



Submitted

Jess Hanks, as Che, and Lisa Walton, as Eva Peron, appear in Otterbein's "Evita."

Evocative 'Evita'

Otterbein production stresses quality

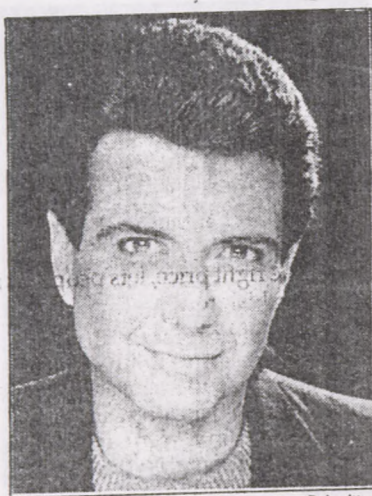
By JOHN HEGENBERGER
THISWEEK Entertainment Editor

Otterbein College Theatre's production of "Evita" is bursting over with extraordinary talent.

To begin with the show boasts the largest cast ever (52) of any Otterbein production. This Andrew Lloyd Webber blockbuster gives you enough drama, music, dance, costumes and spectacle to rival any Columbus (or even off-Broadway) musical theatre production.

"The community has let us raise the quality of our shows," said Tod Wilson, head of OCT. "The turning point for us was when we put on 'A Chorus Line' and discovered that ticket sales were outrageous! We quickly realized that this was the level we should be striving for, and last season's 'Sweeney Todd' was further indication of our success."

"I've always been enamored of the lady and the legend," said director Dennis Romer. "And I think this is Webber's deepest and most solid stage play. It's a cautionary tale; its theme is seduction. I think Eva seduced Peron and then the two of them seduced a nation. So, it's a very timely subject, what with all the famous and influential people currently being investigated or at least questioned by the news media."



Submitted

Veteran director Dennis Romer will be behind the scenes again for Otterbein's "Evita."

Preparation for the play began a year ago, when Romer raised his hand and told the Department of Theatre that he wanted to direct "Evita." He got the green light for this to be one of the college's guest artist productions, and immediately began casting from the college students.

Practically everyone wanted to be in "Evita." Then, in February, Romer flew to New York to audition guest artists for the weighty

role of Juan Peron. There, he selected Charles Pistone, who had played Javert in the first national tour of "Les Miserables."

Romer said, "We were lucky to get him. He's great with the students; he's a skilled performer; and he's got another job waiting for him as soon as he leaves here, so you know he's good."

"Evita" is more than just a college play. It's a Central Ohio collaborative art event. Russel Hastings from The Ohio State University theatre department will lend his expertise as guest set designer and Doreen Dunn, executive director of OhioDance, will be guest choreographer.

Lauren Lambie, resident costume designer with Players Theatre Columbus, traveled to New York to purchase almost \$2,000 of special fabric, and costumes are being borrowed and rented.

Romer added, "Dave Mead of Stage Tech is the person who is most responsible for helping us move into the age of the modern musical, making it available to the audience and the students. The quality of the sound system he creates is superb."

Even the sets are something special. Constructed largely of metal

Please see 'EVITA' page 17
(not continued)

ENTERTAINMENT

Charles Pistone probes Peron's power in 'Evita'

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

Juan Peron was Sicilian. So is Charles Pistone, the guest Equity artist who will play Peron in Otterbein College's *Evita*.

"His real name was Peroni," Pistone said. "His grandparents emigrated to Argentina from Sicily. We have at least that in common."

That's merely one of several reasons why Pistone, a New York actor with several Broadway and off-Broadway credits, is eager to play the Fascist Argentine dictator whose glamorous actress-wife, Eva Peron, inspired Andrew Lloyd Webber's most biting musical.

"Peron was a megalomaniac with a lot to work out," Pistone said. "He was a strong man with a real power thing, yet tremendously insecure. I've always been interested

Otterbein College Theatre will present *Evita* at 7:30 tonight, 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday in Cowan Hall on the Westerville campus. Call 898-1109.

in guys like that."

There's a lot of rich material there, a lot to be explored."

Pistone, in an interview during rehearsals, compared *Evita* to *Samson and Delilah*.

"Peron was not a typical dictator," Pistone said. "*Evita* is really the story of his emasculation by Eva, so there's an interesting journey there (for the actor). Peron starts out as a strong man, but by the end he is a weakling."

Otterbein College's largely student pro-

duction, which runs today through Sunday, will be Pistone's first experience as a guest artist in academia.

