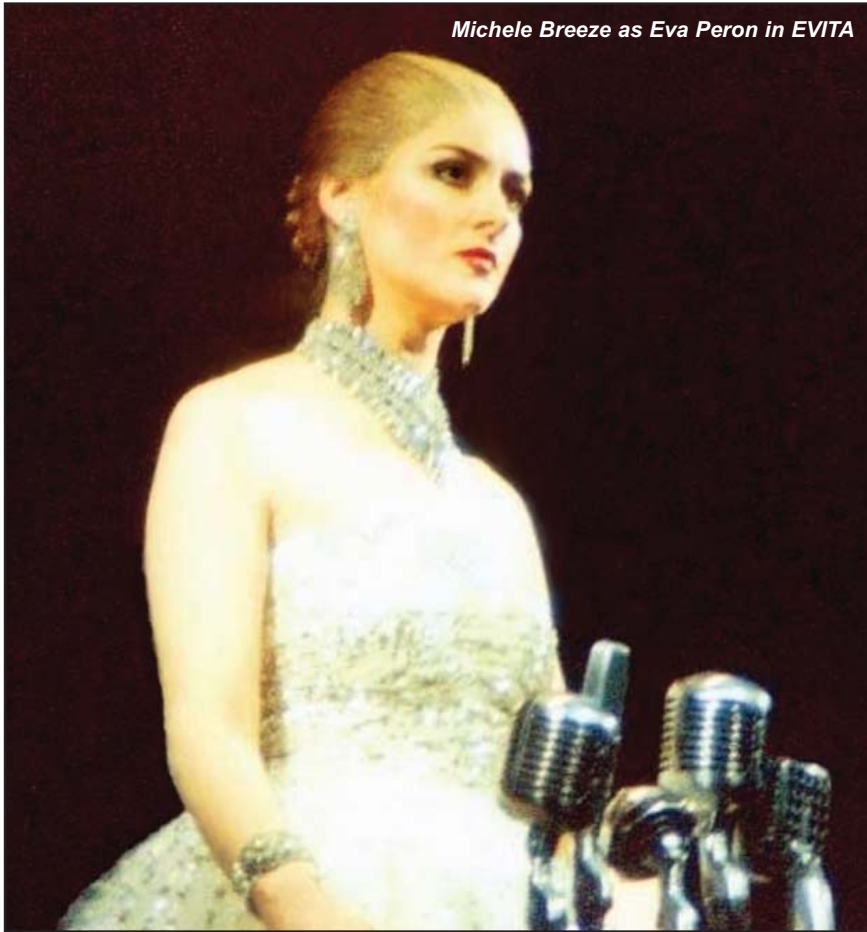




# EVITA - 30 YEARS ON



Michele Breeze as Eva Peron in EVITA

by Michele Breeze

**London is famous for a great many things; not least it's innovative and quality Theater. When you actually live in London, It's easy to become blasé about it and take it for granted, where as those who do not have this wonderful privilege on tap, literally save up for months and meticulously plan their trip to London, to co-incide with seeing certain Shows, not to mention flying in from all over the World for certain theatrical events. An eye opener perhaps and a slap on the wrist for any Londoner who has not been to the Theater for the last six months, redeem thyselfes now!**

We have performers of the highest quality here and indeed, are the envy of the world when it comes to theatre and so we should be, here we have theatrical performing dynasties which go back as far as Shakespeare - I have traced my own musical theatrical family back at least five generations!

So for me 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 musicals; 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 perfec-

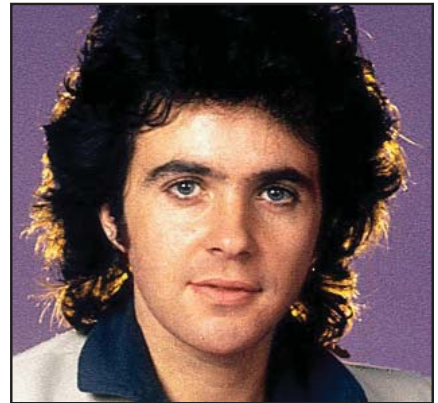


tionist Anthony Bowles and to perform alongside the likes of Elaine Paige, Joss Ackland, David Essex, Nigel Planer, Mark Ryan and Siobhan McCarthie not to mention the ensemble cast which were hand picked from all walks of entertainment, the theatre, ballet, circus, disco, Opera, Cabaret and Rock, they were indeed the best of the best, it was a variable goldmine of eclectic talent & experience and I tried desperately to soak up and learn as much as I possibly could. The talent didn't end there with the cast, the lighting, the sound, the wardrobe, the wigs, the orchestra, the crew, were all hand picked. Creativity oozed from every pore of The Prince Edward Theatre.

