, the brief glimpses of this multi-layered story, those that we can perceive with any clarity, are fascinating, not only for their historical ironies, their reflections on the conflict between world politics and popular culture, but also for their archetypal significance.

Hollywood's view of history, especially the history of heroes, has always been a heavily airbrushed one. And the casting of Madonna is both part of the deception and part of the truth of the film. Madonna, too, is an illegitimate child. Both become heads of their own production companies at a young age. Both have debatable positions in the history of women's rise to power. Evita is revered in Argentina for her activism on behalf of the poor and for her work as an early feminist who changes the apolitical position of women forever (for example, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, Sandinista leader, newspaper publisher, and currently President of Nicaragua would not be where she is without the pioneering efforts of Evita Peron). The film, in this way, seems to

reflect a minority view (mostly championed by historical revisionists like Camille Paglia), wherein Madonna can be seen as a feminist trailblazer in her bringing women's sexuality from a commodity status controlled primarily by men into something that women have the right to control themselves (while still commodified – the difference being who controls the structure and sale of the commodity – which may or may not be a good thing, depending on which feminists you ask). What the future will bring for the bad girl of MTV, whether she will follow further in Evita's footsteps, remains to be seen. On this point, admirably, the film asks, "Why shouldn't women have the same ambition as men?"

While the filmmakers have attempted to make a multi-layered film, what they have produced is confusion. This is clearly seen in the dance sequence when Evita comes to Buenos Aires for the first time. Tango – the national dance of Argentina – is what we expect. What we get, however, is a *mélange* of Tango, Mambo, Samba (the dance from Brazil which was, at that time, Argentina's enemy both politically and culturally), and Rumba, a Cuban dance that had not even been invented yet! On the other hand, one of the most moving scenes in the film is the slow, lugubrious Tango danced in a cafe to express the people's sadness at Evita's death.

What adds further to the confusion of the film is the misguided position of Che – the ever-present, Greek-chorus commentator on the action. This floating observer follows her everywhere, in her small town, through her makeover and to her triumph at the side of Juan Peron. His apparent purpose is to keep the audience informed of what is going on. However, he cynically

tries to reveal her “real” motivations – greed, egotism, vanity. In this way he intrusively distances us from what we are seeing on the screen. We never get a chance to participate emotionally by sharing this woman’s rise and fall – Che’s tour of the “truth” is intended to separate us from those simpletons who get suckered in by her charisma. And thereby he separates us from the masses whether we like it or not. And consequently, his character makes *Evita* classist and racist, for “they” are stupid while “we” are smart. Without Che’s ever-present and heavy handed commentary, we would at least have a chance of making up our own minds.

The choice of the character of Che as the Virgil to our Dante is a bit odd. Yes, this Che is Ernesto “Che” Guevara. Historically, he *was* in Argentina in the 1950s. But he participated in the riots *against* Peron! He then went on to legendary fame as the revolutionary leader in Bolivia and Cuba we have come to know. His role in this film is like some very odd cultural introject; Antonio Banderes is nonetheless absolutely charming in this thankless role.

If the film manipulates us away from embracing *Evita*, what does it want of us? Hard to know. Is it to have pop goddess Madonna parade around in 80 costume changes (Guinness Book of Records – are you listening?) while playing another pop goddess? I hope not. Is it to make Juan Peron’s fascist dictatorship palatable to the American public? (In expectation of what?) Again, I hope not. Is it to bring back the film musical – with two hours of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s untuneful, bombastic recitative with one slightly melodic song and thousands of mourners singing in the chorus to shellshock the viewers? (The writing varies from groaner to groaner, from “the Buenos

Aires big apple,” to “the reign in Spain.”) Again, I hope not. Everything here is vague and unsatisfying despite the staccato pace of the editing which seems to substitute for narrative drive.

Admittedly, the scale is entertaining. And Madonna is in good voice and shows a range of vocal expression not heard before. Her acting is once again top notch – not since *Desperately Seeking Susan* [1985] has she seemingly so easily slipped into a role. However, when Madonna plays a 15-year-old, we see the flesh hanging from her arms as an anachronistic sign of aging. This has the same grisly hilarity to it that Elizabeth Taylor’s ancient Egyptian vaccination scar did in *Cleopatra* [1963].

So, what is really going on here? I am not sure, but here are a few hints I picked up. Before the titles appear, we hear shooting and voices. We are watching a movie-within-a-movie. Perhaps this is an immediate message to the audience: What we are watching is nothing more than a movie. It is not history, it is entertainment. A dream. However, the movie/dream is broken when the projector is shut off, a riot ensues . . . until people are told that Evita is dead – another celluloid dream is broken. If this is the ploy the filmmakers intend, I see this as a cheap way to avoid moral commitment on their part, an intellectually snobbish way of dealing with serious issues. (If this is so, then it is an extension of the attitude generated by the Che character – to distance us from what is taking place on the screen, to move us from emotional involvement to a sterile intellectual consideration.)

Evita's earliest experience (as shown in the film) is being barred from her father's funeral because she is illegitimate. Her subsequent actions can be seen as an attempt to assuage this early childhood trauma – to bring dignity to the common people, to break down the barriers between the classes, even to bring down the Argentine aristocracy. (Despite the portrayal in the film, Evita was accepted by the doyens of society at the time.) Yet, none of this is developed in the narrative of the film.

What the film *does* develop, perhaps without even knowing it, is a very ancient archetypal story. Psychotherapist Fritz Perls summarized it well (though with very different intentions), "Being is becoming." When one plays at a role, that role will often take on an energy of its own which can swamp the psyche and take over the individual – sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. (Actors must be very careful not to be hollowed out by taking too many roles to heart and losing their true selves.) One of the best filmic examples of this effect is in *Schindler's List* [1993], where we observe a man's journey from a greedy swine to a savior by simply playing that role. In *Evita*, however, it is a little more complex, for the journey of Evita's psyche is not that linear (nor is the film). Peasant girl Evita plays at being an actress . . . and becomes one. However, the role of actress is one of deceit, of make believe, of putting aside the true self in deference to the role. Thus we, and perhaps the Evita of the film herself, never quite know how much is acting and how much is psychic truth. Evita begins as a social climber, a courtesan on her way up the social and political ladder of Argentine society. By pretending to be a leader, she becomes one. Probably despite herself. And because the driving force behind this is the actor archetype, we never trust

her. She probably does not trust herself. And this lack of trust, both within the film in its characters, and external to the film in its attitude toward the audience (along with the cynical approach to the story telling discussed above), makes for a very sterile film experience. What could have sucked us into a vortex of psychic energy, growth, and confusion, ultimately becomes an off-putting film. The actor archetype is a very dangerous one for it robs its victims (and films) of their souls. It is difficult to develop a political personality without any explanation of the politics within which the person develops. We are expected to accept such inanities as a populist dictatorship.

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