After being invited to play Peron, Pistone turned for advice to Bob Gunton (recent star of Broadway's *Sweeney Todd*), who originated Peron on Broadway.

"Gunton said it was a positive experience for him, and he encouraged me to try it," said Pistone, 37.

"I really wanted to work on this role — so much that I was willing to take a chance," he said. "Luckily, it worked out. I'm working with a very talented team at Otterbein, and I consider it, in many ways, a professional experience."

Pistone played a reporter in Broadway's *The News* and was Leonard Thompson on ABC's *One Life To Live*. Off-Broadway, he appeared in *Leader of the Pack*, *Little*

Mighty, *Dubrovsky* and *Dear*.

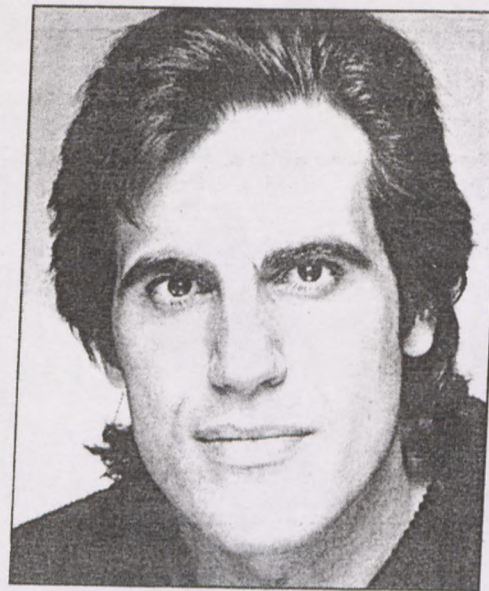
Perhaps his greatest indirect preparation for Peron was playing Inspector Javert in the first national tour of *Les Miserables* in Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit and Washington, D.C.

Both roles share the same dynamic: the tyrant/victim.

"Javert and Peron are cut from the same cloth," Pistone said.

"There's a message in *Evita*: How people are perceived isn't really how they are. People should be more careful about who they revere and for what reasons.

"*Evita* is about idolatry," Pistone said. "People idolized Eva and Juan Peron. But they were no different than the Marcoses, in the Philippines, or the Ceausescus, in Romania. They trampled the people's trust."



File photo

Charles Pistone

'Evita' captures Cowan stage

By Jeff Goins

A strong-willed, ambitious woman attempted to gain the presidency of Argentina last night, and over 1,400 people witnessed the event.

"Evita," the musical biography that traces the life of Eva Peron, began its five-show run to a packed Cowan Hall at 7:30 p.m. yesterday. The musical, which garnered seven Tony awards during its Broadway run, boasts a cast of 52—the largest ever assembled for an Otterbein production.

The musical centers around Eva, a poor, illegitimate peasant who possesses a powerful desire to rise above her station. She later becomes the second wife of Argentine dictator Juan Peron. As she gains confidence and popularity, she begins to grow and express herself politically, and soon becomes a cultural icon. The production combines the history of Argentina and Eva's rise to power with colorful dancing and vocal performances. Eva is portrayed by theatre senior Lisa Walton, who said she was "very happy to be a part of this production."

Five guest artists are lending their talents to the production as well. Director Dennis Romer traveled to New York to cast the role of Juan Peron, and chose actor Charles Pistone.

Pistone, who has portrayed Javert in the First National Company production of "Les Miserables" for two years, is making

his Otterbein debut in "Evita." His acting repertoire includes roles in "Hamlet," "The News" and "Leader of the Pack," and he also has appeared on the television production "Howard Beach: Making the Case for Murder," and a role on "One Life to Live."

"We were fortunate to find him," Romer said. "He's the type of actor we look for when seeking a guest artist. He has a strong desire to work with students, and will strike a wonderful balance in 'Evita'" he added.

Doreen Dunn, executive director of OhioDance, is guest choreographer for the performance; she is joined by scenic designer Russell Hastings, costume designer Lauren K. Lambie and sound designer David Mead.

Lambie, resident costume designer for Players Theatre Columbus, bought special fabrics in New York for the production, and costumes have been also borrowed from Ohio State and Players. In addition, she oversees the 200 costumes that will be used throughout the performance. Walton, who undergoes 20 complete costume changes, said that the requirement was a challenge.

"We sat down and talked at a rehearsal and planned every change," Walton said. "I have two hair and two costume people assigned to me during the show, and they've been absolutely great; (with their help) I've been able to make a complete costume change in as little as one to two minutes during a break."

