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ANDREW LLOYD SUPERSTAR

The composer's brilliance illuminates
Portland Opera's production of *Phantom*

by Flora Sussely

Andrew Lloyd Webber is clearly the greatest dramatic composer of our time. Every time I see one of his shows, I am overcome in the way audiences in another time must have been when they heard Verdi. We cannot question Webber's genius when we ponder the fact that he was barely 20 years old when his *Jesus Christ Superstar* was a hit on the London stage. Since that time, he has given us *Evita*, *Cats*, *Starlight*

There is no difference between opera and serious musical theater." And the voices in the Portland production of *Phantom* are definitely operatic, which is exactly what this musical requires.

The most truly knock-your-socks-off singer in this performance was Julie Schmidt, who plays the Diva, Carlotta Giudicelli. Jason Peabworth's charisma as Raoul would carry him, even if he didn't have a lovely, strong voice—which he does. Plus, he is dashing and romantic, your basic prince. Likewise, Richard Reardon, one of the two openly gay cast members, lights up the stage as Monsieur André. His sense of timing is wonderful, and his voice never gets in the way of his enunciation, so you understand each word he sings. Steven Stein-Grainger, also family, played Ubaldo Piangi, the caricature Italian tenor. It is a role that demands vocal exaggerations, mistakes, bumbling gestures, clumsy timing, slapstick. Stein-Grainger did all that and sang with amazing passion in ensemble pieces like "Prima Donna," where you could hear his voice among the rest.

As for Brad Little and Kimilee Bryant, the Phantom and Christine, I lament to report a lack of chemistry on stage. The voices are good, the acting is OK, but, even with the amazing music and suggestive lyrics, they don't have dramatic escalation, which is necessary in this piece. The only moment that increased the tension was when

Express, *Aspects of Love*, *Sunset Boulevard* and an incredible *Requiem*.

Webber's *Phantom of the Opera* is in Portland and, for those of you who have never seen it, you must. It is a most erotic musical experience.

I had already seen *Phantom* in Los Angeles and San Francisco when I sat down to watch the Portland opening. As I heard the first bars of the overture, as I watched the chandelier fly up above me, I realized sacrifices were made for the traveling show. The wall of sound Webber wrote, the throbbing bass that scares and excites, is absent. Some of the layering counter-melodies are faint and lacking in presence.

One cannot blame the orchestra, which played beautifully, but the sound system just didn't carry it. Likewise, some of the pyrotechnics and scenes in water were not as dramatic as in longer-running, larger productions—the feeling of sinking was absent in the water scenes, for instance.

Is it still worth the price of admission, you may ask? Undoubtedly.

Lyricist Charles Hart has penned brilliant words to Webber's incidentally plagiarized score of *Phantom*. Plagiarized? Yes. In his score you hear everything from *Brigadoon* to *Turandot*, but who cares? No one has woven such passionate, frightening and haunting orchestrations as has Webber. In his work you can hear entire passages of melodies that have come before, but in such different contexts and with such rich surrounding tonalities that they become Webber's. Coupled with the psychologically intense poetry of Hart's lyrics and the mind-blowing direction of Harold Prince, this is, without a doubt, one of the major works of art of our time.

The original story, *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* by Gaston Leroux, has been the subject of several motion pictures, going back to Lon Chaney in 1925. But never has the element of desire been explored so boldly as in Webber's adaptation. The tacit longing, the fascination with the forbidden, dark, upsetting feeling of the erotic—these emotions were barely conveyed in the early productions of *Phantom*. Now, we have the Phantom and Christine touching themselves.

Personally, I think subtler performances work quite effectively when the Phantom sings words like: "possess" and "surrender" and "intoxication, tremulous and tender, helpless to resist." This, as scored by Webber, makes me tingle. And that is what opera is supposed to do.

The public relations people at Portland Opera nearly put me 'on report' for calling this musical an opera, but I had a defense. In a 1988 interview with Webber in *Time* magazine, he is quoted as saying: "What do we mean by opera anyway?"



Brad Little as the Phantom

they sang "The Point of No Return." In this scene, Christine, in costume for an opera the Phantom has composed, sits behind the Phantom, who is disguised as the leading tenor. The way they lean and move with one another is so boldly sexual that, indeed, it is the climax of their relationship. Unfortunately, in this production there was so much sexual gesture that it was far less powerful. After all, the Phantom hates his body, despises the fact that no one has loved him—not even his own mother. It doesn't make

sense that he's running his hand up and down his torso (and Christine's) early in his scenes with her. When he uses the wrought iron grating of his lair to hold himself back from Christine, when he winds his wrists into it so that he looks bound and she dominates him with her unthreatening presence, it is very sexy. This kind of insinuation doesn't play, though, unless it builds from zero, and Little and Bryant got too physical too soon.

Don't let these observations detract, however, from what is a dramatic and musical gem. See for yourself why Andrew Lloyd Webber is the Verdi of our age.

Phantom plays through Aug. 16 at the Civic Auditorium, Southwest Third Avenue and Clay Street. Tickets are \$16-\$61.50, available through TicketMaster at 790-ARTS, the Portland Center for the Performing Arts box office, or at the Portland Opera offices, 1515 SW Morrison St.

Members of the Phantom of the Opera company will present a benefit for Cascade AIDS Project and Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS at 7:30 pm Monday, July 21, at Panorama, 341 SW 10th St. Cast members will perform solo and group numbers mixing musical theater, opera and dance. Tickets are \$20 from The Fish Grotto and Jelly Bean; for another \$5 patrons can meet the cast after the show at a champagne reception.