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DIVA TALK

Chatting With Evita's Christina DeCicco, the 'Alternate Eva'

By ANDREW GANS

For those like myself who like to catch as many different actresses playing the role of Evita as possible, there is some exciting news: For two weeks this summer former *Wicked* star Christina DeCicco will step into the title role of the Tony Award-nominated Broadway revival of the Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice musical at the Marquis Theatre. DeCicco, who normally performs the role twice weekly — Wednesday evenings and Saturday matinees — will play the late Eva Peron six performances a week July 12-19 and August (dates to be announced shortly) while Argentinian actress and Olivier winner Elena Roger films a movie (during those two weeks Jessica Lea Patty will be the Alternate Eva). (For the record, this diva lover has enjoyed the Evitas of Tony winner Patti LuPone, Derin Altay, Nancy Opel, Donna Marie Elio [now Asbury], Judy McLane, Natalie Toro, Felicia Finley, Elena Roger, and, come July 7, Ms. DeCicco.)

Although DeCicco has only gotten to play the role about 20 times, her co-stars have lavished her with praise. Rachel Potter, who plays Peron's Mistress, previously told me, "Christina is from New York. She's an American through and through, and she brings such a different energy, but it's so, so great, and I hope that more and more people will come see her because she's fantastic....Her voice is stunning, and we're all very, very proud of her because obviously being an alternate is never an easy job. And, she's done such amazing work just watching. She didn't get as many runs. She got maybe a fourth of the time — not even — probably an eighth of the time that Elena got to rehearse. And, she's so great. She still professes that she's still developing the role, but she's just stunning." And, Tony winner Michael Cerveris, who received his fifth Tony nomination for his performance as Perón, added, "In the beginning, she just had nowhere near the time on stage with me or in the rehearsal room for us to form that kind of comfort zone, even though from the very beginning, it was astounding from her first run-through with everybody, just how much work she had done to be able to step up ... and not just hit the right marks and know the right words and hit the right notes, but really already have a character being formed and developed... [It's also] so wonderful that the relationship between Elena and Christina is just dictionary-definition of 'collaboration' and 'mutual respect.' They were like sisters in rehearsal — just sitting and sharing ideas and talking about things — and it really set the tone for that kind of work together. That relationship could obviously be a really dicey one, and it really has not. It's, in fact, been the opposite. It's been kind of inspirational." Potter and Cerveris, it should be noted, spoke with equal enthusiasm about co-star Roger.

Earlier this week I had the pleasure of chatting with the talented singing actress about playing one of the most demanding roles in the musical theatre canon; my interview with DeCicco follows.

Question: How did this role come about for you?

Christina DeCicco: Well, I had just booked “Sister Act,” over a year-and-a-half ago, and my agents called me with an audition.

Question: What was the audition process like?

DeCicco: I first went in for Kristen Blodgett, the music director, and then met with [director] Michael Grandage and then went back in for the producers and actually didn’t book it. [Laughs.] And then I called my agents and said, “They have to see me again. I have to get back in,” so they allowed me to come back in a second time, and then I got the job.

Question: What do you think was the difference between those two auditions for you?

DeCicco: Probably I had a little bit more fight in me. [Laughs.] It was pretty strong, and because I didn’t get it the first time, I understood her fire a little bit more — her determination — and just came in with that.

Question: How much of the show did you have to do in those auditions?

DeCicco: We had about five different songs to do. It was a segment of “Buenos Aires,” a segment of “Dice Are Rolling,” where she’s sick, a little bit of “Don’t Cry for Me Argentina” and... There were two other songs — little bits of the show ... to see if you have that stamina to keep going and singing it. [Laughs.]

Question: Were you familiar with the musical? Had you ever been in a production of it?

DeCicco: When I got out of college, I did a production of it at Walnut Street Theatre, and I played the Mistress. So it’s nice, all these years later, to come full circle because I always saw the Mistress as a kind of foil for Evita. If she didn’t have that strength and that determination in her, that could’ve easily been her.