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 Guivarra was played by



**David Essex**, a Rock Star! - Not a theatre darling! but a national heart throb whom every female aged between 9 to 99, who still had a heart beat was in love with. (Clever box office!) 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. (Security - box office and intrigue!)

The title role of EVITA became THE role to have after many world class stars such as Liza Minelli and Barabara Striesand to name only two from an endless list who allegedly auditioned along with virtually every female performer in the country and after many weeks of front page speculation, the part was finally cast to the completely "commercially" 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?), so she had better be damned good! - (Intruigue - box office -curiosity) newspaper frenzy! (box office - box-office - box-office) when I told my mum I was down to the last three she said "Don't be ridiculous, who do you think you are - Julie Covington?" she only believed it when she saw a full length photo of me in the Daily Express - but gave me a word of warning "Don't get excited - I don't want you to get hurt - you haven't got a hope in hell!"



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 from the set designers - lighting designers - sound designers - costume designers - wig designers - prop designers - Orchestra and crew - riggers - electricians - carpenters and painters - dressers - stage managers - company managers - PR and promotions.

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, 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 Evita - I was incredibly excited but what I was most anxious to disguise was that I am dyslexic and could not read music, not to mention the last dance class I had taken was when I was ten years old ! Stress? - phew - what stress? - (In case you are wondering I tape record everything and learn it by ear) - 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! This also included costume fittings

and wig fittings, which, for Evita were long and many.

Everything changed everyday and the things you stayed up all night learning would simply be cut the next day for no apparent reason. I remember in particular Larry Fuller who famously choreographed 'West Side Story', had this fantastic dance number which lasted about seven minutes and would have stopped the show, it was truly breath taking, using just the dancers who were from all walks of dance and they were the best of the best after rehearsing this for three weeks it was brilliant. Hal Prince walked in one morning, watched it and simply cut it with no explanation at all - it was devastating and yet Larry, with no sign of disappointment at all, moved immediately on to setting the scene transformation without the dance number.

Every day Andrew Lloyd Webber would rush in like an unmade bed with realms of musical scores under his arms which one presumed he had been up all night writing, and give them to Hershy Kaye who would immediately arrange them and give them to Anthony Bowles who would teach them to us and the assistant MDs. Anthony was a particular lover of choral requiems and nothing short of perfection was acceptable, he had an ear that could hear everybody at all times and in the original stage cast there were supreme sopranos whose voices could literally shatter glass and bass baritones that shook the floor boards. There was no chance of not "feeling it" in that cast! One morning during the requiem and bearing in mind there were 40 in the cast singing it Anthony stopped everything and said "Stand up Michele," shocked, I stood up dropping all my music to the floor "now what exactly are you singing?" I was dumbstruck thinking he wanted

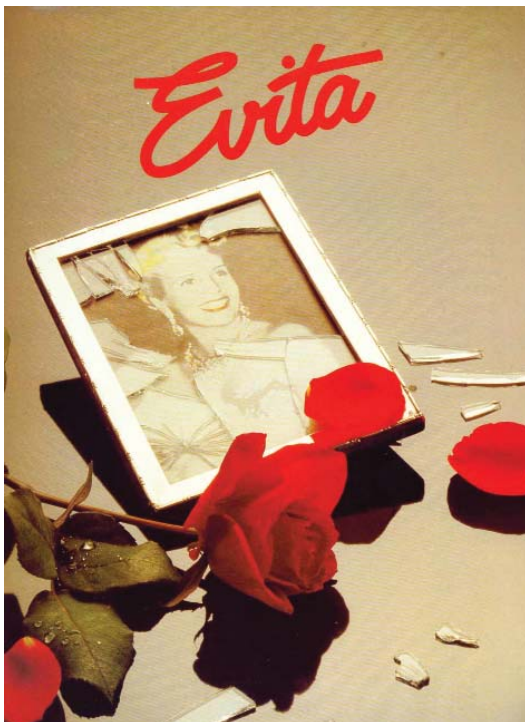
me to tell him in 'musical terms' I panicked and the tears just streamed down my face, I was sure I was about to be sacked on the spot. Bemused he clasped his hands together at his chest tilted his head to one side and said "sing it dear - sing it!" ( I don't know if you know this but it is almost impossible to sing whilst you are crying ) anyway I managed to sing it and at the end he smiled at me saying "now Michele that was absolutely beautiful dear but it was wrong" he took me over to the piano and played straight through my mezzo soprano lines for the entire requiem and then said "you sing it now" which I did "perfect dear perfect" he said and then he leaned over and whispered in my ear "I don't know why you're crying, you'll know all this long before the readers will dear" and he winked at me and continued on with the rehearsal, obviously he knew all along I couldn't read music but his prediction was right, the day all the music was taken away chaos ensued....!but nothing changed for me and I learned a good lesson that day, to

be able to learn by ear is a gift and not something to be ashamed of.

