

The Music of 10,000 Nights: *Phantom* on Broadway

BY MELANIE BAKER

With over 10,800 performances and counting, *The Phantom of the Opera* is the first and only musical in Broadway history to achieve the honor of hitting 10K curtain calls. A juggernaut in the realm of New York theatre, *Phantom* continues to dominate as its timeless story makes its way into the hearts of a new generation of fans who travel from near and far to flood the Majestic Theatre, and to be transported by “The Music of the Night.”



Hugh Panaro as the Phantom and Marni Raab as Christine in a scene from the show

Phantom — based on the French novel *Le Fantôme de l’Opéra* by Gaston Leroux, and adapted and composed for the stage by Andrew Lloyd Webber — first premiered on Broadway in 1988, with the commanding Michael Crawford and songstress Sarah Brightman at the helm. The origi-

nal New York production earned 7 Tony Awards, including Best Musical and a Leading Actor statue for Crawford’s portrayal. Since then, 13 leading men, including current role-holder Hugh Panaro, have stepped behind the famous mask to tantalize and terrify the story’s ingénue Christine Daaé, now played with innocence and naiveté by powerful soprano Mary Michael Patterson, and Marni Raab at certain performances.

Panaro is no stranger to one of the most grotesque, yet beloved characters in musical theater history. In fact, he was invited to reprise the role of the Phantom — a part he’s comfortably stepped into intermittently over the years — for the 25th anniversary on Broadway. Yes, you read that right: *Phantom* also stands as the sole member of the 25th anniversary club on the Great White Way, and just celebrated its 26th birthday in January.

Panaro is unquestionably a rarity for the production, being among a small handful of actors to play both the handsome love interest Raoul, in 1991, and then transfer to the titular role off and on from 1999 forward. Panaro has played the masked antihero over 2,100 times, making him the runner-up for most Broadway performances in that role, behind Howard McGillin’s whopping 2,544 shows. With his work as Raoul over almost 1,000 performances, Panaro’s stats set him past 3,000 shows with the

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New York production. Cue the applause.

Is there a secret behind the all the success? The stream of stage stars to undertake such powerful roles since the late ’80s certainly helps, but there’s something to be said for the way *Phantom* so completely transports audiences into the past with its larger-than-life orchestrations, period costumes, and a romance that leaves us with dropped jaws and rapidly beating hearts. From conflicts and crescendos, including a massive, one-ton chandelier that hangs ominously above, Lloyd Webber’s love triangle plays out filled with tension and risk against the backdrop of old world Paris, a city where love takes precedence over all.

Of course, Lloyd Webber’s score has

secured its place as an indomitable force to be reckoned with, from the sweeping, grandiose “Masquerade,” to the tender and soul-tugging “All I Ask of You,” duet between Christine and Raoul (Jeremy Hays), her knight in shining — rather than “emotionally and physically scarred” — armor. Christine’s operatic rival, diva extraordinaire Carlotta Giudicelli, played by Michele McConnell in her Broadway debut, wields a soaring vibrato and oozes pure vocal honey on the show’s opening song, “Think of Me.”

Phantom is an entity, an experience, and a story to behold. Shatter any masked doubts and get thee to the Phantom’s lair at the Majestic Theatre for this landmark production.

Phantom of the Opera is playing at the Majestic Theatre, 245 W. 44th St. For tickets, call 212-239-6200 or visit thephantomoftheopera.com.



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