Question: What was the actual rehearsal process like? I imagine you didn’t get as much time...

DeCicco: It was really strange. [Choreographer] Rob Ashford and Michael Grandage were really wonderful about making sure that I knew that I could create the character as well. It wasn’t just an understudy situation, but there really wasn’t a lot of time on my feet, so I used to joke and call myself the “Eva Swing” because I would be in the room observing, kind of hovering in a corner somewhere, writing down as much as I can, observations, direction that I heard from either Michael or Rob to Elena. And, Elena was so wonderful about including me in conversations with her and Michael Cerveris, and her and Ricky [Martin], and making sure that I was in the room when they were discussing scene work or they were discussing music. She was really, really great about cluing me in and making sure I had time to develop on my own. Right before we got into tech, I was able to do a full run-through, and a lot of it I hadn’t even rehearsed, but it was just time to jump in. And, it was sink or swim time!

Question: What was it like for you the first time you actually had to perform the part? Did you go on that first Wednesday night?

DeCicco: Well, I had about one-and-a-half/two dress rehearsals in tech, but not like full through. My first performance was our first Saturday. We started previews on Monday, and our first Saturday matinee was my first show, and it was terrifying and frantic. And, it went really quick! [Laughs.] I just remember being like, “Wow. It’s over. I don’t even remember that.” As time

went on, it kind of calmed down, but there was a lot of frenetic energy in that performance.
[Laughs.]

Question: What would you say is the most demanding aspect of the role because it is such a huge part?

DeCicco: Especially from my position, since I'm only on twice a week, it's learning how to conserve your energy because you just don't stop. And, the few minutes that you're off stage, people are taking clothes off and putting wigs and other clothing on and jewelry and shoes and pushing water bottles in your face and tissues and running back out, so it's a lot of learning how to pace yourself so that you are able to control the story all the way through. This is definitely the most demanding thing I've ever done.

Question: What is it like for you just doing the role twice a week? Do you have to be there for the other performances?

DeCicco: I do. Along with being the alternate, I'm also the standby. I am there every night. I mean, Elena's rock solid. She hasn't missed one. But just in case, because it is so demanding and one little small cold can set you back, I'm there just in case anything goes wrong, or if she calls out, I go on. So I'm in the building and present, but I have my own dressing room upstairs with the rest of the cast. I kind of read and watch movies and do my own thing while the show is going on.

Question: Were you asked to use an accent or not do the accent?

DeCicco: I asked Kristen Blodgett our first music rehearsal because I had figured, "We're going for authenticity here. Elena's from Argentina." I've done shows with accents before, and I was ready to dive in and do all my research, and they're like, "No. You're here. You're American. You're from New York. When you go on, the show is going to be about you, so you don't have to worry about putting on any kind of accent, just tell the story." Kristen, Rob and Michael Grandage were really welcoming to make my two shows about who I am.

Question: Did you do much research into the life of Eva Peron?

DeCicco: Oh, any books I could get my hands on, any YouTube videos I could watch... My husband and I actually took a trip to Argentina before rehearsals started, so we got a little bit of the flavor of the country and the people and her history there and talked to people who were around then and [went] through that regime and afterwards... So we did a lot of research coming in. And, you try to be respectful. Obviously, the show we're doing every night is a story that Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice wrote, but it's about a real-life person, so you do try to pay respect to that. And, because of Ricky and Elena, we do have a lot of foreign travelers coming to see our show — a lot of Argentines — so we want to be respectful of their history as well.

Question: Was there anything in particular that you saw — clips of her — or read about her that you've incorporated — maybe mannerisms or just anything small that people might not pick up, but that have been meaningful for you?

