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## *Evita*: From Elitelore to Folklore

JAMES W. WILKIE and MONICA MENELL-KINBERG

*University of California, Los Angeles*

I confess that I have an ambition, one single, great  
ambition: I would like the name of "Evita" to figure  
somewhere in the history of my country.

Eva Peron, 1951

The story of Eva Perón and her ambition to influence Argentine history has been told by many, in literature, in cinema, and most recently on the stage in the hit musical *Evita*. Emerging from the various accounts are images of Latin America's most famous female political leader which contrast with one another and with the image that she herself set out to create. Central to an analysis of the historical role and motives of Eva Perón is an examination of the lore about her.

The lore propagated in *Evita* is particularly interesting because history is rewritten in two ways. First, *Evita*, whose role was subordinate to that of General Juan D. Perón during his presidency in Argentina from 1945 to 1955, is seen in the musical as the dominant figure, with Juan playing a role of lesser importance. Second, the narrator of events in the musical is the Argentine-born Cuban revolutionist Ernesto Che Guevara, who did not play an important part in history until after *Evita* died in 1952, and never played any direct role in Argentine history.

Expanding upon ideas first presented in a film by Argentine director Carlos Pasini, *Evita* has revived international interest in Eva Perón by popularizing her life story in theaters in London, Melbourne, New York, Chicago, Madrid, Vienna, and Los Angeles. Acclaimed as the "Best Musical of 1980," *Evita* has won seven Tony Awards and eight Los Angeles Drama Critics' Awards. To date, the musical has been seen

by more than one million persons and has grossed more than \$13.5 million in Los Angeles alone.

This essay attempts to define lore and its component fields: lore of the folk and lore of the elite.<sup>1</sup> Eva Peron's life in the Argentine context is contrasted with the portrayal of her life in the musical. The evolution of lore about *Evita* is traced through representations of her in literature, cinema, and theater. It will be shown how elitelore about *Evita* has become folklore.

The relationship of elitelore to folklore is only beginning to be understood. But new research findings allow us to sketch the outlines of this relationship and to question the origins of folklore in a specific case that may have far-reaching meanings.

### Theory of Lore

The usual scholarly perception of folklore is to see it in terms of common knowledge as developed in myth, traditional wisdom, and understanding that is transmitted from generation to generation through stories, sayings, ballads, songs, and behavioral mannerisms. As folklore is passed along over time, embellishments are added to help maintain topicality in very different epochs. Although folklore is transfigured by many variations, its core of transmitted knowledge remains the same. Folklore *apparently* has no single author; rather it is seen to rise from a collective need to entertain or to explain puzzling matters and predicaments with which the masses must cope.

The relatively new concept of elitelore is defined as special knowledge such as that developed in oral history, literature, cinema, and theater which is transmitted through verbal communication, biography, films, stage, and emulation of behavior.<sup>2</sup> As elitelore is passed down over time, it is learned and refined for different contexts to transmit attitudes

<sup>1</sup> For criticism of an earlier draft of this paper, we are indebted to Ronald H. Dolkart (California State College, Bakersfield) and to Julie M. Taylor (University of California, San Diego). For permission to quote the lyrics from the musical drama *Evita*, copyright 1979 by *Evita Music Limited*, we are grateful to Tim Rice and Leeds Music Corporation (MCA Records). For permission to use stage photos from *Evita*, photography by Martha Swope, we thank the Mary Bryant Agency of New York City. Epigraph is from Eva Peron, *Evita by Evita* (London: Proteus Books, 1978), p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> For the basic definition of elitelore, see James W. Wilkie, *Elitelore* (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications, 1973). The concept was first presented by Wilkie in a paper delivered at the Social Science Research Council Conference on Folklore and Social Science, New York City, November 10, 1967. The most recent of the ongoing refinements of elitelore theory is given in James W. Wilkie, Maria Herrera-Sobek, Edna Monzón de Wilkie, "Elitelore and Folklore: Theory and a Test Case in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*," *Journal of Latin American Lore* 4:2 (1978), 183-223.

and manners involved in differentiating leaders from followers. Elitelore has individual authors who generate lore in order to gain followers and to bind like-minded persons together. Individual and collective elitelore allow leaders to justify their status or their manipulation of the folk.

Elitelore differs from folklore in some fundamental ways. Elites (i.e., leaders) and the masses (i.e., followers) share folklore, but they do not share elitelore. Elitelore allows leaders to set themselves apart and to influence followers in all fields (e.g., politics or the arts) and at many levels (e.g., national or local). There is no one elite at the top of society but multiple elites according to the role played. Figures often thought to belong to an elite by basic membership, from another level of analysis may not be leaders. This is the case of the majority of petroleum workers in Mexico who submit to the leadership of a select few within their elite labor union. Thus we may here distinguish between core and peripheral elites.

If, at yet another level of analysis, folklore provides frameworks that allow the masses to explain their role as well as to learn how to survive in society, elitelore provides parallel frameworks. The leader needs' self-justification for potentially controversial actions and he uses special knowledge to survive as leader. If the masses need a structure of wisdom and knowledge to justify their situation in life, leaders must rationalize their attempts to resolve complex problems the resolution of which would otherwise appear to be arbitrary and unreasonable. Be they leaders or followers, each wants to feel that life has meaning and is worth the "burdens" of striving.

Leaders tend to identify their own advancement with the spread of their ideas-the failure of one begets the failure of the other. Hence in the name of the idea (rather than personal aggrandizement) leaders become influential, rewarding their supporters and penalizing others. In this situation, too often the ends of power merge with the means: the first law of leadership requires that one's influence over followers be maintained in order for "great ideas" to be implemented.

The question arises as to the extent to which elites "invent" lore to sway or control society. As discussed in an earlier study, the lore disseminated by cultural elites, for example, can be seen as selectively influenced by popular belief, thereby creating an intellectual view of what the "folk" are all about.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, elite conceptions of the folk may be so persuasively presented that they come to be accepted as expressing the unarticulated folkways of the masses.

The processual interrelationship of elitelore and folklore can be

<sup>3</sup>Daniel I. Geffner and James W. Wilkie. "Cinematore: *State of Siege* as a Case Study." *Journal of Latin American Lore* 2:2 (1976), 221-238.

called "lore in the making." Such a process has been illustrated previously in two ways. First, elitelore found in the film *State of Siege* was shown as purposefully aimed at discrediting "U.S. Imperialism" by creating internationally the popular image of Uruguay's Tupamaro guerrillas as physically "beautiful people," a folkloric image which the Tupamaros themselves had been unable to generate.<sup>4</sup> Second, the novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by the Colombian Gabriel Garcia Marquez was shown to involve unintended eliteloric creation, of folklore.

Elitelore mixes with folklore, then, when the elite create their own "reality" from what they understand to be the lore of the people. The resulting fictionalized folklore may have results unintended by the author, as in the case of Garcia Marquez who sought in his own way to tell us that men are born daily in Latin America condemned to live in solitude and in fear of engendering children with pigtailed—that is, to live in inhuman, ridiculous conditions subject to a fate not chosen by themselves. But when the story becomes so wonderful that "ridiculous" is seen as positive, the unintended consequences of lore become more important than the intended ones. Thus, in the case of Garcia Marquez, an attack on solitude becomes its very defense. And, as Garcia Marquez's powerful individual elitelore is diffused in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, as the cultural elite misinterpret for the political elite the lore of the folk, it is the folk themselves who may gradually come to collectively accept that misinterpretation.<sup>5</sup>

In a very different case, creation of folklore by elites to attempt to achieve social control has been examined in the context of Nazi Germany. The folktale history of the German people was reinterpreted by the Third Reich to become a medium for the Nazi ideology especially to spread racial propaganda.<sup>6</sup>

To recapitulate, leaders need elitelore to justify their actions and need to construct folklore in order that the importance of their messages be propagated in ways that will strengthen their support among the people. This dual role of elitelore can be depicted in a case study of Maria Eva

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 230-231.

<sup>5</sup> See Wilkie, Herrera-Sobek, Wilkie, "Elitelore and Folklore," pp. 223-223.

<sup>6</sup> See Christa Kamenetsky, "Folktale and Ideology in the Third Reich," *Journal of American Folklore* 90 (1977), 168-178. See also W. E. Simeone, who writes: "Ironically, the new folktale interpretation by the Third Reich) achieved the very opposite of what it officially set out to do. While transforming the folktale into a stale product of Socialist Realism, it severed it from its genuine connection with the living folk tradition, thus stifling its growth and creative development. Finally, the folktale was no longer a true reflection of the common peasant folk, but only a medium for the Nazi ideology, and a mouthpiece of racial propaganda." W. E. Simeone, "Fascists and Folklorists in Italy," *Journal of American Folklore* 91 (1978), 545-557.

Duarte de Peron, who constructed a self-image which she tried to meet and with which she became the first lady of Argentina.

### **Evils Peron in the Argentine Context**

Born into illegitimacy in a poor rural Argentine town in 1919, at age fourteen Eva Duarte left home (where her mother took in "boarders") to seek her fortune in Buenos Aires. At seventeen she landed her first part on the stage and after playing various bit parts in numerous plays, at twenty-two she moved on to film and radio. By 1943 she became the star of Radio Belgrano's weekly program called "Famous Women," which dealt with the lives of personages in history.<sup>7</sup>

Eva's big break, however, came when she met Col. Juan Perón, apparently at a benefit concert for earthquake victims of early 1944.<sup>8</sup> Perón, who was twice Eva's age, was the strongman of the military government and was pleased to take Eva as his mistress. At the time Perón was

<sup>7</sup> J. M. Taylor, *Eva Peron: The Myths of a Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979). pp. 35-36.

<sup>8</sup> Paul L. Montgomery in *Eva. Evita; The Life and Death of Eva Peron* (New York: Pocket Books, 1979), p. 49, says that Evita *claims* that she met Juan at a February benefit concert for the January 1944 earthquake victims of San Juan, Argentina. Juan Jose Sebreli in *Eva Peron, Aventurera o Militante?*, 2d ed. (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Siglo Veinte, 1966). p. 134, gives two possible accounts of the meeting: either Evita and Juan met at a January 22 festival held on behalf of the victims in Buenos Aires's Luna Park or they met outside where Evita was waiting after having been denied entry to the festival. From Juan Peron's own account of the fateful meeting, however, the above do not jibe with Evita's character. According to *Yo, Juan Domingo Peron: Relato Autobiográfico* (Barcelona: Editorial Planeta, 1976). pp. 50-51. Peron as minister of labor and social welfare had declared an immediate state of emergency to aid the earthquake victims and had convoked a meeting of entertainers and actors to plan the raising of funds. According to Juan: "On the day for which I called the meeting ... all the great Argentine artists met [with me].... We have to organize a grand fund raising campaign:

I told them.... Several responded, each giving different ideas as to how to proceed. Then Eva took the floor. I remember that she was not seated in the first row, that she wore a very simple suit, that she was very slender, that she had blond hair, and that she dressed with a small hat which was used at that time. 'No festivals: she responded to the person that had proposed one; 'let us go directly to ask funds without offering anything. In this moment, there is need to organize neither a spectacle nor a tea. Those are old, outmoded approaches. Let us go to the street, to public places, to the racetrack, to the theater, to all important places and tell the people that our brothers need help....' I liked Eva's way of thinking and expressing herself. I realized that she was not like the rest and that she was above them in her manner of speaking and in her plan. She was practical and she had new ideas. 'Good: I told her, 'then since the plan is yours, organize it.' And that's the way it was: she organized the whole campaign." Montgomery, unaware of Juan's account, concluded that Eva and Juan met in October 1943 at a party given by Radio Belgrano for military leaders (see Montgomery. *Eva. Evita*, p. 49).

serving as Minister of Labor, and he soon gave his backing to Eva to organize a union of radio theater artists over which she presided as president. It was the only union of radio artists recognized by the government, and Eva immediately became the most powerful force in that key communications industry.

