

# Entertainment

Ethel Simmons editor/644-1100

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**Florence Lacey has become familiar with the life and character of Evita Peron, from playing the charismatic First Lady of Argentina in many productions and from reading books about Evita's rise from poverty to politics as the wife of Juan Peron. This is Lacey's third visit to the metropolitan area in the musical "Evita." Previously, she appeared in two touring companies that played Detroit's Masonic Temple. The show runs through Sunday, April 12, at the Birmingham Theatre. STEPHEN CANTRELL / staff photographer**



**Barbara Michals**

## 'Evita' deserves your rapt attention

Performances of the Birmingham Theatre production of the musical "Evita" continue through Sunday, April 12. For ticket information call the box office at 644-3533.

By Barbara Michals  
special writer

Featuring Webber and Rice's most melodious, bumbable songs, "Evita" at the Birmingham Theatre remains a dynamic musical well worth a first visit or a repeat viewing. It's a serious show, far different from the composers' other hits.

"Evita" chronicles the rise and fall of Eva Peron, wife of Argentina dictator Juan Peron, from an impoverished teenager to the most powerful woman in Latin American history. The play's dramatic strength is that it manages to humanize Eva Peron without ever glorifying or even whitewashing her.

Florence Lacey in the title role and Philip Hernandez as Che, the caustic narrator, deliver strong, passionate performances. They are backed by a polished company under the direction of John H. Lowe III and choreographer Kenneth W. Urnston.

While Lacey's voice is not as operatic as that of earlier Evitas, she has great emotional range and brings a high degree of credibility to the role. As Eva's health declines, Lacey does a remarkable job of visibly shrinking and withering.

OFTEN DESCRIBED as a woman who seduced an entire nation, Eva hypnotized the impoverished masses into venerating her as a near-saint while she lived like royalty and socked away public funds in private Swiss bank accounts.

Having slept her way to the top, she never understood why the upper classes rejected her. Nor could she understand why her body failed her when she was so near the peak of her political ambition.

As Che, the rebellious voice of reason, Hernandez's expressive face serves him equally well whether he is doing some engaging clowning or denouncing the Perons with fiery rhetoric.

"She didn't say much, but she said it loud," sings Che, summing up Eva as a consummate actress merging politics and show business (and long before such a merger was fashionable). Similarly, Peron understands and capitalizes on Eva's appeal to the poor. "She is a diamond in their dull, gray lives," he sings, and her glamor "takes us away from the squalor of the real world."

JOHN LESLIE Wolfe is a smooth, self-possessed Peron. In the rhythmic duet "I'd Be Surprisingly Good for You," Juan and Eva seize upon the potential use each can make of the other.

Kenneth McMullen as Magaldi has a pleasing voice in "On This Night of the Night."

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## 'Evita's' star Florence Lacey plays stellar role

By Ethel Simmons  
staff writer

MEETING FLORENCE Lacey for the first time, backstage at the Birmingham Theatre, you notice there's not much resemblance to the dynamic character she plays onstage — Evita Peron. Perhaps the only thing they have in common is the platinum-blond hair.

A pretty, composed actress, with a slender face, Lacey has starred as Evita on Broadway and in three national companies of the international musical hit. She went from red hair — which she tucked under a blonde wig in the second act during an earlier tour visiting Detroit — to her present, flowing blonde tresses.

"I got tired of wearing the second wig," she said. She went blonde and "my agent liked it, and my husband liked it."

Lacey is married to Timothy Stela, whom she met on tour when they first did the show in Detroit. That's one reason she has fond memories of the city where "Evita" played the Masonic Temple twice, in 1982 and 1984.

"WE GOT wonderful reviews,"

**'She was hard because she was a vulnerable girl trying to compete in this man's society. She felt she was the only one speaking out for the poor.'**

— Florence Lacey

she said. "We were very full of ourselves. We had champagne parties in my dressing room for three months. I don't think we missed a night."

Lacey is relaxed and earnest. Instead of being tired of talking about Argentina's famous, controversial First Lady, who was the wife of dictator Juan Peron, she's full of information regarding Evita.

The Broadway musical star has read seven biographies about Evita, seen two documentaries and carries Evita's autobiography on the road with her, constantly rereading it.

Lacey is strongly sympathetic to the character of Evita. She tries onstage to let the naive and vulnerability show, along with the powerful drive that propelled Evita from the slums of Argentina to the "Big Ap-

ple." Buenos Aires, where she met Peron and rose with him to dominate the country.

ASKED WHAT she thought of Payne Dunaway's interpretation of Evita (as a cruel and vengeful leader) in the 1981 television movie "Evita Peron," she hesitated before replying. "I think that was pretty one-dimensional. I don't think this was a one-dimensional woman."

"I think she was a woman ahead of her time."

But she doesn't believe her portrait of Evita overemphasizes good qualities.

"You see a great deal of her hard and cold, calculating edge. She was hard because she was a vulnerable girl trying to compete in this man's

society. She felt she was the only one speaking out for the poor."

In the play, Philip Hernandez as Che Guera, the narrator, is the voice with a touch of irony that tells the opposite side of the story.

Said Lacey, "There is always the pro and con, which is what makes this such an interesting play, whether you want to be seduced by her. Was she good or evil?"

Although always happy to answer questions about Evita, Lacey doesn't remember all the details about the actress-mistress turned First Lady. "I just remember the emotions of her a lot," she said.

AMONG THE details she does remember is that Evita, who broadcast over the radio, began speaking about Peron before they ever met. "One account said he used to listen to these radio reports and cry."

Peron lost his first wife to cancer, then Evita developed leukemia. After her death, Peron gave her jewelry to young girls.

"Her body was perfectly preserved. The new president had it shipped out of the country and buried. After he was assassinated, the

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**'I'd Be Surprisingly Good for You' Evita (Florence Lacey) and Peron (John Leslie Wolfe) sing when they first meet at a charity concert.**

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