

The woman was a tramp.

Nobody denies it.

But peasants adored Eva Peron, Argentina's controversial First Lady.

As much as the aristocrats shunned her, the lower classes loved her. She was a saint to them.

This contradiction is what makes it such dynamo material for art. Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice saw that, picked it up and transformed it into the musical "Evita."

The TheatreZone, Collier County's only professional Equity Regional Theatre Company, is presenting the show in Naples through March 9.

Broadway's original Annie, Andrea McArdle, stars as Eva.

McArdle is relishing her role as a bad girl. The 5-foot-4-inch actress is usually typecast as the sweet, loveable female.

"I mean, this stuff is like meaty," McArdle says about the show. "(Eva is) part blueblood and part hooker."

Eva was born to a peasant mistress of an aristocrat. Her high-society father wouldn't acknowledge her existence.

At 15, she high-tailed it out of the boonies to the bright lights of Buenos Aires by latching onto a seedy lounge singer.

Eva ascended to become a B-list actress and kept sleeping her way higher.

At 24, Eva found her golden target: popular politician Juan Peron. By 27 she was married to Peron, who became president of Argentina.

That's when she started charities for the poor and stuck it to aristocrats every chance she got.

When Eva died at 33 from cancer, an estimated 3 million lined up to touch her casket. Commoners called her Evita as a term of endearment.

Eva's life is so dramatic a musical is fitting, McArdle says.

Unlike most musicals, though, there isn't one bit of dialogue. That's a challenge for any actor or director, say McArdle and Mark Danni, founding artistic director of TheatreZone.

"Some of the keys in the show only dogs can hear. It's that high," McArdle jokes. "But there's less of a cheese factor. That's my problem with some musicals."

Mainstream America learned of Evita when Madonna played her in the 1996 film co-starring Antonio Banderas.

Danni is banking on the widespread appeal.

"I want to have one show a season that's recognizable so I can get people in and then trust me," Danni says.