When Perón was arrested in a military coup against him on October 9, 1945, Eva played a major role in organizing a general strike to paralyze Buenos Aires and to obtain his release.<sup>9</sup> On October 17 Peron was restored to power and five days later he took Eva as his second wife (his first wife died in 1938).

One biographer has cruelly described Eva's rise to power in the following terms that mix some fact with much fiction:

[Eva had arrived in Buenos Aires) with broken shoes and darned stockings, a cardboard suitcase and a sixth-grade education. Her dream was to be an actress and, although she had no talent, she parlayed a steely ambition and a willing body into a salary of \$15,000 a week by the time she was twenty-five. A skilled manipulator of men, she climbed from job to job as she did from protector to protector. Her last conquest, Juan Peron, put her in the presidential palace and she became the most powerful force in what was then Latin America's most powerful country. Lashing out at the rich who had soiled her when she was a teen-ager hungry for work, she altered the social structure of Argentina and became a saint of the working class. After two years of agony, she died of cancer [in 1952] at the age of thirty-three, but her story did not end there. For the next twenty years, her embalmed corpse, attended by a pathologist who kept worrying about her underwear, became a battleground for the violent factions she had done so much to create in Argentine politics. In Latin America, the enduring myths are embroideries of precipitous success and sudden falls, outside of order or reason. In many ways, Eva Peron's history surpassed the dreamiest of myths.

For explorers of her story, there is something to titillate every persuasion. For some she is Eva of Paris, famous for her rooms full of furs, dresses, shoes and hats, and her sultan's collection of jewelry. She is also Evita of the Humble, a simple woman who fed and cared for the poor, dispensing penicillin and crisp bank notes from alligator cases. She is the Woman with the Whip, torturing and terrifying an entire country with methods learned from her Nazi advisers, and she is Mama Eva, a feminist hero who gave Argentina's womep the vote and a new status in life.<sup>10</sup>

By 1949 Eva Perón was the one remaining woman leader in the world. Among her postwar rivals, Madame Chiang Kai-Shek was in

<sup>9</sup> *Yo, Juan Domingo Perón* p. 64. For a view which concludes that Evita did not play a significant role in organizing the general strike to free Juan, see Marysa Navarro, "Evita and the Crisis of 17 October 1945: A Case Study of Peronist and Anti-Peronist Mythology," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 12:1 (1980), 127-138.

<sup>10</sup> Montgomery, *Eva, Evita*, pp. 9-10.



Eva Perón with the appearance she emphasized before her 1947 "Rainbow Tour" of Europe. (From *Yo, Juan Domingo Peron: Relato Autobiografico* [Barcelona: Editorial Planeta, 1976], p. 72)

exile with her husband in Taiwan, and Eleanor Roosevelt was no longer in the White House. Eva had become the virtual minister of labor, head of the Eva Peron Social Welfare Foundation (from which she dispensed millions of dollars to the poor and, it is said, to her secret bank accounts in Switzerland), and the owner of principal newspapers. In 1947 she had made a triumphant state visit (the so-called "Rainbow Tour") to Spain, France, and Italy, where she was accorded honors by Franco, celebrated by the French, and received by the Pope.

With international fame came stories about her sparked by jealousy of her status. Some of the anecdotes were based upon fact and others distorted it. In the former category is the report about an embarrassing moment during her visit to a nightclub in Paris; during a comedy act two men in a camel costume presented her with a bouquet through the back of the outfit at which point Eva stormed out of the club. Paris newspapers reported the incident and one went so far as to say: "She is used to looking at a horse's ass every day. Why should she be upset at the rear of a camel?" In the apocryphal category is the often-repeated tale about an incident that supposedly took place on her European tour when groups in Milan protested against the high prices of food exports charged by "fascist" Argentina. With rocks and tomatoes pelting her limousine, Eva purportedly turned to the retired admiral who was escorting her and complained, "Do you hear that? They are calling me a whore!" To which her consort allegedly replied, "I understand perfectly; I have not been to sea in fifteen years, and they still call me admiral."<sup>11</sup>

Given the hostility Eva faced in her efforts to live down her past, we can understand why she would formulate and attempt to live up to an ideal-self wherein reality blurred with fiction. The process of creating

<sup>11</sup> These stories and dozens of others are repeated by Montgomery in *ibid.* See pages 83 and 81, respectively, for the anecdotes given here. The durability of the "Eva-as-prostitute story" is evidenced most recently by a variation that has worked its way into folklore as told by the former Senator from Idaho Frank Church. Church, former chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and known for his liberal stance favoring full restoration of U.S. diplomatic relations with Fidel Castro and for his backing of the U.S. Panama Canal Treaties, is quoted (after having been defeated in his 1980 bid to retain his seat in the Senate) as taking a philosophical view of his future after leaving the Senate because, as he has said, he will always be called "senator." Thus, Church tells the apocryphal and completely muddled story: "I remember being told of the time dictator Perón and his wife were on a visit to Spain. They attended an official function at a huge stadium. Franco and Perón entered together followed by Evita escorted by an elderly general. When the crowd spotted Evita they shouted 'prostitute, prostitute.' The general leaned over and patted the arm of Evita. 'My dear,' he said, 'it has been 25 years since I was on active duty and they still call me general.'" See *Times of the Americas* (December 17, 1980).

a new self is described in Eva's autobiography, *La Razón de Mi Vida*,<sup>12</sup> published in 1951 some months before her death. She wrote:<sup>13</sup>

I had to have a double personality to correspond with Peron's double personality. One, Eva Peron, wife of the President, whose work is simple and agreeable, a holiday job of receiving honors, of gala performances; the other, "Evita," wife of the Leader of a people who have placed all their faith in him, all their hope and all their love.

A few days of the year I act the part of Eva Peron; and I think I do better each time in that part, for it seems to me to be neither difficult nor disagreeable.

The immense majority of days I am, on the other hand, "Evita," a link stretched between the hopes of the people and the fulfilling hands of Peron, Argentina's first woman Peronista-and this indeed is a difficult role for me, and one in which I am never quite satisfied with myself.<sup>14</sup>

Evita describes the cause of Peronism (a term embracing the man, his justicialist ideology,<sup>15</sup> and his movement) in her autobiography when she wrote that her marriage to Juan was not a "political marriage":

We got married because we loved one another, and we loved one another because we both loved the same thing. In different ways we had both wanted to do the same thing: he with intelligence, I with the heart; he, prepared for the fray; I, ready for everything without knowing anything; he cultured and I simple; he great and I small; he master and I pupil.

He the figure and I the shadow.

He sure of himself, and I sure only of him!

That is why we married, even before the decisive battle for the liberty

<sup>12</sup> Translated by Ethel Cherry as *My mission in Life* (New York: Vantage Press, 1953).

The Proteus edition cited in note I is the same volume only retitled and with some reparagraphing and with facsimile newspaper articles on the Perons included in two appendixes.

<sup>13</sup> Although the Spanish journalist Manuel Penella de Silva may have ghostwritten the volume, the ideas are so simply put that they must be those of Eva Peron. Certainly the wording in the volume corresponds to her thoughts expressed in speeches and other writings. On this point, see also Sebreli, *Eva Peron*, p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> Eva Peron, *Evita by Evita*, pp. 58-59.

<sup>15</sup> In *ibid*, p. 83, Evita defined justicialist thought as follows: "The fundamental object of justicialism in relation to the workers' movement is to end class war and substitute cooperation between capital and labor. Capitalism-to give everything to capital-exploits the workers. Communism, to solve this problem, proposes a system of strife which is not to end until there is only one social class; but this one-class society is to be attained through destruction-a long struggle, without quarter, between capital and labor. Justicialism, on the other hand, also wishes to arrive at a single class: those who work. This is one of the real fundamentals of Peronism. But it wishes to achieve this end by cooperation rather than strife. We do not want a single proletariat class, but a single class of former proletarians who will live and work worthily."

of our people, with the absolute certainty that neither triumph nor defeat, neither glory nor failure, could destroy the unity of our hearts.

Indeed, I believe he never promised me anything! Speaking of the future, he always talked to me only of his people, and I ended by convincing myself that his promise of love lay there, among his people, among my people. Among our people!

It is the path which all we women take when we love a man with a cause.

First, the cause is "his cause:" Then we begin to call it "my cause."

And when love reaches its greatest perfection, the feeling of admiration that made us say "his cause," and the selfish feeling that made us say "my cause," are superseded by a feeling of complete unity, and we say "our cause...."

That is why I say now: "Yes, I am Peronista, fanatically Peronista!"

But I would not be able to say which I love most, Peron or his cause, for to me it is all one and the same thing, it is an one love; and ... I say in my speeches and in my conversation that Peron is the nation and is the people.<sup>16</sup>

Yet in becoming one with Juan, Evita was careful in her autobiography to make herself subordinate to Juan, her God:

I win not commit the heresy of comparing him with Christ . . . but I am sure that, imitating Christ, Peron feels a profound love for humanity, and that it is this, more than any other thing, which makes him great, magnificently great.

But he is great also because he has known how to put his love into practical form, creating a doctrine so that men should be happy, and carrying it out in our land.

I firmly believe that he is a genius and that this century will be lighted by him. I see him walking amid a world without faith and without hope, and it seems to me at moments that he is the only thing on earth in which one can still have a little faith and a little hope.

Among those who read this, I know many will smile incredulously....

But with some, the thought will remain that perhaps what I say may be the truth.

They will think that, in these moments, so sad and so difficult for mankind, the world appears like an immense battlefield: two small imperialistic minorities, armed as no nations before in history, dispute the right to command an immense humanity which is between two fires, without knowing what to do; it does not want to be communist, it does not want to live in the old ruined capitalistic world.

And no one, except Peron . . . shows humanity a new path, giving it New hope.

One day I read a book by Leon Bloy about Napoleon, in which the writer said that he could not imagine Heaven without his Emperor.

I liked this, and in a speech said that neither could I imagine Heaven without Peron.

Some thought that was almost heresy.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 41-43.

