

The Phantom Formula

When the megamusical *The Phantom of the Opera* opens in Jacksonville for a three-week run in March, the curtain will rise on what has become one of theater's greatest spectacles. But most theater-goers are unaware of what goes on backstage, where the show there can be as entertaining as the show out front.

BY EVE GLICKSMAN

When *The Phantom of the Opera* opened in New York after playing in London for two years, some critics panned Andrew Lloyd Webber's score as repetitive, the dialogue as banal and the spectacle as kitsch. That was 1988, and the Tony Award-winning *Phantom* still is playing to sellout crowds worldwide.

No one expected the show to run this long, though — least of all the designers, who never considered the logistics of moving the show's megalithic props and technical effects for a nine-city tour each year. Nor were the 230 ornate period costumes — valued at \$2 million — built to outlast a gazillion quick changes.

"You never think, 'How will we tour this?'" says Sam Fleming, associate costume designer, who started out with the Broadway production in 1989 and is now with the Cameron Mackintosh/Really Useful Theatre Company, which brings the musical to Jacksonville in March.

"Shows open and close," echoes Gary Zabinski, stage manager for *Phantom's*

Brad Little and Amy Jo Arrington in *The Phantom of the Opera*

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touring production, who has been in the business for 18 years. "It is unheard of for a musical to last five years, let alone 11. Megamusicals like *Cats* and *Les Misérables* are a whole new animal."

Phantom, after all, is little more than a formula turn-of-the-century gothic romance. Beast meets Beauty and falls in love. Beauty loves someone else. Beast acts out. However, the musical has become an industry, with ticket sales exceeding \$2.8 billion.

Despite the unforeseen challenges, everything old is new again in each city where *Phantom* plays. First, imagine 20 humongous semitrailers hauling everything from a 1½-ton staircase to the floor deck placed over each stage for various special effects.

"Everything has to be very well-controlled; we can't use what the theaters have. The set is a self-contained unit," explains Zabinski, who has been with the tour three years.

The infamous 10-foot-high chandelier arrives at each city two weeks before the cast

because the local theater usually needs to be restructured with steel beam reinforcements to accommodate it. The company travels with two chandeliers so installation can proceed in the next city on the tour while the show finishes up elsewhere. The only wizardry of the New York production that is missing from the touring show is a candelabrum that rises from the floor.

To get an idea of how complex the production is, there are six monitors backstage to help the stage manager with cueing, plus three television cameras hidden around the stage.

"The show that goes on backstage can be more entertaining than the show out front," Zabinski says. Picture 36 actors, 16 others helping them dress, six prop people, eight carpenters, six "fly men" (those who make things rise and drop), 10 electricians and four sound technicians running amok. "It is an absolute madhouse!" Zabinski says.

Extraordinary measures are taken every day to freshen the sets, rehearse the ever-changing cast, test the pyrotechnics and keep

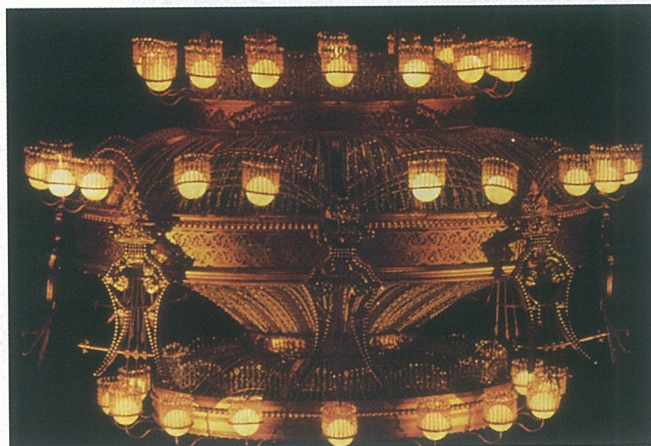
every bustle crisp. In *Phantom*, there are nearly twice as many people in the stage and electrical crew as in the cast. Some joke that the actors are merely props in the 2½-hour show.

The Night the Chandelier Didn't Fall

It's a smooth operation, but things do go wrong. Take the night in Fort Worth, Texas, when the chandelier didn't fall at the enraged *Phantom*'s whim. Knowing that many wait for that scene, *Phantom*-for-the-evening Brad Little – the very same actor who will be appearing at the Times-Union Center for the Performing Arts in Jacksonville – asked the members of the audience to remain in their seats when the final curtain fell. "I made a mistake, and I need to get it right," he announced, still in character. The audience went crazy as the motor-driven chandelier finally dropped dramatically to the floor. And no, the 1,000-pound lighting fixture – rigged with safety cables – never hits anyone, although fragmented pieces and beads regularly land in the orchestra pit.

Fleming's catastrophes are different. "Pregnancies are a crisis," the designer groans. "I may do a costume fitting . . . and by the second fitting the woman is pregnant. It makes me crazy! I must start altering without being sure where the weight will go since no one gets pregnant the same way." The worst was an understudy expecting twins who stayed through her seventh month, Fleming recalls with a shudder.

