

Salisbury Post review: Phantom of the Opera still thrills

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Belk Theater in Charlotte's Blumenthal Center was packed last Friday for the opening night of "The Phantom of the Opera."

It's a challenge to write anything new about a record-setting show that has been seen numerous times by scads of people. And if you are one of the few people who have not witnessed a live production of Phantom, and want to be surprised and delighted by the flashy visual effects, then [spoiler alert] don't read this.

In the opening scene, as items from the Paris Opéra House are being auctioned on stage, the Charlotte audience waited politely until the auctioneer focused upon the bulky, tarp-covered mass in the middle of the stage, conveniently labeled "chandelier." Then a wave of murmuring anticipation rippled through the rows — "here it comes" — the thunderous blast of the famous descending chromatic, pulsating pipe organ as the chandelier bursts from its canvas prison, ascending to illuminate the gilded angels, polished wood, and lit candle sconces of the formerly brilliant opera house of the past.

I couldn't help but watch a girl across the aisle from me who was sitting bolt upright on the edge of her seat, hands clasped, gazing raptly at the stage except when she would giggle, and clasp the shoulder of her friend next to her. They looked more like they were attending a Jonas Brothers concert than a Broadway musical.

Her body language shrieked, "here it comes — my favorite part!" then "here it comes, my next favorite part!"

She mouthed the words to all the songs. She conducted and cued the orchestral entrances.

She really got on the nerves of my daughter, who attended the show with me. After all, this was music of Sir Lloyd Webber, not "Rocky Horror Picture Show."

But I found her enthusiasm fascinating, and I regret not asking the girl how many times she has seen the show.

The Phantom of the Opera, both in its N.Y. Broadway home and on the road always delivers, with remarkable singing of Andrew Lloyd Webber's magical songs accompanied by stunning visual effects.

When you've set the bar so high in the beginning, it seems it would be exhausting for producers and casts to maintain the spectacular level audiences have come to expect. But I can say, having seen it in New York and in Charlotte previously, the present production

may have managed to still take the show to another level with the current cast.

No expense appears to have been spared, even in these tough economic times, to bring the Charlotte audience the full Phantom experience with gorgeous costumes, the boat that floats, more gorgeous costumes, moving scenery, "things flying about" as my daughter said.

There's something for everyone. Those who say they don't like Broadway music would be entertained by the leaping flames, murder and mayhem, or the love story.

And if you're a musical purist who sniffs at the sensationalism and focuses on the singers and the score, there's nothing to complain about there. Lloyd Webber didn't achieve his level of musical fame for no good reason. That music is remarkable. And the singers in the current production are top notch.

But, judging by the thunderous ovation at the conclusion, the audience had a favorite: Tim Martin Gleason playing the Phantom himself. That is to say, his ovation was maybe a few decimals higher than the vociferously deafening response to the other cast members.

And this was well-deserved. Gleason managed to bring an additional level of emotion to the role in both acting and vocal prowess. This, after years of playing the romantic lead, Raoul, in three different American companies. In fact, he holds the record for playing Raoul the most times, about 2,600 times, including for the Broadway company when it broke the record for the longest-running Broadway show in history.

I can imagine him during those 2600 shows, in his slightly boring Raoul character, studying the more interesting Phantom and thinking "I bet I could do that better." Plus, according to the program, he earned a degree in psychology before turning to a life in show business. He does indeed seem to have gotten inside the head of the disfigured and violent character, turning him into a man that Christine and audience alike feel genuine compassion, and even affection for, not just pity.

"The Phantom of the Opera continues its run at the The Blumenthal Performing Arts Center through July 5.

For ticket information, call 704-372-1000 or visit www.blumenthalcenter.org.