Yet, every time I remember it, it seems to me more logical.  
I know that God Himself fills the heavens.  
But God, Who could not imagine Heaven without the Mother He loved so  
much, will forgive me if my heart cannot imagine it without Peron.<sup>17</sup>

To non-Latin Americans skeptical of Evita's overblown rhetoric, she was a bad liar who used words only to seduce and exploit the Argentine people. Through the prism of elitelore analysis, however, Evita can be seen as sincerely believing her own words. If we recall that the traditional style of most speeches by political leaders in Latin America contains rhetoric which is often an end in itself, Evita was not only highly successful but also revealed more of her thoughts than careful leaders are wont to do. With regard to rhetoric versus truth Evita wrote: "General Peron has said that his movement would not be possible without trade unions. And this is true, first because General Perón has said so, and second because it is actually the truth."<sup>18</sup>

Indeed Evita was sincere in her own way about helping the people. That she helped herself along the way is easy to understand if she is viewed in part as creating a role model to which Argentine women could aspire—no doubt Evita felt that she represented the possibility for all to rise from poverty to riches and wealth while maintaining a social conscience. Otherwise why would she have figuratively worked herself to death?

Actually, stress may have been the major factor leading to her early death, although it did not show at age twenty-six when she gained power. Then the notable thing about her was that she was five feet, five inches in height, tall for an Argentine woman. Although she alternated between plumpness and thinness, the latter won out as she drove herself in the name of power for the people.

A description of her distributing money to the poor was reported by John Dos Passos who visited the Eva Peron Social Welfare Foundation for *Life Magazine* in 1949:

In a small office with red-damasked walls were rows of benches packed with ragged-looking women and children facing her desk. Babies squawked. Everybody talked at once. The Senora's desk was set up under floodlights . . . When she finally arrived the floodlights were turned on and there was a great crush of cameramen in the narrow room. Distinguished visitors were posed in an admiring group behind the Senora's handsome blonde head as she leaned over the desk to listen to the troubles of the poor women with their tear-grimed children.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 165, 171-173.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 81.



Eva Perón with the appearance she emphasized after her 1947 "Rainbow Tour" of Europe. (From Eva Perón, *Evita by Evita* (London: Proteus Books, 1979), following p. 119)

"She's too thin," one of the women was muttering aloud. "That woman's working herself to death:"<sup>19</sup>

Evita claimed that she was ordained for the work she performed and the life of "incomprehensible sacrifice" that she led. In Evita's view, she resigned herself to be a "victim" in the cause of, ameliorating social injustice.<sup>20</sup>

We cannot know what drove Evita to drain her energies in work. Perhaps she can be termed the classic "Type A personality" (who feels that there is never enough time for all that needs to be accomplished

<sup>19</sup> John Dos Passes, "Visit to Evita," *Life Magazine*, April 12, 1949, p. 31. Dos Passes described (pp. 27-28) his first meeting with Evita as follows: "Suddenly there was Eva Peron advancing briskly towards us down the red-carpeted stairs, blond, slender, in a pale gold dress, wearing a becomingly angular magenta hat .... Her face was rather sallow. Her eyes were so dark you couldn't see the pupils. She had small tight lips. She gave each man and woman one sharp attentive look straight in the face and shook hands unassumingly with a quick almost modest little girl's smile."

<sup>20</sup> Eva Peron. *Evita by Evita*, for example chapters 3, 5, 10.

and hence generates stress that may be fatally harmful to the physiological system).<sup>21</sup> Perhaps she suspected that she would not reach the 1950 Argentine life expectancy of sixty-one years, and thus tried to accomplish her goals in little more than thirty years. In any case, she wrote:

I already regret that life, however long it may be, is so short, because there is too much to do in such a short time.

But it is better this way. Goodness knows how boring it would be to live if there were time to spare!<sup>22</sup>

From a different point of view, some observers claim that she was psychologically driven to become a leader because she was an asexual person, "a cold woman who was more interested in power than love."<sup>23</sup> According to these sexist views. Evita used sex to gain power whereas Juan used power to gain tremendous variety in sexual relations.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> On psycho-physiological stress, see Meyer Friedman and Ray H. Rosenman, *Type A Behavior and Your Heart* (New York: Knopf, 1974). In addition to causing heart disease, stress may have a negative impact on the human body in other ways; thus in *Mind as Healer, Mind as Slayer* (N.p.: Delacorte Press, 1977), p. 178, Kenneth H. Pelletier quotes analysis by Vernon Riley on the "carcinogenic personality" in the following terms:

"When immunological competence is compromised, even temporarily, by loss or inactivation of T cells or other vital defense elements following stress-induced corticoid hormone elevation, the host surveillance fails to destroy the transformed malignant cells during their immunologically vulnerable stage. The data further imply that once a cancer cell escapes to an organizational state beyond the limited defensive abilities of immunological surveillance, the production of a lethal tumor may then be inevitable and not reversible by natural host defenses." From another point of view, R. S. Lazarus in "Psychological Stress and Coping in Adaptation and Illness," *International Journal of Psychiatry in Medicine* 5:4 (1974), 321-333, has written that "The evidence to date seems to indicate that psychosocial processes act as conditional stressors that increase general susceptibility to illness rather than causing any specific disease outcome. Furthermore, stress contributes to illness mainly as a cumulative process..." Recently researchers Barbara Betz and Caroline Thomas of The Johns Hopkins University Medical School stated that they have, identified three personality types that are inborn: the gamma type personality is seen as often brilliant but often moody, irritable, demanding, and at high risk to suffer from cancers, high blood pressure, heart attacks, mental illness, emotional disorders, or suicide (see Victor Cohn, "Alpha, Beta, Gamma? Disease Linked to Personality Group." *Los Angeles Times*, August 19, 1979).

<sup>22</sup> Eva Peron, *Evita by Evita*, p. 135.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted by Montgomery, *Eva. Evita*, p. 35.

<sup>24</sup> According to *ibid*, p. 152, shortly after Evita's death Juan founded the Union of secondary School Students which was soon transformed from an agency of indoctrination of Peronist ideals to one of procurement of young females for the pleasure of Juan and his military colleagues. Montgomery gives the details of Juan's sexual activity with young girls on pp. 153-155.

Regardless of speculation about sexual drive, we can argue from elitelore theory that *Evita* would not necessarily have developed a different character had she been accepted by Buenos Aires society after 1945, as her contemporary critics claimed. Thus, the following passage in her autobiography seems to have been sincerely believe by *Evita*:

I have ... set forth the principal causes of the mission which it has fallen to my lot to accomplish in my country. My explanation would not be complete, however, if I did not say something also about the circumstances which made me decide to bring myself into strict collaboration with General Peron after he became President of the Argentines....

This is a fundamental condition, and is directly related to my decision to handle the role of wife to the President of the Republic in a manner different from any President's Wife who had preceded me.

I could have followed in the old pattern. I want to make this very clear, because people have also 'wished to explain my "incomprehensible sacrifice" by arguing that the drawing rooms of the oligarchy would have been closed to me in any event.

Nothing is further than this from all reality, nor more remote from all common sense.

I might have been a President's wife' like the others.

It is a simple and agreeable" *role*: a holiday job, the task of receiving honors, of decking oneself out to go through the motions prescribed by social dictates. It is all very similar to what I was able to do previously, and I think more or less successfully, in the theater and in the cinema.

As for the hostility of the oligarchy, I can only smile.

And I wonder: why would the oligarchy have been able to reject me? Because of my humble origin? Because of my artistic career?

But has that class of person ever bothered about these things here-or in any part of the world-when it was a case of the wife of a President?

The oligarchy has never been hostile to anyone who could be useful to it. Power and money were never bad antecedents to a genuine oligarch.

The truth is' different. I, who had learned from Peron to choose unusual paths, did not wish to follow the old pattern of wife of the President.

Also, anyone who knows me a bit- I don't mean now, but from before, when I was a "simple Argentine girl" -knows that I could never have enacted the cold comedy of oligarchical drawing rooms.

I was not born for that. On the contrary, there was always in my soul an open repugnance for that kind of acting.

But also, I was not only the-wife of the President of the Republic, I was also the wife of the Leader of the Argentines.<sup>25</sup>

Clearly *Evita* resented having been snubbed by the traditional elite, but that does not mean that she would have been coopted into that elite-the workers were her base of power, not the old elite.

*Evita* had to convince herself that she was working hard for social justice rather than money. Perhaps by working without a formal salary

<sup>25</sup> Eva Peron, *Evita by Evita*, pp. 57-58.

she could justify an accumulation of "gifts" in the form of cash and gems from those seeking to do business with the government.<sup>26</sup> At the same time: "Evita could ostensibly disassociate herself from corruption and 'torture practiced by the Juan Peron regime. And without salary she could in unorthodox ways carry out her roles as virtual minister of labor and head of the Eva Peron Social Welfare Foundation. According to Evita:

I have no salary. I am not a government functionary under any aspect.  
I am free, absolutely free.

That is how I have wished it. Very often the General himself has wished to add me to his government as official collaborator....

If I became a functionary I should stop being part of the "people."  
I could not be what I am, or do what I do.

Also, I have always been, disorderly in my way of doing things; I like disorder as thought were my normal way of life. I think I was born for the revolution: I have always lived at liberty. Like the birds, I have always liked the, fresh air of the woods. I was not even able to tolerate that degree of servitude which is part of life in one's parents' home or the life of one's home town. Very early in life I left my home and my town and since then I have always been free. I have wished to live on my own, and I have lived on my own.

That is why I could never be a functionary, which means being tied to a system, chained to the great machine of State and fulfilling a definite function there every day....

Although I am not a government functionary and receive no salary, still I go to work exactly as though I were, as though I were being paid for it.

And in reality I am paid not in money but in other things with more than money-and how I am paid!

The people pay me with their affection....

Peron also repays me with his affection and his confidence.

I know that because of my work I often cause him some disappointment.

Because I get home late - almost when he is getting up.

Because he thinks my disorderly way of working will make me ill.

Because I spend so little time with him.

Because sometimes thinking to be useful to him, I do something unusual that turns out to be wrong. But he always forgives me.

He has been able to reconcile "slavery" and liberty in me.<sup>27</sup>

Evita was slated to become vice-president of Argentina in the 1951 reelection of Juan as president but two factors intervened. The military, fearing the further rise to power of the labor movement and labor's lack of respect for hierarchical order, threatened a coup against Juan.

<sup>26</sup> According to Montgomery, *Eva, Evita*, p. 156, after death Eva's gem collection was appraised at 2.7 million dollars-not the 530 million claimed by some writers while she lived. Similarly, her entire fortune was probably not more than 520 million dollars compared to the 5800 million claimed by some observers (*ibid.*, pp. 155-156).

<sup>27</sup> Eva Peron, *Evita by Evita*, pp. 163-164.