The 10-foot-high, 1,000-pound chandelier (right), which drops dramatically to the floor during each performance, requires specially installed steel beam reinforcements to accommodate it. Cast members perform *Hannibal* (below) in *The Phantom of the Opera*.



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DAN OLESKI

Jerry A. Wolf, *Phantom's* wardrobe supervisor, with a fish hat/mask from the *Masquerade* production number.

The musical's 1911 setting is the opulent Paris Opera House where silk, taffeta, velvet and lace are *de rigueur*. One ruffled frock can come to the price of a house when you add the two replicas needed by understudies, says wardrobe supervisor Jerry A. Wolf, holding up a dazzling \$30,000 number. Wolf, who has worked with 13 other shows, describes *Phantom* costumes as "architectural." The highly stylized pieces are worn with bustles, corsets, capes, trains, feathers and padding.

"How will I keep these clothes alive for a year, let alone 10?" he asked himself when hired. Fleming also faces the near-impossible task of having to replace genuine antique trimmings when they wear out, he says.

Some costumes involve a wrestling match to get in or out of quickly so they are vulnerable to rips, Wolf says. Understandably, there's a message board backstage where all required repairs are noted daily – from makeup stains, snags and missing beads, to sagging hemlines, pleats that need pressing and fading fabrics.

The wedding gown worn by Christine, played by 22-year-old Amy Jo Arrington, gives Wolf the most headaches. He uses moist baby wipes after each performance to remove the surface dirt from the gown after Christine's desperate crawl across the stage.

Phantom Phenomena

Even the razzle-dazzle, the can't-miss music and direction by the legendary Harold Prince don't fully explain *Phantom's* nightly standing ovations more than a decade later. Currently, the touring company has bookings through 2001 – with no end in sight.

Little, the show's current star, calls *Phantom* "the most brilliantly produced theater ever" and credits producer Cameron Mackin-

Who Is That Masked Man?

Phantom's Brad Little identifies with difficulties his character faces

On the surface, handsome, 30-something Brad Little would seem to have nothing in common with the sad, disfigured Phantom he portrays. But Little, who is dyslexic, knows all too well what it's like to be ridiculed and to hide his shame. That private pain has shaped his performance in *The Phantom of the Opera*.

Little has been with the *Phantom* family for 4½ years. He started in the Broadway production, playing the swing role – an understudy for all the male choral parts. He went on to play Raoul, the Phantom's adversary, for 1½ years. Then came the chance-of-a-lifetime invitation two years ago to play what he considers "the most famous role in musical theater" for a touring production of *Phantom*.

While Little loves filling the Phantom's mask, it's a role in which the actor fades into anonymity. "People offstage often address me as Phantom, not Mr. Little. I find myself being an ambassador for the part." Another down side is the sheer physical drain of the role. "Doing *Phantom* eight times a week is a workout! You are crawling on the floor, running up ladders, falling and throwing things."

The most difficult moment in the show for Little is singing *Music of the Night*, the show's signature song. "I go into it with a lot of prayer. When it lands, it's very exciting. It requires a quiet intensity, and all the variables need to come together."

"To say this role is tenor or baritone isn't fair – it's both," he says, of the score's challenging vocal extremes. On stage, Little must be alternately evil and pitiful, sensual and explosive. "I want the audience to fear, hate, love and feel for me."

Fans who come to the show again love to see the changing inflections, he says. "I'm painting the same sunset as two years ago, but I toss in different colors each time."

"It's tough to give your emotion over to the audience without letting it affect your voice," the actor continues. "I want to be the race horse ready to jump out at the starting gate. I want to make a full impact every night, yet contain the energy so it's not all over the place."

After the show, "I take my mind down," Little says. That might mean checking out a jazz club, or kicking back at a restaurant with other cast members. He typically gets to bed between 2 and 3 a.m., and rises at 11 a.m.

A native Californian, Little grew up with music and a theater professor father. There was fishing and Little League, but few friends because of his dyslexia, a learning disability that caused him to invert and confuse letters, and that prompted other children to call him names.

While Little still doesn't read, he has learned to compensate for his condition with an outstanding memory and ear. "I don't put myself in situations where I have to read anything cold," he says. When doing a television spot, he memorizes the script and doesn't use a prompter. His wife, actress Barbara McCulloch, who currently is touring with *Peter Pan*, also prepares tapes to help him learn lines.

Only since assuming the role of the Phantom has Little gone public as a dyslexic – primarily at the urging of his wife. Today, he gets great satisfaction from talking to schoolchildren about his disability and from hearing that he has inspired some of them.

