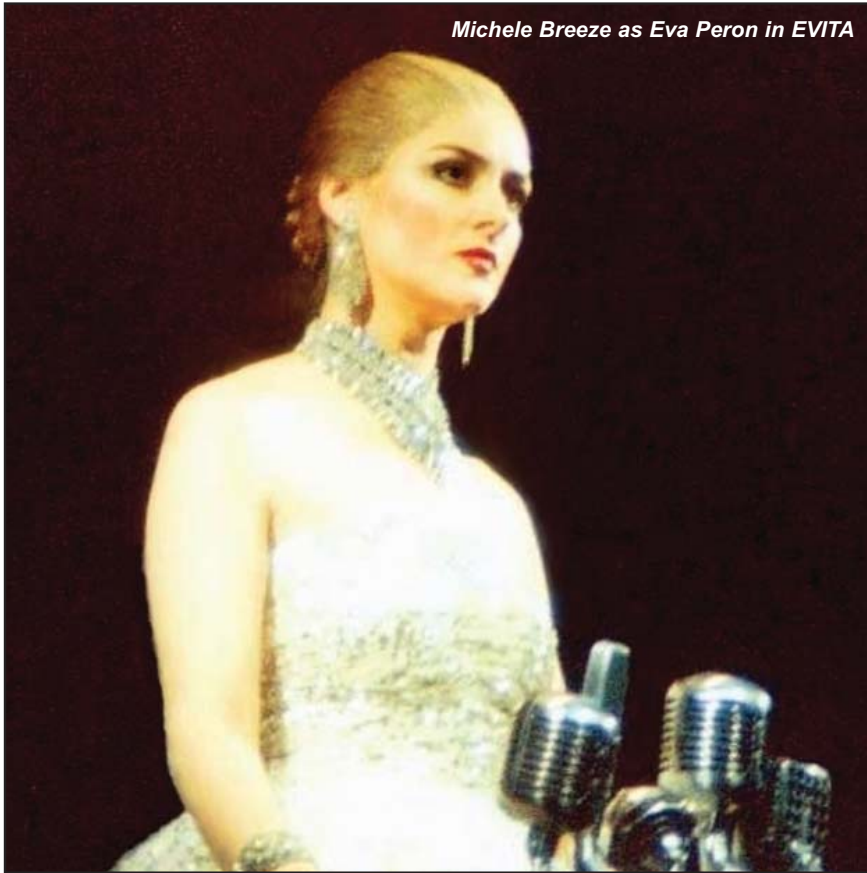
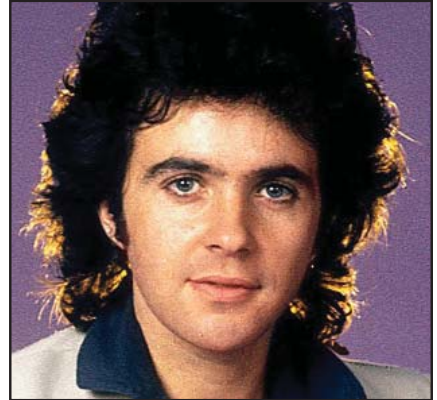




EVITA - 30 YEARS ON



Michele Breeze as Eva Peron in EVITA



David Essex

by Michele Breeze

EVITA - 30th Anniversary of The World Hit Musical by Andrew Lloyd Webber & Tim Rice

London is famous for a great many things, not least it's innovative and quality Theatre. We have the most wonderful performers of the highest quality here and indeed we are the envy of the world when it comes to theatre. The birth of a brand new musical is indeed the most exciting event to be involved in, which is why I now write and perform new one woman musical dramas. However, I doubt I would have ever reached this wonderful plateau of complete creativity had I not been fortunate enough to land the part of understudy to Elaine Paige at the birth of the new Andrew Lloyd Webber - Tim Rice musical EVITA.



Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice

I played the title role of Evita in London many times during my three and half years in this West End Production and went on to become the first Evita to tour Australasia / New Zealand. It was truly a life changing experience for me to work with Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber & Tim Rice, be directed by the great Hal Prince and Choreographed by the legendary Larry Fuller. To be musically directed by the ultimate perfectionist Anthony Bowles and to perform alongside the likes of Elaine Paige, Joss Ackland and David Essex. Not to mention the ensemble cast which was a variable goldmine of eclectic talent & experience.



Hal Prince

EVITA opened at The Prince Edward Theatre Old Compton Street on 21st June 1978 and this year celebrates its birth here in London some 30 years ago. At the time it was the most politically controversial, most hyped, most expensive and most successful musical of all time. Its casting for a start was not traditional. The part of Che Guevara was played by David Essex a Rock Star ! (not theatre darling!) but a national heart throb whom every female aged from aged 9 to 99 (who still had a heart beat)

was in love with. Peron was played by well known character actor Joss Ackland who had been in countless tv series, films and plays, but was not known before for his musical skills. The title role of EVITA became THE role to have after many world class stars such as Lisa Minnelli and Barabara Streisand allegedly auditioned, along with virtually every female performer in the country. Thus, after many weeks of front page speculation, the part was finally cast to the unknown and diminutive Elaine Paige. Shock! horror ! that just wasn't done in those days, stars got star roles, that's the whole idea surely ? The Press had a field day.

To set and stage a musical that has never been done before meant that every day was filled with innovation, surrounded by incredibly talented people firing on all cylinders and bouncing off each other. It was a whirlwind of non stop hyper -activity which took five weeks of extreme effort from every single soul to pull off. Cast rehearsals took place at Cecil Sharp House and professionalism was paramount. Any lateness, bad attitude or directional reluctance, was swiftly dealt with by replacement. There was no time for egos, so much to do so little time to do it in, and there was one boss, the director, Hal Prince (it was in his contract !) Mornings was singing, afternoons was dancing / staging, everyone learned everything. We were handed a huge musical score which we were expected to sight read and learn, plus the script and lyrics which were in a mixture of English, Argentinean Spanish and Latin and I was handed twice as much as anyone else as I not only had to learn my part in the ensemble, but also the title role of Eva Peron. I had to attend all Elaine's tutorial rehearsals as well as my own, which obviously meant I had to be in two places at the same time! Every day, Andrew Lloyd Webber would rush in like an unmade bed with reams of musical scores under his arms which, one presumed, he had been up all night writing and give them to Hershey Kay who would immediately arrange them and give them to Anthony Bowles, who would teach them to us and the assistant MDs. Attention to detail was the buzzword in every aspect of the show. 'Eva Peron' never set foot on the stage twice wearing the same jewellery and the show was a constant quick change for her. She had three full time dressers, one wig / makeup and one sound engineer with her at all times and they



worked flat out throughout the show. The original set had computerised, motorised platforms which was literally ground breaking technology at the time. These brought you on and off the stage and this must have seemed a great idea on paper. The platforms would leave exactly on cue, however, the danger here was if you missed it, well, you'd missed it! once it was gone, it was gone and all that was left was 'a gaping black hole at least 20 feet across' and the other problem was, it was impossible to see if the trucks were 'in' or 'out' as everything was painted black, at the upstage entrance on the raked stage this left a hole about 14 feet deep and downstage the hole was about 4 feet deep. One night during a very fraught technical rehearsal, where as usual with new things, nothing worked. Hal Prince (the Director) was having a nightmare. He was screaming at the top of his voice and waving his arms in the air in true New York fashion and basically everyone was keeping their heads down, as all sorts of trucks, cinema screens, banners and beds, were flying in and out without warning and at the wrong times all in total darkness, it was absolute mayhem. During the almost constant blackouts I suddenly heard a distressed voice crying out for help and recognised it as the voice of Jimmy Cassidy, one of the high Tenor singers and I called for the house lights to come up. Jimmy had simply wandered up stage and fallen down the 14 foot deep 'Black Hole' and had broken a bone in his foot and he had to be taken to hospital. Hal was now at his wits end and he said to the cast "What is the matter with this cast? don't you know a 'black hole' when you see one, or do you just fall into them like Lemmings? Later, he exploded again, "Where the hell is Evita?????" Everyone was very tired and the cast fell into complete silence. As our eyes accustomed to the dim light we saw something that looked roughly the size of a football appear from under the stage itself and it then hovered slightly above the stage. Someone whispered "Look it's the Prince Edward ghost" and then we saw what we