Even more importantly, Evita had never fully recovered from her hospitalization in January 1950 for what was officially termed an appendectomy. Increasingly pale, nervous, and tired, she was not well enough to become the country's vice-president. By mid-1951 she was spending most of her time in bed. Unknown to the Argentine people, she was dying from breast cancer that had metastasized to other areas including the lungs, liver, shin, uterus, and cervix.<sup>28</sup>

In January 1951 Evita underwent a hysterectomy to check the spread of cancer that had made sexual relations impossible after 1949.<sup>29</sup> The government averred that her illness was the result of her having kissed the ill, the lepers, and the consumptives.<sup>30</sup>

Knowing that death would come soon, Evita made certain that her image would live on after her. In 1951, Juan proclaimed October 18 "Saint Evita Day." In her will she left her jewels to the poor and her faith to Juan. She helped to plan a 449-foot-high tomb. According to her biographer Paul L. Montgomery, she placed two conditions on its construction, that the architect be a Peronist and that the structure be taller than the Statue of Liberty (305 feet high).<sup>31</sup>

But her main resolution was that her body be embalmed in a lifelike manner so that it could forever be open to view and thereby exert power. In this way Evita followed the twentieth-century example of Lenin—her body could serve as a focus for a new state religion. To this end and for the sake of vanity, Evita ordered that after death her manicurist replace her red nail polish with a clear lacquer.<sup>32</sup>

Evita had done her part in creating a lasting legend and the Peronist *La Prensa* newspaper made its contribution by reporting her death on July 26, 1952, as follows: "A little after the hour of 8:25, when she passed into immortality, a large group of Peronists ... saw the profile of the Senora clearly on the silver disc of the moon."<sup>33</sup>

The embalming of Evita's body was carried out by Dr. Pedro Ara, Spanish cultural attache to Argentina and a pathologist and anatomist famous for his research on the preservation of corpses including internal organs and eyes. Apparently Dr. Ara's secret process involved replacing the blood with absolute alcohol and then replacing the alcohol with

<sup>28</sup> On Eva's illness, see Montgomery, *Eva, Evita*, pp. 101-103. One could also speculate that the disappointment at not having achieved the vice-presidency of Argentina contributed to Eva's death—the opportunity to reach the pinnacle of power had passed.

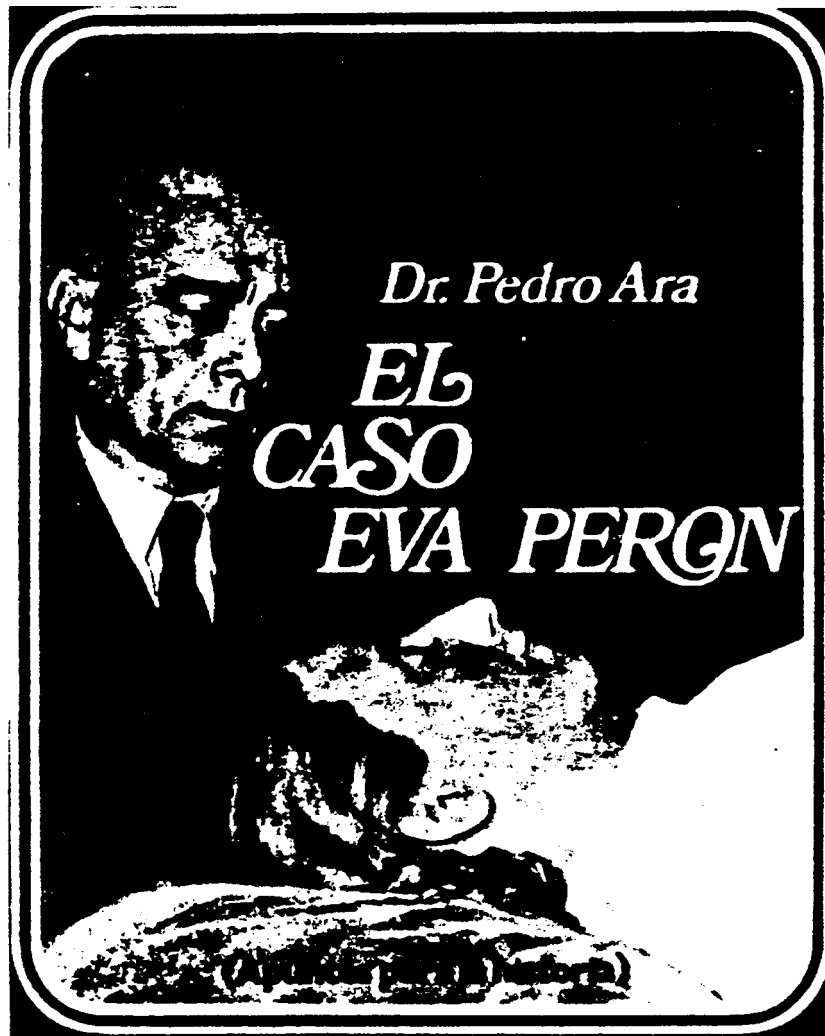
<sup>29</sup> Taylor, *Eva Peron*, p. 57.

<sup>30</sup> Montgomery, *Eva, Evita*, p. 125.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 104, 112, 175.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 117, 121.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 123.



Dr. Pedro Ara with his most famous embalmed corpse, Jacket photo of 1974 volume, published in Madrid. (From *Yo. Juan Domingo Peron: Relato Autobiográfico* (Barcelona: Editorial Planeta. 1976). p. 125)

glycerine heated to 140 degrees.<sup>34</sup> The alcohol would draw the water from the tissues of the body and glycerine would replace the water, allowing the body to return to its former lines. The result was that Evita looked as if she were alive and sleeping comfortably.

Although the monumental tomb for Evita was never completed and the Union of Food Workers' petition to the Pope that he make Evita a saint was rejected (the Vatican noted that nothing was known about her religious virtues and that she did not seem to have any of the "heroism required by the Church in such matters"). Evita's autobiography was made required reading in the fifth and sixth grades of state schools. Hundreds of buildings and places were renamed in her honor as in the case of the City of La Plata which became the City of Eva Perón. During the two-week funeral exhibition of the body hundreds of thousands marched past Evita's bier-sixteen persons were trampled or crushed to death and some 3,900 required medical attention.<sup>35</sup>

After the funeral, Evita's body came to play a role different from that she had envisioned. While the mausoleum was under construction, in the center of Buenos Aires, the body remained in the headquarters building of the General Confederation of labor. Placing Evita's body on exhibit would not have helped Juan deal with Argentina's deteriorating economy and he was overthrown in 1955. Although some observers have argued that had Evita lived Juan might have stayed in power, that view ignores the fact that by the end of the 1940s Peronist industrial policies had severely disrupted the nation's traditional rural production which had made Argentina into a prosperous nation. This disequilibrium would make the social and political situation untenable for Juan.

Military governments that followed Juan were intent on stamping out Peronism, and to this end they blew up the foundations of Evita's mausoleum and secretly shipped her body abroad to be buried finally in 1957 under a false name at the Musocco Cemetery in Milan, Italy. There she rested for fourteen years while in Argentina Peronists tried to recover her body: in 1970 Montonero guerrillas kidnapped and murdered former President Pedro Aramburu (under whom investigation of Peronism after 1955 had resulted in the arrest of more than 1,000 persons and the return of thirty-five million dollars in embezzled government funds). The Montoneros offered, unsuccessfully, to return Aramburu's body in exchange for that of Evita's lifelike corpse.<sup>36</sup>

Evita's body was not recovered until 1971 when Argentine President

<sup>34</sup> The process is described in *ibid.*, pp. 113, 115, 177. The body was not to be exposed to sun or temperatures above 77°F.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 124-127.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 201, 216.

Alejandro Lanusse resolved to take the military out of politics and to permit Juan Perón to return from exile to political activity in Argentina. Even after Juan regained the presidency in October 1973, he left Evita's body at his house in Madrid perhaps to ease the role of Maria Estela Martinez de Perón, his wife since 1961, who was serving as Evita's proxy.<sup>37</sup> To have returned Evita's body may have given the impression that the seventy-eight-year-old Juan had two wives rather than one symbolizing the other. Certainly the Montoneros, on the Peronist left, wanted Evita's body as focus for their activities which Juan discouraged. On the one hand the Montoneros loved Evita who if alive, they said, would have been a Montonero. On the other hand, they hated Maria Estela, who was known to be staunchly conservative and was using her position as vice-president of Argentina to crush them.

Still almost perfectly intact, Evita's lifelike corpse was returned to Buenos Aires only after Juan died after some eight months in the presidency. Forty-three-year-old Maria Estela succeeded to the presidency in 1974.<sup>38</sup> With her all-out attack on the Montoneros, no doubt she realized that by reuniting the bodies of Evita and Juan she would appear to be their spiritual heir. Maria Estela did indeed resemble Evita in physical appearance and even adopted Evita's clothes and hair styles. Nevertheless Maria Estela's attempt to become a beloved "Isabelita" (in the same way that Eva had become Evita) was doomed by her tearfully emotional manner and compassionless voice.

The Montoneros failed in a 1974 attempt to take Evita's body from Maria Estela by renewing the 1970 proposed exchange of Aramburu for Evita. (Breaking into the crypt where the body of the ex-president had finally come to rest, the Montoneros had stolen his corpse to no avail; within three years they were defeated.) Only after Maria Estela fell from power in March 1976 was Evita finally buried in Argentina.

<sup>37</sup> Maria Estela Martinez, thirty-five years Juan's junior, came from a middle-class family of La Rioja province in northwestern Argentina. Juan in exile met her in Panama City after being allured by her act as a member of a troupe called Joe and his Ballets, which appeared at the Happyland Cabaret. She became his "secretary" and they moved on to Madrid, where their staunchly Catholic host Francisco Franco, dictator of Spain, reportedly urged that they marry. She became his third wife and is quoted as having said, "I'm his companion, colleague, adviser, wife, and sometimes sister and mother." In Peron's last years, she also became, as one observer put it, "the son he never had" a political heir to carry on his name. See *Time Magazine*, September 29, 1975, p. 40. By the early 1970s when so many Argentines were anxious for Juan's return they were willing to take Maria Estela as vice-president. Political and social conditions had indeed changed.

<sup>38</sup> On the years of Juan and Isabelita in the presidency, see the May 25, 1973, issue of *Gente* (Buenos Aires), which is entitled, "25 de Mayo de 1973-24 de Marzo de 1976: Fotos-Hechos-Testimonios de 1035 Dramaticos Dias."

In October 1976 she was put to rest in the Duarte family tomb in the Recoleta cemetery, which is still guarded to prevent theft. (Two months later Juan was also buried in Buenos Aires, at the Chacarita cemetery.) But in 1976 the story of *Evita* and Juan was just beginning for international audiences.

***Evita*, the Musical Drama<sup>39</sup>**

In a darkened theater, an audience watches as a coffin is wheeled onto the stage. In it lies Eva Perón. Against a background of mourning, the character of Che Guevara appears, singing:

... Who is this Santa Evita?  
Why all this howling hysterical sorrow?  
What kind of goddess  
Has lived among us?  
How will we ever  
Get by without her?<sup>40</sup>

Thus begins the hit musical *Evita* which since it first appeared as a record in 1976, has resurrected internationally the myth of Eva and has cast it in a new light.

