

## **THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA** **Arts a la Mode Review by Mark Pizzato**

Music by Andrew Lloyd Weber

Lyrics by Charles Hart

Directed by Harold Prince

Blumenthal Performing Arts Center

Broadway Lights Series

Belk Theater, June 10 to July 5, 2009

What's in a face? We might say that true beauty is more than skin deep. But beautiful, young faces and bodies are so magnified today by our mass media that such inner beauty becomes hard to believe in—or find—if it is not mirrored in an outer form.

The Phantom of the Opera (based on a French novel from 1910) was originally staged in London in 1986 and later became the longest running musical in Broadway history. It is famous for its romantic characters, ghoulish mystery, and operatic passions. Yet the fame of its lead character bears much irony. How substantial is this phantom and his musical drama? He turns out to be a human, not a ghost, who wears a half mask because one side of his face is horribly disfigured. He thus combines elements of the Elephant Man, Svengali, Mephistopheles, and even the theatre god Dionysus—with a chorus girl, Christine, becoming the extension of his ideal artistic desires.

Having taught Christine to sing, the masked Phantom demands affectionate loyalty from his protégé. He also forces those in the theatre he haunts to make her a star, leaving letters that insist his new opera be performed with her in the lead. When she betrays him, falling in love with a handsome young Vicomte, the Phantom takes revenge. But he receives pity from Christine, despite his murder of two people in the theatre. She kisses him to save the Vicomte from a similar fate, yet the mystery continues. Has she fallen in love with the monstrous Phantom after all? Does this change him? Or return him, as her "Angel of Music," to hell?

This character study does not give the details of character development. Yet, its plot holes create more mystery for imaginative spectators to fill with their own passions and insights, inspired by the show's music, romance, and Gothic spectacle. It is set in 1881 (except for the opening scene, an auction 30 years later) and in various areas of the monumental Paris Opera House, plus the Phantom's underground labyrinth and a graveyard—with many amazing scenic effects.

The proscenium frame of the Belk becomes much enhanced by golden baroque angels and satyrs, some of which come alive, like flying Jack o' Lanterns. An added chandelier over the stage also expresses the Phantom's passions. There are several opera, ballet, and party scenes, with huge Egyptian cow-headed gods and a life-size (but not live) elephant, a picturesque pastoral backdrop, and a joyous yet sinister masquerade on the lobby's grand staircase. We see boxes from above the stage, inside the star's dressing room (with its phantom mirror), the managers' office, and the performers' view, from backstage, of the darkness of the audience. We even go to the roof of the theatre. And the steamy lake,

where Christine floats with her Phantom to his labyrinth, is even more mysterious, as he lures her into "the music of the night."

Lighting transforms the stage during these scenes, as well as between them. The many bejeweled costumes and masks are fantastic, too. And there are surprises with fire and magic tricks, plus moving choreography and gestures, along with various moments of humor. But the best treats come from the excellent voices, in powerful arias and the complex, layered dialogue of recitative. Even if the lyrics are difficult to discern at times (and the acting not as fine as the voices), the play's music echoes throughout its spectacle and within the bodies performing and watching, as the Belk becomes the Paris Opera House and its audience is haunted, like Christine, with the "phantom in my mind."

In Phantom, various styles of music and movement vie for power: threatening organ chords, sweet romantic tunes, grand opera, comic operetta, and dainty ballet. All of it entertains. Yet, an irony remains. With all this showiness and contrapuntal harmony, what demons are shaped in the darkness, in others without beautiful faces, who are devalued and demeaned? Or in the talented beauties that we idealize onstage and onscreen?

Mark Pizzato is Professor of Theatre at UNC-Charlotte and author of *Ghosts of Theatre and Cinema in the Brain* and *Theatres of Human Sacrifice*. His plays have been published by Aran Press and his screenplays, produced as short films, have won New York Film Festival and Minnesota Community Television awards.