The set for "Evita" is almost as complex as its costumes. The set features a custom-painted drop, with a rear projection screen that will provide a multitude of settings from 150 different slides. Melanie Edwards, a design tech major, said that the scenes were built over several long nights. "Classes began to lose top priority, we

worked on the set almost constantly," she said.

In addition to special lighting for the show, several spotlight operators on stage will work in conjunction with over 200 light cues for the numbers. Musical direction was provided by David DeVenney, who conducts a pit orchestra consisting of Otterbein students.

"Another Suitcase In Another Hall," and "Don't Cry For Me Argentina" are two of the more popular songs the orchestra will perform. Paige Tirey, who plays french horn, said that the most interesting thing about the 15 music recitals was learning about Argentina's history. "The music was fairly straightforward and easy to learn, and I was really into the performance," she said.

Romer agrees that Argentina's history and present situation are major factors in the department's choice of "Evita." "[It's] a very timely production," he said, "This is a time when everyone is questioning new governments and we have a healthy skepticism concerning authority. It revives the whole question of leadership and government," he said.

Walton sees Eva as an anti-hero, a powerful, ruthless woman who becomes an international celebrity. "I hope the audience will admire her for her determination," she said. "I just feel so honored to have this role; I've learned a lot from Charles, and this is something that may never happen (to me) again."

The production begins at 8 p.m. tonight through Saturday, and closes with a 2 p.m. matinee on Sunday. Most performances are almost sold out, although there are several tickets available for Sunday's show.

Otterbein's 'Evita' captivates

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Power also seduces, onstage and off.

Evita, a seductive entertainment that opened last night at Otterbein College, offers an object lesson in the pitfalls of power.

Interestingly, director Dennis Romer views Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's award-winning musical about Eva and Juan Peron as an object lesson in seduction.

First, actress Eva Duarte seduces Col. Juan Peron. Then Peron seduces Eva; then both fascist leaders seduce their country, 1940s Argentina.

Finally, to take Romer's analysis one step further, Otterbein's lavish revival seduces the audience.

"What a circus, what a show." To paraphrase Che's sardonic commentary on Eva's rise to power, Otterbein's theater department has "gone to town" over *Evita*.

Visually captivating and elegantly choreographed, *Evita* boasts Otterbein's largest cast (52) yet and more than 200 colorful costumes.

With an energetic pit orchestra, multiple historical slide projections,

REVIEW

Otterbein College will present *Evita* at 8 tonight through Saturday night and at 2 p.m. Sunday in Cowan Hall. Call 898-1109.

Rob Johnson's moody lighting and guest scenic designer Russell Hastings' expansive metal sets and lovely artwork, Otterbein's ambitious production casts its glamorous but chilling spell on a much larger scale than Players Theatre Columbus' 1986 revival.

Romer keeps *Evita* "rollin', rollin', rollin'" past its bleaker moments of manipulation, greed and revenge; past Lloyd Webber's repetitive and often discordant melodies — and past irritating lapses in sound amplification.

Hampered by an untested body mike at Tuesday's student preview, Lisa Walton's Eva sang too weakly to be understood during much of the first act. One wondered what Peron, Che and the rest of Argentina saw in this particular *Evita*.

Gradually, however, Walton's haunting performance came into its

own as a man's — and a nation's — "fantasy of the bedroom and the stage." Her coquettishness was on ample display in *Goodnight and Thank You*, in which *Evita* seduces and dismisses a succession of increasingly influential men.

By the second act, when most sound problems were corrected, Walton's plaintive beauty (and voice) glistened in *Don't Cry for Me, Argentina*. Paradoxically, Walton grows stronger as *Evita* declines.

Overall, Otterbein's production radiates more than "a touch of star quality," thanks to a generally capable student ensemble and guest Equity artist Charles Pistone.

In his first guest artist role since Broadway and off-Broadway, Pistone chooses to underplay his scenes, thereby grounding *Evita*'s glittering showmanship in psychological realism.

His Peron is utterly believable. Peron loved power, all right, but he loved Eva just as much — making her slow descent into illness and death more of a romantic tragedy.

At the same time, Pistone's soft, rich baritone is passionately theatrical in *Dice Are Rolling* and *She Is a Diamond*. Pistone and Walton are



Dispatch photo by Ken Chamberlain

Jess Hanks as Che and Lisa Walton as Eva Peron in *Evita*

at their sensuous best in the calculating but sincere courtship duet *I'd Be Surprisingly Good for You*.