Although after her death in 1952 there were numerous books in English about *Evita* as well as at least one Broadway play (*The Diamond Orchid*, 1964) and a film (*Little Mother*, 1975), *Evita*'s stature as an international star had faded until the mid-1970s when lyricist Tim Rice and musical composer Andrew Lloyd Webber presented their *Evita*. A work of great power, its success has been enhanced by contemporary fascination with feminist leadership.<sup>41</sup>

*Evita* was first staged in London in 1978 under the direction of Harold Prince. The *London Times* drama critic, John Peter, acknowledged the impact of the musical, but on moral grounds gave it a scathing review:

*Evita* is a superb musical but its heart is rotten .... [Watching *Evita*] is, in some ways, like looking at shop-windows selling Nazi uniforms and

<sup>39</sup> The composer of *Evita*, Andrew Lloyd Webber, prefers to call *Evita* an opera. See "Don't Cry for Andrew Lloyd Webber." *Opera News*, April 4, 1981. Taylor in *Eva Peron* (p. 149) calls *Evita* a "rock opera."

<sup>40</sup> From "Requiem for Evita/Oh What a Circus," in the musical *Evita*, lyrics by Tim Rice, music by Andrew Lloyd Webber, direction by Harold Prince. All lyrics quoted here are from the libretto accompanying the Premiere American Recording, July 1979, and are henceforth cited by the name of the song only. Lyrics are used by kind permission of Tim Rice and Leeds Music Corporation, Copyright 1979, at 25 Deshon Drive, Melville, N.Y. 11747, Sole Selling Agent MCA Music, A Division of MCA Inc.

<sup>41</sup> The success of *Evita* has led to a new round of works on Eva Peron, including an NBC movie for television (*Evita Peron, First Lady*. 1981).

Japanese bayonets: they seem to cast a baleful spell on the curious innocents who never saw them in action.... The music ... and its moments of bleak dissonance hint at something sinister and inhuman. Hint, mind you, and [the] ... pounding idiom, made up of rock, tango and ballad, is exhilarating, almost seductive. *Evita* would have approved. Rice's libretto redresses the balance a bit. We do get a glimpse of *Evita*'s greed and vulgarity (though nothing like the real thing).<sup>42</sup>

By the time *Evita* was reviewed in the United States, however, *New York Times* drama critic Walter Kerr saw the moral implications of *Evita* in a different light. In his review, Kerr wrote that the musical now tried to "take the appeal out of *Evita*." Fearful of making their character too attractive, as she had appeared to some London critics, Rice and Webber now erred in making her too unattractive, and in Kerr's opinion had made a medieval morality play, a theatrical event "emotionally icy, psychologically monochromatic, a cut-and-dried sermon."<sup>43</sup>

Rice and Webber did indeed face a difficult dilemma. If, on the one hand, the musical *Evita* were not sympathetic to their main character they could not repeat the success of their hit musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970). If, on the other hand, the musical were not critical of *Evita*, then they faced protest as in the case of the threatened boycott of the U.S. premiere by the Los Angeles Jewish community, some of whose leaders would resent any glamorizing of an "anti-Semitic, fascistic" main character.

Indeed many Americans still share John Peter's view that "Eva Perón was a grasping and utterly unscrupulous co-ruler of a near-Fascist dictatorship ... ('Be a patriot: kill a Jew!' was an early slogan of the Peronistas.)"<sup>44</sup> This view has persisted in spite of authoritative research by George I. Blanksten that has long since concluded the following about Perón and fascism: "Although he tolerated and even encouraged anti-Jewish activities in the first two years after the revolution, he did not originate it, and he *did* terminate official anti-Semitism after 1945,"<sup>45</sup> when he and *Evita* came to full power.

<sup>42</sup> John Peter, "Glitter of Evil," *London Times*, June 25, 1978.

<sup>43</sup> Walter Kerr, " 'Evita'-A Bold Step Backward," *New York Times*, October 7, 1979.

Our comparison of the London and Los Angeles librettos reveals that the Los Angeles lyrics about Eva were changed in two places (songs 16 and 18) to stress corruption, economic mismanagement of Argentina, and censures hip of the national press; but in two other places (songs 9 and 22) references to *Evita* as a prostitute or sexually aggressive person were toned down. In yet another place (song 20), *Eva*'s demand to become vicepresident of Argentina was reduced from 23 lines in London to 8 lines in Los Angeles. Other changes include the complete rewriting of song 6 for Los Angeles to point out, for example, the role of the military,

<sup>44</sup> Peter, "Glitter of Evil."

<sup>45</sup> George I. Blanksten, *Peron's Argentina* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953). p. 225 (italics are those of Blanksten). In a telephone interview, Los Angeles-Jerusalem,



The entire cast of *Evita*. (Photograph by Martha Swope. courtesy of Philip Rinaldi of Mary Bryant. 165 West 46th Street. New York, N.Y. 10036)

To solve the dilemma on how to present *Evita*, Rice and Webber at the outset seem to have chosen to use as narrator the historical personage of Che Guevara.<sup>46</sup> Che would be also at times an observer and at other times a social philosopher who would confront *Evita* with direct personal criticism, as in the following song "Waltz for Eva and Che":

on January 29, 1981. Dr. Asher Rivlin of the Hebrew University told Monica Menell-Kinberg: "it is accepted among Jews in Argentina that Peron never came out openly against the Jews."

<sup>46</sup> The nickname "Che" is an Argentine vocative term equivalent to "Hey, man!"

Guevara had been kidded by other Latin Americans who really were laughing at the Argentine practice of overusing the term; but the nickname became so famous in Guevara's case that he legalized it as part of his name after the Cuban Revolution. In the London version of *Evita*, the character of Che was not explicitly linked to the personage of Guevara, no doubt because the name "Che" could only evoke the image he had made



Evita of the musical and her supporting actor Juan. (Photograph by Martha Swope, courtesy of Philip Rinaldi of Mary Bryant, 165 West 46th Street, New York, N.Y. 10036)

### CHE

Tell me before you ride off in the sunset  
There's one thing I never got clear  
How can you claim you're our saviour  
When those who oppose you  
Are stepped on, or cut up, or simply disappear?

famous in real life. In the Los Angeles version Che explicitly became Guevara and a confusing set of lyrics was omitted wherein Che speaks as a capitalist inventor of a fly-killing insecticide. On Che's elitelore, see Albert L. Michaels. "Che Guevara-His Life: Myth and Reality," in James W. Wilkie and Albert L. Michaels. *Two Essays on Latin American Political Myths: Octavio Paz and Che Guevara* (Buffalo: Council on International Studies, State University of New York. 1981). pp. 19-42.



Evita of the musical, (Photograph by Martha Swope, courtesy of Philip Rinaldi of Mary Bryant. 165 West 46th Street, New York. N.Y. 10036)

#### EVA

Tell me before you get onto your bus  
Before joining the forgotten brigade  
How can one person like me, say,  
Alter the time-honoured way the game is played?  
Tell me before you get onto your high horse  
Just what you expect me to do

I don't care what the bourgeoisie say  
I'm not in business for them but to give all my descamisados  
A magical moment or two

CHE AND EVA

There is evil, ever around, fundamental  
System of government quite incidental

In juxtaposing the charismatic figures of Eva and Che (with Juan Perón relegated to a supporting role), Rice and Webber realized that they would have to explain how Che found his way into the musical. In the libretto accompanying the Premiere American Recording of the musical, Rice and Webber give the following introduction to Act One:

It is the 26 July 1952. A young Argentine student, Che, is among the audience in a Buenos Aires cinema when the film is stopped by an announcement that Eva Perón, "the spiritual leader of the nation, has entered immortality. . . ."

There is no evidence whatsoever that Che Guevara ever met Eva Peron or became in any way involved with her, but the character Che in *Evita* is based upon this legendary revolutionary. He was, however, an Argentine born in 1928 and would therefore have been seventeen when the Peróns came to power and twenty-four when Eva died. He became strongly opposed to the Peronist regime during Eva's lifetime and it is not unreasonable to suppose that his later activity in Cuba and elsewhere was in part a reaction against the government he had known in his youth.

On the one hand, then, the following words are put into Che Guevara's mouth for the purposes of the musical:

You let down your people Evita  
You were supposed to have been immortal  
That's all they wanted  
Not much to ask for  
But in the end you could not deliver  
Sing you fools! But you got it wrong  
Enjoy your prayers because you haven't got long  
Your queen is dead, your king is through  
She's not coming back to you  
Show business kept us all alive  
Since 17 October 1945  
But the star has gone, the glamour's worn thin  
That's a pretty bad state for a state to be in  
Instead of government we had a stage  
Instead of ideas a prima donna's rage  
Instead of help we were given a crowd  
She didn't say much but she said it loud

And who am I who dares to keep  
His head held high while millions weep?  
Why the exception to the rule?  
Opportunist? Traitor? Fool?  
  
Or just a man who grew and saw  
From seventeen to twenty-four His  
country bled, crucified?  
She's not the only one who's died! <sup>47</sup>

On the other hand, the end of the musical begins to bring Evita forward as a sympathetic character. Evita is portrayed favorably in her "final radio broadcast" before death:

I want to tell the people of Argentina  
I've decided I should decline  
All the honours and titles you've pressed me to take For  
I'm contented-Let me simply go on  
As the woman who brings her people to the heart of Perón!  
Don't cry for me Argentina  
For the truth is I shall not leave you  
Though it may get harder  
For you to see me  
I'm Argentina  
And always will be. <sup>48</sup>

To enhance the character of Evita, Rice and Webber downplayed the role of Juan Perón. Thus it is Eva who saves the day for Peronism. Throughout the musical, her character appears much stronger than that of her husband. Even in his movements, the actor who plays Perón is puppet-like on the stage, while Eva runs the gamut of emotions and wins us, against our will, to a grudging admiration for her sheer guts if not for her philosophy. The musical tries to convey the vulgarity of Eva. Her language is coarse, compared to that of her husband.

Finally, Rice and Webber hit on an important factor in Evita's success in capturing the imagination of so many Argentines. Peron speaks of the masses and their love for Evita:

... she's all they have  
She's a diamond in their dull grey lives-and that's the  
Hardest kind of stone-it usually survives  
And when you think about it, can you recall  
The last time they loved anyone at all? <sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> "Requiem for Evita/Oh What a Circus."

<sup>48</sup> "Eva's Final Broadcast."

<sup>49</sup> "She Is A Diamond."

Not only did many Argentine folk desire leaders with whom they could identify, but to them *Evita* was an example of how a poor person could rise. Some Argentines were upset at the corruption in government under the Peróns, but many believed *Evita* when she told them:

I was once no better than you are, but look at me now! I am taking the jewels from the oligarchs only for you; it is all for you. One day you'll inherit my whole collection.<sup>50</sup>

Rice and Webber read the literature by and on *Evita* with care and extracted ideas for their musical. The above quote, for example, appears in the musical when *Evita* sings from the balcony of the Casa Rosada (National Palace) to the crowd below:

. . . I was once as you  
Are now! I have taken these riches from the oligarchs  
Only for you-for all of you! One day you will inherit  
These treasures! Descamisados!<sup>51</sup> When they fire those  
Cannons, when the crowds sing of glory, it "is not just for  
Peron, but for all of us! All of us!"<sup>52</sup>

Further, Rice and Webber would paraphrase a Fleur Cowles interview with Eva. Fleur, the wife of the American publisher, had asked Eva about the funds of the Eva Perón Social Welfare Foundation:

I put the question to her carefully, saying I presumed she kept a very strict accounting of every dollar spent. "How else will history give you credit for your charitable efforts?" was the way I put it.