DeCicco: There's a lot of her stature... In the Evita museum in Buenos Aires, there's a lot of video of her making speeches, and a lot of her intensity in her posture, and I tried to bring a lot of that into it. Also, it was really interesting to me how loved she still is in Argentina. People still have this passion for her... Elena and I have spoken about this in depth — we really wanted to

make sure that her humanity came out, and it wasn't just this ambitious woman who wanted to be famous and powerful for fame and power's sake. We wanted to understand why she had this passion for the *descamisados* — for her people, as she calls them — and make her a real person. We wanted to show that there's a little bit of truth in her creating social welfare programs and not just, "I want to be powerful."

Question: What are some of your favorite moments in the show for yourself? As a performer, what do you look forward to?

DeCicco: I mean, it's still so surreal to me. ... Every now and then, I'm all dressed ready to start "Requiem," and I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror, and I'm like, "Oh, wow! That's me? That's me?!" [Laughs.] And, I'm getting ready to play Eva Perón in the first revival of 'Evita' on Broadway in 30 years," so I think I'm just having the absolute time of my life every moment. Also, I think I've performed my 22nd show, so while the show has been going on a few months now, and everybody else is coming up to their 100th performance, I'm still kind of in my preview period. I try to remember every moment and try to take it all in and experience it because it's still so new to me. I think because the show has been up and running, everyone thinks that I've been part of that all along, but it's been a very different experience for me. It's just such a hard story to tell that each difficult moment as it comes, "Oh! This is my favorite. No, no... This is my favorite... No! This is the best part!" So I don't know if I can single out one single moment.

Question: How demanding do you find it vocally because it is such a rangy and belty score?

DeCicco: Oh, yeah! It's hard. [Laughs.] This is definitely not for the faint of heart to sing, but Kristen Blodgette was wonderful about letting me sing it from my voice and not trying to emulate anybody else that has come before — not trying to put something on and really just tell the story through Andrew's music and Tim's lyrics through my voice. I'm definitely a little bit more lyrical than people might expect, but I try to turn it on when I feel like the story is demanding that she uses her power in her voice... If you listen to her speeches — now I don't speak Spanish, so the meaning, if it's not translated, is lost on me — but her power and her pitch is just very similar to the notes that Andrew Lloyd Webber wrote, so you could just imagine that coming from her, and it's like you know that you have to give it all that you have at that exact moment.

Question: Has Lloyd Webber seen your Evita?

DeCicco: Yes. Actually at my second performance, my associate director tricked me and said that nobody from the creative team was going to be there, and he did not let me know that Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice were watching my second show ever! [Laughs.] They were lovely, and they came back to the dressing room. I tried to compose myself after I realized that, and they were wonderful and complimentary and just absolutely lovely to me. And, that was kind of a little highlight. I'll always have that in the back of my head as [one of] my Broadway memories. [Laughs.]

Question: Tell me about working with Ricky and Michael, your two co-stars.

DeCicco: They've been so gracious to me from the start. It's an unusual situation that we're going through, and everybody was just kind of ready for the ride. They all knew that I was a very different person from Elena, and that it would probably be a different show. We try to hit the

same marks with the same words, but they're ready to go along for the ride, and they've been like that from the beginning. Really, I couldn't ask for better scene partners.

Question: Is it ever a little surreal to think that you're sharing the stage with Ricky Martin?

DeCicco: You know, it's so funny. ... People are always like, "What's Ricky like? What's Ricky like?" What's funny — we were all really respectful of him in the beginning, but by the end of the first week of rehearsals, he was Ricky, our cast member. And then all of a sudden, you sit back, and you're like, "No, wait. That's Ricky Martin — international music superstar."

[Laughs.] And then we forget, and then you realize again. Everyone's been really respectful of his music. ... Sometimes when you work with pop stars or stars, you don't know how exactly they feel, and you don't want to upset anybody. And, one day, before I was getting ready for one of the matinees, I just downloaded all of his music and just started blasting it from the dressing room. [Laughs.] He comes out, and he's smiling at me. I was like, "Come on, Ricky. Dance with me! Shake your bon-bon!" He's an absolute sport, and we all adore him.

Question: Now, you're going to play a full week of the show?