But the show's clear standout is Jesse Hanks, a stirring singer. He is surprisingly good as Che, the revolutionary observer whose skepticism and outraged idealism gives *Evita* its darkly comic perspective.

Two of the sweetest, if briefest

voices: Kelly Fleming as Peron's mistress (*Another Suitcase in Another Hall*) and Jeffrey Miller as the crooning Magaldi (*Night of a Thousand Stars*).

As in most Lloyd Webber musicals, personality is largely submerged in spectacle. Nevertheless, Otterbein's *Evita* is shaping up to be a highlight of the spring season.

Dec. 30, 1990

THEATER/1990

Developing theater groups gain some needed stability

Professional theater can be good, bad or indifferent. So can semi-professional, community, college, senior and children's theater.

But theater, in all its constantly changing variety, has developed considerably in central Ohio. Especially in 1990, when the shaky progress of previous years began to stabilize on a somewhat higher level. Make that *levels*.

Players Theatre Columbus, in an unsuccessful effort to whittle an estimated \$400,000 deficit amassed since signing a contract with Actors' Equity Association in 1987, played it safe with slight crowd-pleasers (*Beehive*, *The Mousetrap*).

Except for *The Foreigner*, a hilariously confident revival of Larry Shue's sure-fire comedy machine, Players' worthiest shows were its least popular: *Woman in Mind*, Alan Ayckbourn's brilliant but disturbing "comedy" about a deranged housewife; and *Precious Memories*, Romulus Linney's bitter Appalachian tragedy.

Players still has a way to go before reaching the quality and consistency of regional theaters in other major cities. But give it time.

Community and college theater cannot be compared directly to professional or even semi-professional theater, but the best work by amateurs can provide more satisfying entertainment than indifferent work by their alleged betters.

Hamlet, Actors' Summer Theatre's best

BEST OF THEATER

Local picks.

- *A Chorus Line*, Broadway Series
- *Audience/Fire in the Basement*, Contemporary American Theatre Company
- *Evita*, Otterbein College
- *The Foreigner*, Players Theatre Columbus
- *Hamlet*, Actors' Summer Theatre
- *I Do, I Do*, Gallery Players
- *Inherit the Wind*, The Ohio State University
- *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, Reality Theatre
- *Please Don't Hold the Dog Up to the Casket*, OSU Theatre Company
- *Woman in Mind*, Players Theatre Columbus

ONSTAGE



MICHAEL GROSSBERG

show (*Evita*) rather than several.

At OSU, an impressive revival (*Inherit the Wind*, honoring Jerome Lawrence's belated 75th birthday) and a brilliantly staged new work (*Please Don't Hold the Dog Up to the Casket*, adapted by Firman Brown from Mike Harden's *Dispatch* columns) launched its most exciting season in years.

Contemporary American Theatre Company began the year with too many problematic script choices — notably *Full Hookup*, a depressing dud, and a poorly conceived American update of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*.

But central Ohio's most likable semi-professional troupe bounced back with critical and popular hits: *A ... My Name is Alice*; *Beyond Therapy*; *The Mystery of Irma Vep*; *A Christmas Memory*, the better half of the best holiday show in town; and *Audience/Fire in the Basement*, a fascinating and timely double bill of dissident Eastern European playwrights.

CATCO also took an important step toward professionalism by hiring Michael Harper and Jonathan Putnam as its first full-time actors.

Other groups took major steps, too. Reality Theatre, whose compact version of *Irma Vep* was trashier than CATCO's and therefore funnier, launched an annual playwrighting festival. Center Stage Theatre found a home as the resident

Shakespeare yet, and *I Do, I Do*, Gallery Players' expertly cast musical charmer, represented community theater at its finest.

While Otterbein College's usually superb theater program faltered, The Ohio State University came back strong after a multiseason slump. For Otterbein, faltering meant merely one memorable



Mary Circelli/Dispatch

Rob Behrens as Hamlet

theater company of the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for the Performing and Cultural Arts.

Perhaps the groups making the most progress were Grandparents Living Theatre, central Ohio's innovative senior troupe led by Joy Reilly, and Columbus Junior Theatre, an aging children's theater rejuvenated by Bill Goldsmith.

A few new groups joined the crowd: Community Musical Theatre, Spotlight Dinner Theatre, and Rosebriar Shakespeare Company.

Michael Grossberg is Dispatch theater critic.