She brushed history and the accountants aside without blinking an eye. "Keeping books on charity is capitalistic nonsense," she said. "I just use the money for the poor. I can't stop to count it."<sup>53</sup>

In *Evita*, Che and the workers tell us:

And the money kept rolling out in all directions  
To the poor to the weak to the destitute of all complexions  
Now cynics claim a little of the cash has gone astray  
But that's not the point my friends  
When the money keeps rolling out you don't keep books

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Fleur Cowles, *Bloody Precedent* (New York: Random House, 1952), p. 193.

<sup>51</sup> "Descamisados" are the workers or literally "shirtless ones," figuratively without coat and tie. Eva defined a descamisado as anyone who identified with the people (see Eva Peron, *Evita by Evita*, p. 80).

<sup>52</sup> On the Balcony of the Casa Rosada/Don't Cry for Me Argentina."

<sup>53</sup> Cowles, *Bloody Precedent*, p. 188.

You can tell you've done well by the happy grateful looks  
Accountants only slow things down, figures get in the way  
Never been a lady loved as much as Eva Perón!<sup>54</sup>

The problem faced by Rice and Webber in *Evita* was how to compress the complexity of life into a constrained time format. They are able only to touch upon her change in personality from the Cinderella dressed in elaborate gowns to the militant leader with hair pulled tightly back in a bun. Eva sings from the balcony of the National Palace:

Don't cry for me Argentina  
The truth is I never left you  
All through my wild days  
My mad existence  
I kept my promise  
Don't keep your distance  
Have I said too much? There's nothing more I can think of  
to say to you  
But all you have to do is look at me to know that every  
word is true<sup>55</sup>

The last four lines further compress time by evoking *Evita*'s thoughts from the concluding chapter of her autobiography published only months before her death.<sup>56</sup>

### **From Literature-Lore to Cinema-Lore and Theater-Lore<sup>57</sup>**

How did Rice and Webber become interested in *Evita* and how did they intend to portray her? With regard to the first question, apparently Rice had become intrigued with Eva Perón after hearing a radio program about her life. A mutual friend suggested that he meet the Argentine film director Carlos Pasini, who had completed a one-hour documentary for Thames Television in England.<sup>58</sup> Pasini's film, *Queen of Hearts*, showed the life of Eva through old film footage of her acting career in the cinema, newsreels of the riots leading to Perón's presidency in 1946, clips of Eva's speeches at political rallies, "home movies" shot by Eva's brother during the "Rainbow Tour," and documentary coverage of the mass mourning at her death. This approach was combined with

<sup>54</sup> "And the Money Kept Rolling In (And Out)."

<sup>55</sup> "On the Balcony of the Casa Rosada/Don't Cry for Me Argentina."

<sup>56</sup> "Eva Perón, *Evita by Evita*, pp. 209-210.

<sup>57</sup> These terms are hyphenated here in order to distinguish them as subcategories of elitelore; they are the media through which elitelore becomes folklore.

<sup>58</sup> Monica Menell-Kinberg telephone interview with Carlos Pasini, Los Angeles-London. November 9, 1980.

interviews filmed by Pasini with Eva's sister, her hairdresser, the theater owner who originally hired her, political aides from her heyday in power, and several citizens from the poorest district in Buenos Aires, one of whom was a middle-aged woman who wept throughout the interview, still mourning Evita and referring to her as "my mother, she was like my mother." The documentary opened and closed with dramatized scenes conceived by Pasini in which Eva's coffin was shown being smuggled out of Argentina to an anonymous grave where it lay undiscovered for seventeen years.

A high-ranking official of Thames Television later attested that Rice and Webber had this documentary shown to them many, many times.<sup>59</sup> One can see how certain scenes in the documentary must have influenced the makers of *Evita*: the mass rallies with tens of thousands of voices chanting "Eeee-veee-TAH, Eeee-veee-TAH," the gestures, hairstyles, and clothes of Eva, the high-pitched tone of her voice when giving speeches.

In the meantime, according to Pasini,<sup>60</sup> Rice went to Buenos Aires to conduct research. Armed with a list from Pasini of people to meet, Rice retraced Pasini's steps, and he eventually included the Pasini format of opening and closing the portrayal of Evita with aspects of her death. Too, the 'projection of documentary photos onto a giant screen on stage seemed to resemble Pasini's approach.

Yet Rice and Webber went far beyond the necessarily limited scope of the Pasini film *Queen of Hearts*. The documentary described rather than explained Eva's role and motives. To explain Evita, Rice and Webber had to overcome two problems revealed in the literature. First, as anthropologist Julie M. Taylor shows, works about Evita have tended to be culturally based in either black or white legends about her.<sup>61</sup> Second, in creating her own elitelore, Evita had obscured the record of her life in a self-history so garbled that every facet was "censored, rewritten, and altered" to fit the image she wanted to create.<sup>62</sup>

Because elitelore includes information and views manipulated to justify leadership, the calculated creation of the lore of Eva Perón is an excellent example of how truth seems to become irrelevant as history moves on. To accomplish her goal of attaining a place in Argentine history, Eva had forbidden all mention of her past, other than the fact

<sup>59</sup> Personal communication with a Thames Television official who prefers to remain anonymous.

<sup>60</sup> Pasini telephone interview.

<sup>61</sup> Taylor, *Eva Peron*. Taylor examines the myths in the early 1970s and assumes that they did not change a great deal between the 1950s and the 1970s. Taylor points out (p. 84) that according to the white myth Evita and Juan grew apart over time, enabling Evita to maintain her political purity while Juan became more intolerant of the opposition.

<sup>62</sup> Cowles, *Bloody Precedent*, pp. 150. 172.

that she was of humble birth. She had destroyed what records she could lay her hands on and had gone so far as to forge a document in the civil registry of Junín, her birthplace, to make it seem she was legitimate and, incidentally, to subtract three years from her true age.<sup>63</sup> In altering the record to shift her birth from 1919 to 1922, Eva caused herself an unintended political problem that would later haunt her. The Constitution of Argentina required the vice-president be at least thirty years of age. Having been "born" in 1922, in 1951 Eva was thus only twenty-nine.<sup>64</sup>

That Evita's early years, up to her meeting with Juan Peron, are passed over in her autobiography has contributed to the lore of the sleazy, the shady, the sordid. Thus, during her first years in Buenos Aires the "illegitimate" Eva is seen to have lived from one job to the next-bit parts in traveling theater companies, and on the radio, and "between liaisons, she had to scratch and scramble."<sup>65</sup>

In Mary Main's biography of Eva, *The Woman with the Whip*,<sup>66</sup> a critical vein of reporting is used to describe Eva as believing at an early age that "life was a struggle for survival in which the prizes went to the toughest and the most unscrupulous ... and that ... communication between ... man and woman ... was based on insincerity and deceit. A wise woman simulated indifference or passion according to which best suited her ends."<sup>67</sup>

The images of Eva in Mary Main's work appear in the lyrics of *Evita*. A production number shows how Eva climbs up the social ladder by sleeping with whomever will be useful to her. As her lovers change and become more important, her negligees become more and more elegant. She feigns disappointment when each affair ends but cynically sings her true thoughts:

There is no one, no one at all  
Never has been and never will be a lover

<sup>63</sup> Montgomery, *Eva, Evita*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>64</sup> Cowles, *Bloody Precedent*, pp. 150, 172. Cowles erroneously believed that Eva's true age in 1951 was between 36 and 38.

<sup>65</sup> Montgomery, *Eva, Evita*, pp. 17-19; quote is from p. 39. It is one thing to overemphasize Evita's illegitimate birth and "another to underemphasize it as Robert J. Alexander does (*The Perón Era* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1951], p. 103:

"The First Lady of Argentina was born in 1919, the daughter of a small Buenos Aires provincial landowner who died early in his daughter's life. Left with but little means of support, the family moved to the city of Junín where Sr. Duane became the proprietor of a small boardinghouse."

<sup>66</sup> Mary Main (pseud. Maria Flores). *The Woman with the Whip* (New York: Doubleday, 1952).

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., pp. 22-23.

Male or female  
Who hasn't an eye on  
In fact they rely on  
Tricks they can try on their partner  
They're hoping their lover will help them or keep them  
Support them promote them  
Don't blame them  
You're the same.<sup>68</sup>

Whereas the lyrics impart some of Main's view of Evita's rise, and Webber and Rice are fairly understanding of Evita's situation, Main could not fathom such behavior.

Because Webber and Rice have claimed they did not have access to Main's biography until after their own work had been completed and because they have said they consider Main's book the best available analysis of Evita,<sup>69</sup> we are led to question how they had originally intended to portray Evita. If Webber and Rice had been guided by Main's interpretation, a very different Evita would have emerged, a terrible person with few redeeming virtues. But throughout the musical the lyrics depict a complicated, human Evita rather than a devious slut.

That the portrayal of Evita did not work out as Rice and Webber had planned is clear in Webber's interview with *Opera News* where he stated:

"I don't understand all the criticism that we have glorified or glamorized Evita Perón. She *was* glamorous already. We examine that. It's not all that emotional a score. We do put the knife in people to prevent empathy. After she sings 'Don't Cry for Me,' when some may want to applaud her, we don't let that happen-the music and lyrics go right on. We don't want her to be applauded. It's only an aria in a through-composition. If it generates an emotional response, we want to take that away from the audience. I cannot imagine any intelligent person going to *Evita* and coming away with anything but the idea that she was a fairly grisly piece of work.

"When 'Don't Cry for Me' became such a success in Europe, I was amazed. It's treated as a sad ballad, but it's really her own cynical, ironic comment on what she was doing to her own people."<sup>70</sup>

We can compare Webber's view of "Don't Cry for Me Argentina" with the lyrics themselves:

<sup>68</sup> Goodnight and Thank You."

<sup>69</sup> Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber. *The Legend of Eva Peron (1919-1952); The Official Edition of the International Stage Success* (New York: Avon. 1978). p. 3

<sup>70</sup> Don't Cry for Andrew Lloyd Webber," *Opera News*, April 4, 1981, p. 27. Webber seems to speak for Rice and vice versa in their various interviews and writings.