Attention to detail was the buzz word in every aspect of costume, make up, wigs and jewelry. The gradual build of caricature of Eva Peron herself was quite mind blowing, Evita never set foot on the stage twice with the same jewelry on 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, every time she left the stage she was changing, it was an amazing experience just to learn the quick changes it was like a military exercise and it had to be perfected, lifting the correct arm and leg, bending over standing up as they pulled off your clothes, wigs, mics, shoes stockings and jewelry and put on the replacements all at the same time, it was quite tricky I can tell you. Panic is not an option and a good tip I learned is to seal your lips and not speak for any reason at all, this focuses the mind and stops you distracting yourself. Each quick change was timed on a stop watch and counted down and then you were dragged, no matter what state of undress you were in, to your entrance platform in the wings for your entrance.

The original set had computerised, motorised platforms which were literally ground breaking technology at the time - these brought you onto and off the stage - 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 racked 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, the computers which were new technology at the time, were not cueing on time, nor were the lights or the sound or the trucks etc etc, during these times the cast have to be there but most of the time they are in the way, they don't want to be there. The Director doesn't want them there, nor do the technical crew but they have to be there to see and make sure everything works for them as we all know equipment works perfectly providing people are not involved! Hal Prince was red faced and screaming at the top of his voice and waving his arms in the air in a 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 and in total darkness, it was absolute mayhem and, as I have come to learn, typical of a new production.

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, I called for the house lights to come up and we eventually found Jimmy who had simply wandered up stage and fallen down a 'black hole' about 14





*EVITA prog. Michele as Eva Peron*

feet deep and had broken a bone in his foot and had to be taken to hospital. Hal Prince was now at his wits end and 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? Now we are going to try this scene once more, and then we'll call it a night" It was now about 2am. "Positions please - Blackout - music - Action-Cue.." the trucks moved suddenly and everyone nearly fell off but just about managed to stay upright at last we were on the stage, a small dull spotlight was pointing to a spot downstage where Evita was due to appear..... Nothing... I should mention at this point that Elaine Paige was extremely reliable and as far I am aware has never missed an entrance in her life. Hal hit the roof with "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 bodiless across the stage, the cast, crew and Hal watched in deathly silence, hardly daring to breath - when suddenly the head began singing "The actress hasn't learned the lines you'd like to hear etc etc." 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, slightly late, as directed, but as Elaine is petite, all any of us could see was a floating head. The cast, now realising Elaine was fine and had not been decapitated, all tried very hard not to laugh and to carry on as though nothing was amiss.

Hal, seeing us all desperately trying not to laugh, thought this was a cast joke and was absolutely furious and flew up onto the stage in a terrible rage, Elaine catching his mood, explained to him that she too had fallen down a 'black hole' as the truck was not in position and one simply could not see if it was in or out. Hal calmed down immediately, concerned that his leading lady was not injured 3 days before the first preview. I must add at this point that Hal was usually very good humoured and everybody really liked him, he was very loud and very American and artistic and flamboyant although tonight he did appear to be on the verge of a stroke!

He 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, OK, got it???"

All together we answered "Yes Hal" at which point he turned and immediately disappeared into thin air! Now I admit it had been a funny old night, what with Jimmy Cassidy and the foot - Elaine Paige and the floating head and now the disappearing director so no-one dare move, all you could see were 40 pairs of eyeballs looking at each other in disbelief, the spell was suddenly broken by 'ARRRR!' and we all moved slowly to the edge of our truck on which we were completely marooned in the middle of the stage and cautiously leaned forward over the edge and peered downwards, there writhing in agony clutching his crotch was Hal at the bottom of the 'black hole'. The stage managers rushed to help haul him out of the hole, but by now the boy dancers (who had a tendency to be naughty) could not contain themselves and were literally crying with laughter, unfortunately, this became very infectious and soon the entire cast and crew were helplessly in hysterics, trying not to laugh at Hal who was still clutching his privates! Fortunately Hal 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!!" And so the course of musical history was changed and hundreds of thousands of pounds worth of computerised design ended up in the dustbin of history.

The next day Larry Fuller Choreographed the cast though they were being brought on by the trucks and thus another wonderful piece of theatrical artistry was created.

Those of us who were playing lead roles were warned about personal security and told that it would not be safe for us to attempt to visit Argentina for fear of arrest, kidnap or assassination. With the opening night approaching there were Pro and Anti Peronista demonstrations in the streets outside the theatre, whilst, at the same time the cues for tickets wrapped around the theatre and got caught up in the demonstrations and fighting broke out, due to this we had 24 hour security at the theatre as the press tried every method known to man to

get in to see the rehearsals and break the news and photo headlines first.

