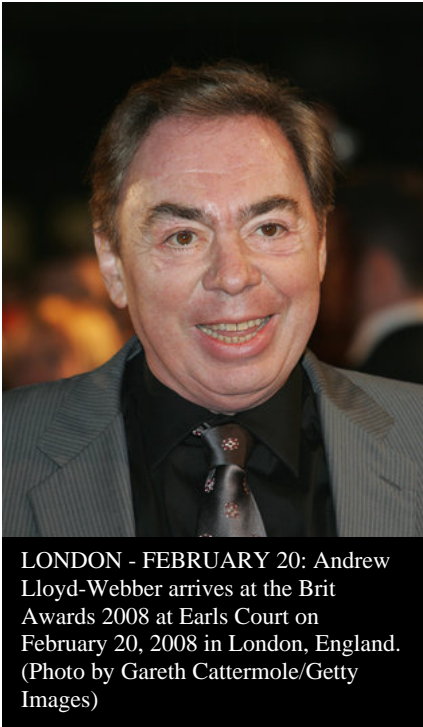


Why touring 'Phantom' never dies

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Posted: Sunday, Jun. 14, 2009



“This is the end of the Broadway musical as we know it,” said a fellow theater enthusiast after “The Phantom of the Opera” won the Tony for best musical of 1988. He spoke with disgust, but he was a prophet.

Except for Andrew Lloyd Webber's own “Sunset Boulevard” in the '90s, no top Tony-winner since has come from the grand Broadway tradition of large orchestration and lush melodies that are free from pop or rock music influences.

That doesn't mean “Rent” and “Spring Awakening” and “Avenue Q” lack charm, heart or good tunes. But the style of the Golden Age of Broadway, which began with the operetta-like “Showboat” in 1927, seems to have just one practitioner now: Lord Lloyd Webber.

Stephen Sondheim, who'll be 80 next year, never cared much for that style and left it behind long ago.

Jerry Herman, who'll be 80 the year after next, no longer writes new shows. So only ALW carries the torch that's in danger of going out.

All three holdovers from the Golden Era wrote their first full-length musical scores within four years of each other. Herman did “Milk and Honey” in 1961, while Sondheim turned out “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum” one year later. In 1965, Lloyd Webber finished “The Likes of Us,” about Irish social reformer Thomas Barnardo. (It was the composer's first of five pairings with lyricist Tim Rice.)

“Likes” set ALW's tone for the next four decades: large, sweeping emotions accompanied by large, sweeping melodies. Think of “Evita” or “Cats” or, if you've heard it, Lloyd Webber's wonderful “Requiem,” written in memory of his dad.

Lloyd Webber comes from a classical music tradition: Father William Lloyd Webber was a composer, and brother Julian is a classical cellist. ALW once wrote a set of variations on Niccolò Paganini's 24th Caprice for violin, then adapted those for the wordless second act of his “Song and Dance.”

So he thinks in grand, long-phrased gestures. His melodies have an operatic sweep, often reminding people of Puccini, though accusations of direct musical theft usually prove unfounded. (And please note that, when John Williams won an Oscar for “Star Wars,” his main theme *exactly* duplicated a motif from Puccini's “Manon Lescaut.” Nobody cared.)

What makes “Phantom” great is not the boat sailing through the candlelit mist or the squashed-tomato makeup of the maimed face or the effects with magic mirrors and underground lakes, though those all cast a spell. It's certainly not the “plummeting” chandelier, which has been about as terrifying as a rickety Japanese lantern in all five productions I've seen. (That includes the Broadway version, six months after it opened; I'm writing this before seeing the national tour that's playing at Belk Theater through July 5.)

No, what makes it great is the wrenching pain the Phantom suffers at losing Christine Daae and the ambivalence she feels at rejecting a brilliant, psychotic artist in favor of a loving but conventional relationship.

Some of that emotional impact comes from the lyrics by Richard Stilgoe and Charles Hart, which are never less than serviceable, but most of it emerges in the music.

Not everyone saw the potential in this story at first. Maury Yeston won a 1982 Tony for “Nine” and was approached by actor Geoffrey Holder, who had rights to create a musical from Gaston Leroux's novel.

“I laughed and laughed,” Yeston said later. “That's the worst idea in the world! Why would you write a musical based on a horror story?... Then it occurred to me the story could be somewhat changed... (He) would be a Quasimodo character, an Elephant Man. Don't all of us feel, despite outward imperfections, that deep inside we're good? And that is a character you cry for.”

He was right. Had he set to work at once and raised money for a Broadway version, Lloyd Webber might have had to turn his attention elsewhere. But ALW reached the stage first and gave us the capstone to 60 years of theatrical tradition.