believed was a 'floating orb' moving slowly across the front of the stage. As our eyes became accustomed to the light we gradually realised it was Elaine Paige's head, moving, apparently body less across the stage. It was now clear that Elaine had also fallen into the downstage 'black hole' which was only a mere 4 feet deep! apparently Elaine was unharmed and not wishing to stress Hal Prince anymore, picked herself up and continued. Hal then said "Look I know you are all English (a standing joke between the American Director and the English cast) but do you think that after all that has happened tonight you could try not to fall into the Goddammed 'black holes' I mean it is not rocket science, you know they are there, even if you can't see them, use your brains for God Sake". At which point he turned and immediately disappeared into thin air and into one of the holes! We all burst into hysterics, trying desperately not to laugh at Hal who was still clutching his privates! Fortunately, he saw the funny side and joined in the hysteria (if only to hide his tears). When eventually it all finally calmed down, Hal shouted "OK Guys, now I see the problem, stuff the computers and the trucks and get the carpenters to fill up the Goddammed 'black holes' "

Opening night was 21 June 1978 and it was a night I shall never forget, the atmosphere was electric, and all day long flowers, telegrams, fruit baskets and cards were constantly being delivered to our dressing room.

Then came all the presents from 'The Management' which was The Robert Stigwood Organisation, David Land, Andrew Lloyd-Webber, Tim Rice, Hal Prince, Larry Fuller and Anthony Bowles. Frankly, now, 30 years later, I can hardly remember who actually gave what,

but we were all given a full case of Champagne, a case of red wine and a case of white wine, plus a set of 4 crystal glasses etched with the Evita logo and a basket of magnificent flowers and, as I was also understudy to Evita, I personally was given a beautiful silver Evita necklace and appropriately, Elaine's was cast in gold. The excitement of that night was indescribable. Royalty attended, as did many big stars of Stage, Opera, Ballet and Screen. During the three and a half years I spent in the London Evita, it became perfectly normal to meet backstage, people you would ordinarily only read about in magazines or see on TV or in the Movies. Silvester Stallone, Margo Fontaine, Princess Margaret, Lady Diana Spencer or



Elaine Paige in EVITA 1978

Dustin Hoffman were all regular visitors. The Opening night was unbelievable, the standing ovation went on and on for at least ten minutes and even after the curtain was lowered the audience refused to go home and continued applauding. When Elaine Paige returned for another bow they went completely wild, it was truly fantastic and she deserved every moment of it, as an actress, she gave 100 per cent on that night and every other night that she performed.

After the show there was a huge party which was held on a boat near Westminster which was moored very close to the statue of Queen Boadicea (whom I have written and performed a musical drama about) and anybody who was anybody was there. Stars from Film, TV, Music were everywhere you turned, it was magical, the food was fantastic and the champagne flowed all night. We partied and danced to a disco until the newspapers were printed and someone took a cab to Fleet Street and bought all the newspapers as they came off the press. Every front page screamed "It's a Hit" - "EVITA is a star" - "Don't Cry for me Argentina I'm a Star" etc.etc.

Evita went on to be the biggest hit and the longest running musical in the West end, it opened with two million pounds advance bookings, which at the time was unheard of and has since performed in more countries and languages than any other musical. On June 21st 2008, EVITA celebrated its 30th year in existence and to me it seems like only yesterday since that curtain went up on the opening night. It gave me the experience and opportunity to work with the best and, more importantly, learn from the best, it taught me professionalism, stamina and humility and I am eternally grateful for that one moment in time, the moment I was cast in EVITA.



EVITA prog. Michele as Eva Peron



Lady Diana



Silvester Stallone



Margo Fontaine