People were trying every which way to get in, there were the teeny boppers trying to get in to see David Essex, the demonstrators out to stop the show, the touts out to get extra tickets any way they could, the irate regular theatre goers who wanted tickets this year, the usual theatre reviewers who hadn't been invited, demanding their invitations, not to mention bomb scares from the IRA and threats from the anti Peronista brigade the phones were completely blocked with calls for tickets, and the nearer it got to the opening night the more frantic it became and I took it all in my stride as I imagined this must be how it was for all new musicals - it was mad and exhilarating, nerve wracking and wildly exciting and trust me when I tell you that it was just the thin end of the wedge in the build up to the opening night of EVITA.

On one particular afternoon I came across the front of house security commissioner who was sitting nervously outside the company managers office in fear of his job, he told me....

"Everyone is at fever pitch out there!" people were demanding more than two tickets each, booking office staff were being threatened, fights were breaking out inside and outside in the cues, he had already thrown out 3 journalists, one dressed as a front of house staff, one as a St Johns Ambulance and one as a cleaner when this (his words not mine) 'harassed, scruffy' looking woman walked in with a baby under one arm a toddler under the other and three bags of shopping and tried to walk straight into the auditorium "Hold it, I'm sorry madam you can't go in there" he said and immediately barred her way. The mousey haired looking scruff with the now screaming kids said, in an accent posher than she looked "but you don't understand, I am Mrs. Andrew



*Elaine Paige in EVITA 1978*



Loydd Webber!" and the jaded doorman replied "F\*\*\* off dear I've had three Mrs. Andrew Lloyd Webbers today already, out you go" and he manhandled her, the shopping and the still two screaming kids out the fire exit onto Old Compton Street. (There were no such things as mobile phones in those days and all the landlines were jammed) - Unfortunately for the doorman, it turned out to be the real Mrs. Andrew Lloyd Webber! - But he was forgiven and kept his job.

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' that 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 each, a case of red wine, a case of white wine and a set of 4 crystal glasses etched with the Evita logo, each a basket of magnificent flowers and (as I was also understudy to Evita ) I personally was given a beautiful silver Evita necklace, appropriately, Elaine's was cast in gold .

The excitement of that night was indescribable, Royalty were there, and all the biggest stars of the Stage, Opera, Ballet and Screen. Backstage it was normal to bump into the likes of



Sylvester Stallone, Margo Fontaine or Princess Margaret or an MP, even Lady Diana or Dustin Hoffman. 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.

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 clapping their hands, stamping their feet. We were already back in our dressing rooms opening our champagne when the tany intercom called us all back onto the stage for



*Margo Fontaine*



*Lady Diana*



*Princess Margaret*

yet another curtain call - by the time I got to the stage from dressing room 19, which was 4 floors up, the audience were shouting "Bravo

Bravo" clapping and stamping and demanding yet another bow and when Elaine Paige set foot on the stage they went completely wild cheering, it was truly fantastic and she deserved every moment of it, as a performer, she had given 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 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 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 said " It's a Hit " "EVITA is a star" "Don't Cry for me Argentina I'm a Star " 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. June 21 2008 celebrated its 30th year in existence and to me it seems like only yesterday since that curtain went up on the opening night, it marks the launch of Elaine Paige's career into stardom which she so justly deserved and she went on to become a National Treasure. I myself spent three and a half years in the London production and played Evita many times, too many to count, I was then given Evita for the Australasian/ NZ tour for 'Stewart McPherson's Stetson Productions' it was the experience of a lifetime and the lessons I learned in Evita have in fact shaped my entire life, I became fascinated with all aspects of the production and seeing how they all came together, of course to perform and star in such a production is the 'cherry on the cake', but for me, the journey is more exciting than the arrival. The stardom Elaine achieved here, was to be mine on the Australasian tour, but personally I did not enjoy the invasion of privacy that came with it, and no matter how close you are to it (my father was a star) until you have actually experienced it yourself it is impossible to understand how invasive it can be, fortunately for me, I could fly away from it, come home and be virtually unknown here which I found a great relief and hugely liberating .

I like to try new things all the time and most of the time it's trial and error, I felt the responsibility of being in the public eye and trying to be perfect, too much to cope with, as it stands I am my own worst critic and I love to create art in many forms so I went on to produce shows all over the world and now I write, produce, costume and perform my own one woman musicals with composer Paul Brett.

EVITA 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 - 30 years ago - It was the moment I was cast in EVITA.