

A voice and some attitude

'Evita' comes to TheatreZone

By RICHARD FERRARA (Contact)

Actress Andrea McArdle was virtually born into Broadway.

At an age when most kids with theater aspirations were putting on school plays, she was making her Broadway debut. It was 13-year-old McArdle who played orphan Annie when the eponymous musical opened in New York City in 1977. McArdle was nominated for a Tony for the role, which despite many other iterations, including a movie, was always hers. So much so that when a new cast made its way to London's West End, McArdle stayed on as the only American to play the title role for British audiences.

"It happened not a moment too soon," says McArdle. "I was ready to grow up. I was an incredibly late bloomer; I looked like I was a 9-year-old boy until I was 18. Good for the business, bad for dating."

She laughed.

From her early success, McArdle went on to star in some of Broadway's biggest hits, and her repertoire of roles reads like an aspiring actress's wish list.

She played Fantine in "Les Miserables," Ashley in "Starlight Express" and she became Broadway's longest-running Belle in Disney's stage production of "Beauty & the Beast." Her other stage appearances include starring roles in "Oliver!," "Annie Get your Gun," and "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat."

McArdle's upcoming performance in Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Evita" at the G&L Theatre in Naples is her latest role in a long and glamorous career in theater spanning more than 35 years.

"I've never, ever done a role in all of my years as a professional that is even remotely as hard as this one. So I guess I'm a glutton for punishment. I don't know," McArdle said with a laugh. "Nothing makes sense in this in terms of a traditional, formulaic musical. Vocally, it's an insane role."

McArdle plays Eva Peron, the young starlet who rose from the throes of poverty to become the icon of a nation — as both a political and spiritual leader. She left behind a legacy nearly as legendary as it is controversial.

"She was pretty beastly," McArdle said of Peron. "There's something in the human condition, when people attain that kind of power. Not only do they lose their naïveté, they lose their good intentions, a power-hungry gene kind of overpowers their desire to be a humanitarian. She became this symbol, and the poor people thought that she was so good to them, but really they were getting raped. It's like any powerful person, they can seduce you, and she did seduce a nation."

McArdle has played Evita before, but not in more than 15 years. Fortunately, the character is indelibly etched in her memory and is ready to be invoked for the stage. Which is a blessing since she'll have only a week to rehearse before Thursday's opening.

Because the set of "Evita" is spartan, the production will rely less on the usual extravagance that is the signature of Broadway. Instead, it will lean heavily on the performances, which McArdle says can be an added challenge in an age when special effects dominate the acting scene.

"Luckily, in this case the story stands on its own," she said.

For McArdle, there's something liberating about playing the sort of antihero that is Evita. "Good girls are overrated," she says, laughing again. As an actress, she tends to seek out the qualities that she shares with her characters: Sort of a corollary to the maxim "write what you know." In this case, she finds something of herself in Evita's temperament and outspokenness.

McArdle's upcoming appearance in Naples can be traced directly to Mark Danni, artistic director of TheatreZone, an equity theatre company.

Danni had worked with McArdle as one of the assistant conductors of "Les Miserables" back in 1997. He founded TheatreZone three years ago. When planning for the Naples production of "Evita," he could think of no one better for the part.

"I wanted a powerful leading lady, and since there's no dialogue and it's all done through singing, this was written for a powerful voice, so I thought it'd be perfect role for her," Danni said. "She's an incredible singer. Her voice just knocks you over. She commands the stage and she's got incredible presence."