EVA

It won't be easy, you'll think it strange  
When I try to explain how I feel  
That I still need your love after all that I've done You  
won't believe me  
All you will see is a girl you once knew  
Although she's dressed up to the nines At  
sixes and sevens with you  
  
I had to let it happen, I had to change  
Couldn't stay all my life down at heel  
Looking out at the window, staying out of the sun So I  
chose freedom  
Running around trying everything new  
But nothing impressed me at all  
I never expected it to  
  
Don't cry for me Argentina  
The truth is I never left you  
All through my wild days My  
mad existence  
I kept my promise  
Don't keep your distance  
  
And as for fortune, and as for fame I  
never invited them in  
Though it seemed to the world they were all I desired  
They are illusions  
They are not the solutions they promised to be The  
answer was here all the time  
I love you and hope you love me  
Don't cry for me Argentina...

One can wonder if Webber was talking about the same lyrics. Whatever he had in mind, his own view does not prevail. Can we conclude, then, that Webber and Rice were indeed taken aback by an unintended glamorization of Evita? Not necessarily. Perhaps they had planned to cast her in a somewhat favorable light but when the finished work drew heavy criticism they decided to issue disclaimers. And there is always the remote possibility that they did not know how they intended to portray Evita,

Regardless of intent, the theater portrayal of Evita manages to thread its way between highly negative and positive views of Evita. In contrast to the understanding treatment of Evita by Rice and Webber, in one of the more extensive biographies of Evita to date Paul Montgomery does not hide his anti-Eva feelings which are rooted in a deep-seated prejudice against persons born out of wedlock. Nor can he brook the fact that she used sex to help her rise to power, sex being seen by Montgomery as something that should not be mixed with politics! He also seems to have

a classist view of society-the lower class (including Evita) should realize its limitations. Montgomery's view epitomizes the literature that is critical of Eva for having risen without the appropriate social qualifications and manners required of "polite society."

The relative tolerance of Evita's background shown by Rice and Webber may perhaps be attributed to the direct or indirect influence of the highly positive view of Evita found in Juan Jose Sebreli's work. Author of one of the more insightful books on Evita in any language, Sebreli attempts to understand why she was so hated, especially among the Argentine and foreign middle and upper classes.<sup>71</sup> In Sebreli's view Eva's life coincided with a moment of Argentina's transition from an agricultural society with a rural power base to an industrial society with an urban power base. Eva's personal history reflected the partial sexual transformation that Argentina was experiencing in the 1940s and 1950s just at the time virginity was losing its high status and social interdiction against extramarital sexual relations was waning. Industrialization, rural exodus to Buenos Aires, decline of the extended family, democratization of customs-these factors demanded new institutions that would finally be recognized by the end of the first Perón period in 1955 with a divorce law, legal recognition of illegitimate children, lifting of the ban on prostitution, and a proposal to separate Church and State functions for purposes of education and taxation of property.

No matter how hard Evita tried to maintain good relations with the Church, according to Sebreli traditional Catholics saw her as a threat to the maintenance of the old order. She symbolized the end of traditional society dominated by a rigid moral code and unbending Roman Catholic religious precepts that sought to continue to impose the "law of male domination over females, the law of believer over nonbeliever, the law of rich over poor, and the law of one generation over another."<sup>72</sup> Hatred had to be generated against Evita to discredit her informal manner that was contributing to the breakdown of the petit bourgeois respect for the apparatus of the State. Through Eva Perón the masses could see the state up close and would no longer fear it. Her presence alone, then, was a disrupting influence on traditional institutions such as the bureaucracy, the Church, and the Army.<sup>73</sup> Sebreli quotes General Gerardo Gemetro explaining why the military so opposed Evita: "the impudence of that woman reached intolerable limits; for example, one day Eva placed herself next to Perón during the act of swearing in a minister of state and she rested her arm on the back of the presidential chair. The army, and I do not know if this will be understood now [1965], was not

<sup>71</sup> Sebreli, *Eva Peron*.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 114-115.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

accustomed to such doings .... With the attitude of Peron the Revolution was losing its hierarchical order and we could not permit that..."<sup>74</sup>

Rice and Webber did not attempt to explain the whole transition from agricultural to industrial society outlined by Sebreli, but they did capture the feeling of hatred generated toward Evita:

ARMY

Peron is a fool, breaking every taboo  
Installing the girl in the army H.Q. And  
she's an actress! The last straw  
Her only good parts are between her thighs  
She should stare at the ceiling, not reach for the skies Or  
site could be his last whore  
The evidence suggests  
She has other interests  
If it's her who's using him  
He's exceptionally dim  
Bitch! Dangerous Jade!

ARISTOCRATS

We have allowed ourselves to slip We  
have completely lost our grip We have  
declined to an all-time low Tarts have  
become the set to know

ARMY

It's no crime for officers to do as they please  
As long as they're discreet and keep clear of disease We  
ignore, we disregard  
But once they allow a bit on the side  
To move to the centre where she's not qualified We  
should all be on our guard  
She should get into her head  
She should not get out of bed  
She should know that she's not paid To  
be loud but to be laid  
Slut! Dangerous Jade! ...

ARISTOCRATS

Things have reached a pretty pass  
When someone pretty lower class  
Graceless and vulgar, uninspired Can  
be accepted and admired<sup>75</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., pp.105-106.

<sup>75</sup> "Perón's Latest Flame."

What Rice and Webber seem to have understood (where others often have not) is that Evita did not want to join the traditional elite but rather to create a new, counter-elite that would back the creation of a New Argentina as conceived in Peronist philosophy.<sup>76</sup> To the old elite, Evita addresses her song:

[This] chorus girl hasn't learned the lines you'd like to hear  
She won't go scrambling over the backs of the poor to be accepted  
By making donations-just large enough-to the correct charity She  
won't be president of your wonderful society of philanthropy Even  
if you asked her to be  
As you should have asked her to be  
  
The actress hasn't learned the lines you'd like to hear  
She won't join your clubs, she won't dance in your halls She  
won't help the hungry once a month at your tombolas She'll  
simply take control as  
You disappear<sup>77</sup>

We can compare these lyrics to the wording in *Evita by Evita* (p. 140):

The honor of destroying [the oligarchs'] ideas has fallen to me through my work.

All "social service" of the century which preceded us was ... cold, sordid, mean and selfish.

In every asylum built by the oligarchy, there is evidenced the exploiting soul of a breed which ... [put individuals] in drab uniforms, giving them insufficient meals, shutting all doors to human happiness-to the simple happiness of having a home, or at least an imitation of a home ....

With or without bloodshed, the race of oligarchic exploiters of mankind will die out, without any doubt, in this century.

Given the "friendly" treatment of Evita by Rice and Webber (the first of its kind for massive international audiences), can we say that Evita's elitelore has been revived intact? The answer is no, for several reasons.

Rice and Webber did not accept Evita's self-view but rather selected from Eva's autobiography and pro- and anti-Evita lore to try to explain the complexity of her role. In immersing themselves in the literature and music of Evita's time to capture the essence of the documentary film

<sup>76</sup> On the concept of "New Argentina," see Blanksten, *Peron's Argentina*. On the substitution of one elite for another as reflected in the political control of the Buenos Aires Teatro Col6n, see Ronald H. Dolkart, "Elitelore at the Opera: The Role of the Teatro Col6n in Buenos Aires. 1910-1970" (paper delivered to the Pacific Coast Council on Latin American Studies. Laguna Beach, California, October 10. 1980).

<sup>77</sup> "The Actress Hasn't Learned (The Lines You'd Like To Hear)".

yet maintain the appeal of the musical drama, Rice and Webber focus on some of the issues facing Argentina in the 1940s and 1950s. They present a complex, tragic figure who is portrayed as having succeeded in giving Argentina leadership in which the people could naively place their faith.

Although Webber and Rice chose not to dwell upon the political repression of the Perón era from 1945 to 1955 (and do not mention that up to one hundred newspapers and magazines may have been closed by 1951).<sup>78</sup> they seem to recognize that such activity has been a constant in Argentine history since 1930—it was not unique to the Perón years to 1955 and is not what made the period historically memorable.

What is memorable and what is captured in the musical *Evita* is Peronism's creation in the 1940s and 1950s of the image of Evita as leader, an image cultivated through a carefully orchestrated plan, comparable to the "making of a star" in old-time Hollywood. The speech writers, ghostwriters, makeup artists, fashion designers, publicity men were all working for the same goal: to create a legend.

One appearance is described by Fleur Cowles who was a fascinated, though appalled, witness. The scene was the Opera House in Buenos Aires in July, 1950: "The audience literally hung from the rafters. . . . Women and their children were packed inside each box ... everyone was yelling, throwing flowers, and waving a little blue and white flag with EVITA emblazoned on it. . . . Those nearest Evita . . . broke police lines to plunge at her, to touch her skirt, to see, at close hand, the Cinderella dressed by Dior, with her three-quarters of a million dollars in jewels. It was an *orgy* of curiosity and admiration...."<sup>79</sup> Rice and Webber portray the public scene as follows:

EVA·

I came from the people  
They need to adore me So  
Christian Dior me From  
my head to my toes I need  
to be dazzling  
I want to be Rainbow High!  
They must have excitement  
And so must I

<sup>78</sup> On the number of newspapers closed, see John Barnes, *Evita, First Lady: A Biography of Eva Perón* (New York: Grove Press, 1978), pp. 137-139.

<sup>79</sup> Cowles, *Bloody Precedent* p. 182. On the opera of Buenos Aires, see Dolkart, "Eitelore at the Opera."

EVA'S DRESSERS

Eyes! Hair! Mouth! Figure! Dress! Voice! Style! Movement! ...  
 Hands! Magic! Rings! Glamour! Face!  
 Diamonds! Excitement! Image!<sup>80</sup>

Better than any other who has written on Evita, Rice and Webber identify her as essentially a superb showman, constantly refining her "act" in order to create elitelore so powerful that it would enthrall and seduce an entire nation. Webber and Rice transmit to present-day audiences, through the medium of theater, the bygone atmosphere of color and excitement created by Evita in Argentina. Evita's life was indeed that of an actress and, in the words of Che:

... She had some style  
 The best show in town was the crowd  
 Outside the Casa Rosada crying 'Eva Perón'<sup>81</sup>

It could be argued that at the outset Rice and Webber were necessarily committed to portraying Evita sympathetically in order to make the production about her salable. Perhaps they did not "need" to show that Evita was basically an evil person as many of Evita's "analysts" have needed to prove. Fleur Cowles, wife of U.S. publisher Gardner Cowles, dedicated *Bloody Precedent* to Gardner and Alberto Gainza Paz, whose *La Prensa* newspaper was nationalized in 1951 and turned into the official organ of the Argentine General Confederation of Workers. Paul Montgomery was horrified at the thought that sex might play a role in politics, and that persons of illegitimate parentage and low-class background would in effect try to create a counter-elite. Mary Main, seizing upon a few lines in Evita's autobiography,<sup>82</sup> entitled her book *The Woman with the Whip: Eva Peron* to symbolize negatively Evita's intention to whip Argentina into shape figuratively and literally. For Main, a partisan of the old order in Argentina, the whip also signified the fact that Evita and Juan did much to "destroy the spirit of their people" when they introduced mass Politics to a "country of individualists."<sup>83</sup>

<sup>80</sup> "Rainbow High."

<sup>81</sup> "Requiem for Evita/Oh What a Circus."