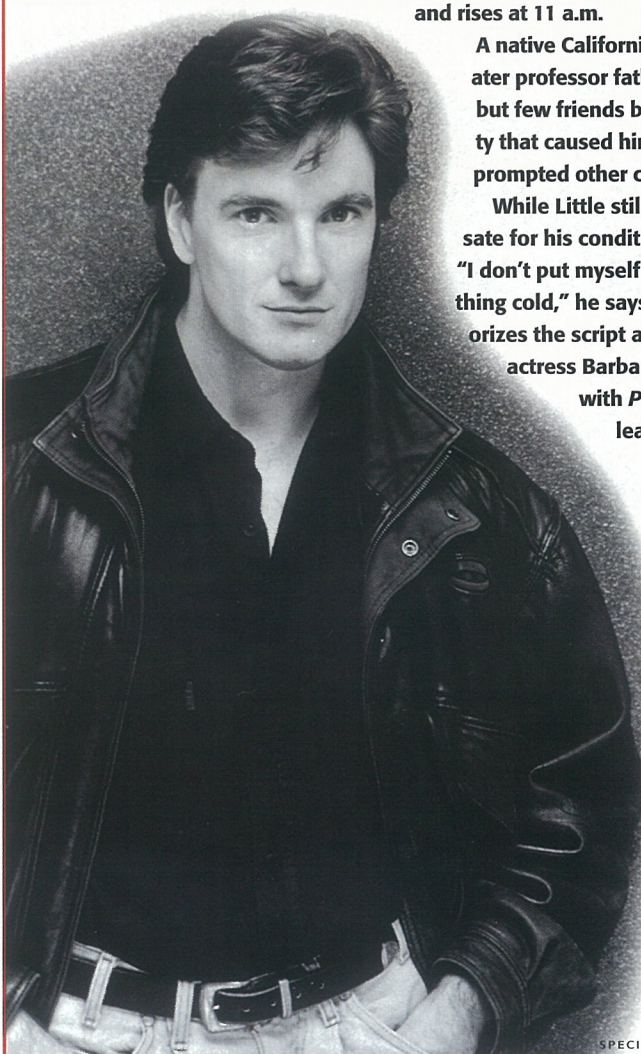
Is there life after *Phantom*?

Little is betting the show will run through 2010 but says he will retire from the role before that time. He intends to take a sabbatical after throwing in the mask.

"This show takes a toll, physically and emotionally. I couldn't just jump back into business without letting my body and voice recuperate." – E.G.



JOAN MARCUS



SPECIAL

PHANTOM PHACTS • The chandelier contains 100 pounds of batteries. • Six loads of wash are done after every performance. • The Phantom's makeup takes 45 minutes to apply and 25 minutes to remove. • One dress worn by the character Carlotta weighs 35 pounds. • Five hairdressers and 130 wigs travel with the company. • 550 pounds of dry ice is used nightly for fog scenes. • Two full-time "beaders" are employed to repair beaded items.

tosh with pulling it together. Zabinski says he's never seen a more cleverly designed show, owing to the genius of production designer Maria Bjornson, who created the strong sense of place and time.

"Even though the spectacle is overwhelming, it doesn't overwhelm the stories of the three main characters," he says. "There is a close feel to the show, and audiences feel like they are part of the opera house." Adds Fleming, "Guys like the cool high-tech toys – the gondola, fires and chandelier. Women like the romantic songs and the emotional experience." Kids under 9 get terrified, she warns parents.

While the musical is nothing if not grand, it is Victorian glitz – not Las Vegas gaudiness or Busby Berkeley kitsch. Fleming says she still gets goosebumps from the moody, haunting look of *Phantom*, where praise belongs to lighting designer Andrew Bridge. "The stage is underlit and shadowy – oozing with mystery and eroticism. The Phantom slips in and out of darkness, and you don't get a good look."

The decision to hide the Phantom's disfigurement behind a half-mask adds to the underlying menace.

In today's world of cable television and high-tech digital entertainment, theater needs to be graphically visual and have lots of special effects to compete, and *Phantom* does that, according to Wolf, the wardrobe supervisor. Take the thrilling scene where the Phantom spirits Christine to his catacomb. The pair sidle through trap doors and thick drapes, to a dropping bridge and underground lake. Their gondola ride is propelled by a handheld remote control below. Ten machines pipe in atmospheric fog. Candles – 141 of them – shoot up from the misty lake. On reaching the Phantom's lair, a spooky organ and bed jump out.

To date, more than 108 million people in 12 countries have seen *Phantom*. One fan claims to have seen the show 365 times.

How will theater historians look at *Phantom*-mania years from now? "Phantom will be like the Mozart of musical theater," Little pre-



Sam Fleming, associate costume designer for *Phantom*, has the unenviable task of replacing antique trimmings on the costumes when they wear out.

dicts. "People will always love this musical. We all have deformities of some type and hide the pain. *Phantom* will touch people no matter what generation they live in."

The FCCJ Artist Series Broadway Series presents *The Phantom of the Opera* March 3-27 at the Times-Union Center for the Performing Arts in Jacksonville. For ticket information, call (904) 632-3373 or 1-888-860-BWAY. *W*

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