DeCicco: There's a week in July and a week in August where Elena is filming a movie.

Question: Will you do all eight shows or six shows?

DeCicco: I'll do six shows, and Jessica Lea Patty will take over as the alternate for those weeks.

Question: What are your thoughts about playing full weeks?

DeCicco: I'm thrilled and terrified at the same time. I'm really excited to get that routine where you're in it, and you're doing it every day. I'm excited to see what I figure out as an actress — just having that flow every day. I'm terrified of the stamina that it'll need! [Laughs.] But I've played difficult roles before — on the road playing Glinda — so I think that I can go back to my strict routine. Being an alternate, you kind of give yourself a little leeway because you know you're only doing it twice a week, but I think I'll know how to snap back into that, but we'll see! I'm very excited about it.

Question: Have any former Evas come to see the show since it's been running?

DeCicco: I'm actually not sure. I know that Patti LuPone sent Elena a beautiful bouquet on opening night, which was just absolutely so gracious. They also ran into each other at the Tony Awards. Patti ran over to Elena to give her a big hug, and they took lots of pictures together, but I haven't met any, no.

Question: I imagine Elena's run is limited because of Actors' Equity. ... Has there been any talk of who will take over for her?

DeCicco: I don't know. There hasn't been any chatter. [Laughs.] I think we're still basking in the beginning — the honeymoon stage — of our show. Of course, I would absolutely love to. I'm always ready to take on a challenge, but we'll see what the future brings. I guess, as an actor, you just have to be ready for anything.

Question: Since we haven't spoken before, let's go back a bit. Where were you born and raised?

DeCicco: I was born in Brooklyn in New York, and I was raised in Long Island by Long Beach.

Question: When did you start performing?

DeCicco: I think towards the end of high school. I always did school plays and sang in choir, but then really towards the end of high school, I thought, “Hmm. Maybe I should just try to be on Broadway.” ... Like it’s so easy to do! [Laughs.]

Question: When you were growing up or even in high school, were there any artists or performers that you particularly admired that you think influenced you?

DeCicco: Any Broadway ticket that I could get my hand on, I was a ready, willing participant... I remember, at the time, “Sunset Boulevard” was a really big show in town, and I remember Elaine Paige performing in it and going to get her autograph, and I still have the Playbill. ... I didn’t know that you could do that, and it wasn’t so much about the performers. It was about the shows and the music and the singing. And, I still have her Playbill with her autograph from “Sunset Boulevard” in my little collection. [Laughs.]

Question: What was your first professional job?

DeCicco: Well, I graduated from Wagner College in 2002 and then spent a year doing non-Equity and did a lot, a lot, a lot of regional theatre for years. And then in 2007, I got Glinda in the national tour of “Wicked,” and that was my first big show — my first experience with commercial theatre. That was definitely a mind-blowing experience — just the technical aspect of the show, besides the fact that it’s still one of my favorites. It was overwhelming and joyous to be part of that.

Question: What was your Broadway debut?

DeCicco: My Broadway debut was with “Sister Act” last year.

Question: What was that like when you finally got to Broadway? Do you remember that first night?

DeCicco: Oh, yeah! It was surreal and fulfilling to know that all these years later, after all my hard work, it finally paid off, and there I was — part of an amazing cast in a brand-new Broadway musical. And then we got to perform on all these TV shows and go to California and perform on other things and be on the Tony Awards. It was definitely a ride and well worth the wait.

Question: Do you come from a performing family?

DeCicco: No, I don’t. Strictly blue-collar, New York, Italian, regular folks.

Question: How excited has your family been about you being on Broadway?

DeCicco: Oh, they’re thrilled! It’s nice because when I was on tour, everyone got to play their hometown, and I never did, so being on Broadway is more than just that dream of being a star on Broadway. It’s, “I finally get to be home with my family and play my hometown.”

[Tickets can be purchased by visiting Ticketmaster.com or calling (800) 745-3000. For more information visit EvitaOnBroadway.com.]