<sup>82</sup> About the oligarchy, Eva Perón had written: "Often I have wished that my insults were blows or strokes of the whip so that, hitting many in the face. I could make them See-even if only for a moment-what I see every day in my audiences of social service." See *Evita by Evita*, p. 119.

<sup>83</sup> Main, *Woman with the Whip*, p. 285.

The idea that Eva was a "murderous Cinderella," to use the words of John Peter,<sup>84</sup> is a far cry from the truth. True, the Peron regime closed newspapers, had opponents beaten up or threatened, and drove enemies into exile, but there was no wholesale torture and murder like that which occurred during the near civil war of the 1970s when some 6,000 political prisoners may have disappeared while thousands died in combat or assassinations.<sup>85</sup>

Perhaps critics of Evita are confusing her with the period of torture and death during the time of Maria Estela Perón from 1974 to 1976. Unlike Maria Estela, who served as Perón's second in command in 1973-1974 before ascending to the top political post, Evita was never president or vice-president. Even Eva's arch-critic Fleur Cowles recognizes that Evita lived in growing isolation from Perón. With her homelife barren, Eva threw herself into work, according to Cowles.<sup>86</sup>

If for Eva power was more important than sex,<sup>87</sup> and may have been used for revenge in punishing persons who slighted her, power was also apparently used to help the people. The extent of this help was debatable. Cowles and Mary Main claim that the welfare houses and programs established by Eva were fake fronts.<sup>88</sup> George I. Blanksten<sup>89</sup> and Robert J. Alexander,<sup>90</sup> writing at about the same time, however, testified to the large number and the effectiveness of her programs which added 8,000 hospital beds and wiped out malaria by 1949. Juan Jose Sebreli

<sup>84</sup> Peter, "Glitter of Evil."

<sup>85</sup> According to Marvin Goldwert, the Peron period moved toward totalitarianism and violent clashes with the Church and other groups only after Evita died. See *Democracy, Militarism, and Nationalism in Argentina. 1930-1966* (Austin: University of Texas. 1972), ch. 6. See also Donald C. Hodges. *Argentina. 1943-1976* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press. 1976), who interprets the overthrow of Peron's popular revolution in 1955 as the beginning of the national resistance against the military attempt to restore the old order. Estimates of the number of persons who have "disappeared" in Argentina in recent years vary widely. The number often given is 10,000 ("Prisoner without a Name. Cell without a Number," by Jacobo Timerman (New York: Knopf, 1981), p. 15), but the years covered are vague. The noted Argentine human rights lawyer Emilio Mignone led a group of investigators who traced about 6,000 persons who disappeared at the hands of government security agents from 1975 to the late 1970s, after which the number of disappearances decreased markedly; see Kenneth Freed. "Repression Looms Again in Argentina" *Los Angeles Times*, March 22. 1981, who was concerned that by early 1981 a new wave of arrests was imminent.

<sup>86</sup> Cowles. *Bloody Precedent*, p. 114.

<sup>87</sup> It is often said that former prostitutes are not interested in sex, but even if this were true it would not explain Evita's view of power, for she was never a prostitute. Cowles was particularly interested in the relationship between Eva and Juan which she defined as "a strange fascination (misinterpreted as sex appeal)." See *ibid.* pp. 173-177.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 188-192; Main, *The Woman with the Whip*. pp. 181-190.

<sup>89</sup> Blanksten, *Peron's Argentina*. p. 107.

<sup>90</sup> Alexander, *The Perón Era*, p. 113.

lists over 150 clinics, hospitals, and schools established to serve the people.<sup>91</sup>

Despite the criticism of the way in which Evita distributed money to the poor (implicitly she ran a personal lottery-the person who caught her attention was a prize winner), her approach was less restrained than that of Lázaro Cardenas of Mexico. Cardenas, from the 1920s to the 1960s, dispensed favors as he traveled through the countryside. Both leaders were in direct contact with the masses and offered them a chance to escape their financial misery. The difference between Evita and Cardenas is that the latter said little as he ran his own implicit lottery while Eva spoke at every opportunity. Cowles described her speeches as emotional binges: "Her voice grows louder, the pitch more resonant, the fury more violent; her political melodramatics more astounding. Mass meetings usually turn into an ominous chant of 'Evitas,' as noisy as thunder, and as spine-tingling."<sup>92</sup>

Rising to power in the Latin America of the 1940s, Eva Perón had to play two roles simultaneously: it was not enough to be a militant; she also had to be a wife. Eva wrote in her autobiography:

In this great home of the nation I am like a woman of any of the countless homes of my people.

Like her I am, after all, a woman.

I like the same things that she does: jewels and furs, dresses and shoes ... but, like her, I prefer everyone in the home to be better off than I am. Like her, like all of her prototypes, I would like to be free to go out and enjoy myself ... but I am tied, like her, to the duties of the home which no one else is obliged to do in my place.

Like all of them, I get up early thinking of my husband and of my children ..... and thinking of them I go about all day and a good deal of the night ..... When I go to bed, tired, my dreams are lost in wonderful schemes, and I try to fall asleep before the spell is broken.

Like all of them, I awake startled by the slightest noise, because, like all of them, I am also frightened....

Like them, I know that the children of this great house which is the nation need me and my husband . . . and I try to see that they are not disappointed.<sup>93</sup>

Regardless of the fact that her autobiography was her ideal-self speaking and that much of it could not come true, Evita seemed to have believed it. Even one of her contemporary enemies, Cowles, understood this when she wrote about Evita:

<sup>91</sup> Sebrelli, *Eva Peron*, pp.148-149.

<sup>92</sup> Cowles. *Bloody Precedent*, p. 199.

<sup>93</sup> *Evita by Evita*, p. 206.

It is ... very possible that her ability to dramatize herself convinced her of her own sincerity, for in the ability to delude oneself lies the fine art of deluding others. She flung herself into a part with too great an abandon, with too complete a lack of self-consciousness...; she never hesitated for fear that she might appear ridiculous; she was unconscious of any limitation in herself, so that any role she chose could seem real to her.<sup>94</sup>

Why did *Evita* write her autobiography at the young age of thirty-two? In the context of elitelore theory she did so because she not only felt that she had to explain her controversial self to others but she had to do it before she died. She knew that she was very ill and knew she wanted her message to live on. In her own words, she explained "how a woman who in some people's eyes seems 'superficial, common, and indifferent,' can decide to live a life of 'incomprehensible sacrifice'";<sup>95</sup> thus she wrote naively of the turning point in her life:

Until I was eleven years old I believed that there were poor just as there was grass, and that there were rich just as there were trees.

One day I heard for the first time, from the lips of a working-man, that there were poor because the rich were too rich; and that revelation made a strong impression on me.

Never since then have I been able to think of this injustice without indignation....<sup>96</sup>

### Conclusion

The case study undertaken here has concerned the evolving life-history role of Eva Peron. Eva's background and her aspirations led her to formulate an idealized self. In attempting to live up to that self, Eva's daily-life acting of the created role blurred reality and fiction into a new self. Eva intended to make herself into Juan Peron's alter ego. The unintended consequence of her own elitelore was to create in Argentina a folklore that made her into Juan's equal. Elitelore and folklore about Eva combined to influence foreign writers, some of whom even came to see her as paramount to Juan. It is this new elitelore about *Evita* that has recently conquered theater audiences from London to Los Angeles. In the case of *Evita*, then, elitelore has been formed and reformed to lead into folklore which in turn has acted from an Argentine base to influence ultimately the image of her held internationally.

With the powerful musical *Evita* we have non-Argentines producing

<sup>94</sup> Cowles. *Bloody Precedent*. p. 104.

<sup>95</sup> *Evita Peron, Evita by Evita* p. 9.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8. Sebrelli, for one, accentuates this statement as truth (see *Eva Peron*. pp.28-29).

lore for the mass market in the English-speaking world about a folk heroine from Latin America. We can see how folklore and elitelore influence each other, the distinctions between the two often becoming blurred. Literally millions of Englishmen and Americans now have an image of Eva Peron through massive record sales, a new round of biographies, and an NBC movie for television, none of which presents the image she sought to create. *Evita* is part of a new elitelore: the figment of imagination and talent that is theater-lore.

The question we must ask is: What is the responsibility of creators of theater-lore when presenting history? Certainly, from the moment they chose Eva Peron as the protagonist of their musical, the creators of *Evita* were locked in to presenting a fascinating vision of the woman. Much of the Anglo-American public views *Evita* sympathetically.<sup>97</sup> Theatergoers with whom we have talked generally have a favorable impression of *Evita*, the exact opposite of the image Webber and Rice claim they intended to convey. In contrast, some who claim to have background in Latin American history, and who thus are unwittingly influenced by the black legend about *Evita*, tend to be convinced that they know better than to become sympathetic to a "fascist."

Even if Webber and Rice had included more negative material about *Evita*, the result would still be what London critic John Peter called "a glamorous, sentimental fairy tale."<sup>98</sup> And yet, within the necessary form and structure of a popular musical (perhaps in more correct terms an opera), what the writers and director have produced in terms of theater-lore is an overview which *does* include a representation of the evils of the Peron dictatorship, its greed and its brutalities.

Finally, we must recognize that theater-lore and its popularization of reinvented, creative "truth" goes back to the oldest known plays of the Greeks, includes all of Shakespeare's Chronicles, and involves in our time the so-called docu-dramas of television. Theater-lore places greater emphasis on the creative vision of the writer rather than on strict historical accuracy. We are viewing history through the prism of the writer's imagination which is further interpreted by the composer, director, actors, scenic designer, and choreographer, all engaged in a communal effort to present historical material in the form of entertainment.

Although the musical *Evita* misleads, especially with respect to the role in history played by Juan, its theater-lore is the most successful form yet to capture the essence of *Evita*'s role in Argentine history: the color,

<sup>97</sup> In the eyes of many Argentines, according to an April 7, 1981, communication from J. M. Taylor. Rice and Webber leave the viewer with an anti-Eva outlook because of the exaggerated emphasis that they place on her sexual life, because of the impression left that she dominated Juan, and because her social justice appears not as charity but corruption.

<sup>98</sup> Peter "Glitter of Evil."

sound, and spectacle of the musical portray Evita as an actress-and an actress she was.

Evita's life and death would help sustain the importance of Peronism for more than thirty years. As one who had helped invent elitelore and folklore, from exile Juan Perón would later look back on the era when he and Evita ruled Argentina and, without fear of being able to destroy well established images, could admit: "It was not that we were so good, but that those who followed us were so bad that we looked better than we were."<sup>99</sup>

One can speak of the jewel collection that Evita acquired during her years in power, yet the value of those gems pales in comparison to the cost that her myth imposed upon Argentina. The myth helped bring Juan back to power with Maria Estela at his side. It encouraged the masses to continue to hope for "New Argentina," for wealth, for power. In a country politically corrupt, Evita showed the people that they could hope to share in the myth. Elitelore had become folklore.

<sup>99</sup> *Yo, Juan Domingo Perón*. p. 275.