

Episode 5: Andrew Lloyd Webber and the Mainstreaming of the Musical

Welcome to Re:Adapted, where we take a work and explore why we keep telling the same story over, and over, and over. I'm your host, Kris Pepper Hambrick. Thank you so much for your support so far, and please, if you're enjoying the show, consider rating, reviewing, or just telling a friend.

This season, we're looking at a long-time favorite of mine, *The Phantom of the Opera*. Over the past few weeks, we've talked about the novel, the film versions from 1925, 1943, 1962, and the sudden zag from period prestige picture to campy modern-day with 1974's *Phantom of the Paradise*. If you're joining us for the first time, I do recommend going back and listening to the previous episodes, because while the musical exploded into the popular consciousness in a way no other phantom has before, it's actually part of a longer trajectory. In a way, today's version of the story is a return to its novelistic roots, but we'll also see how Andrew Lloyd Webber's blockbuster 1986 musical perfectly mirrors the desires, and concerns, of its own day.

This is a big one, because it represents both a culmination of the themes we've seen in prior versions, but also a sort of turning point in how we perceive the Phantom and his relationship with Christine, which in turn speaks to a broader cultural shift. We're also going to cover the way adapting the story for musical theater fundamentally alters how it's received by audiences. And finally, like it or not, it sets up basically everything that has come since. For all of these reasons, I'm covering the musical and its effect on the culture in two episodes, so stay tuned!

But first, let's look at how the plot of this version plays out. I'll try to be brief, as most people listening to this are probably familiar with the musical. For the record we're speaking only about the stage version today—the 2004 film will get its own episode, so if you haven't seen this live and want to know what we're talking about, try to rent the anniversary Royal Albert Hall presentation of the stage musical. We open in 1911 at an auction of old opera memorabilia. An elderly Raoul de Changy buys a music box shaped like a monkey. Meanwhile, the auctioneer recalls to mind the "strange affair of the Phantom of the opera" as he describes a broken chandelier, which suddenly rises up and time warps us back to 1881 or so (depending on the production), where Carlotta is having a fit about mysterious happenings. She storms off, and ballet mistress Madame Girya and her daughter Meg suggest chorus girl Christine stand in. Except for Madame Girya being ballet mistress instead of box keeper, this is very much as in Leroux. As in Leroux, Christine is recognized by childhood sweetheart Raoul, who visits her in her dressing room. Christine confesses to both Meg and Raoul (separately) that she's been visited by the Angel of Music, which is why she can suddenly sing so well. Neither believes her, but the Angel himself is pretty upset at both his blown cover and the attention she's getting from people who aren't him, and he appears in her mirror to draw her down into his underground lair and sing her a seductive song. Given the circumstances, she realizes he is not an angel at all but a man who keeps a full-sized mannequin double of her wearing a wedding dress in his underground lair. She faints, and then is awakened by his furious organ playing and decides to find out who he is by sneaking up behind him and snatching off his mask. This does not please him, and he is in

turn furious and then apologetic and returns her to the surface.

Like the book, we get the managers' fretting about the demands of ghosts, and croaking divas and hanged stagehands and crashed chandeliers when those demands are ignored. We also have the rooftop love scene, overheard by the Phantom who vows revenge.

For some reason six months pass during which we don't hear from the Phantom, until he shows up at a masked ball with a completed manuscript called *Don Juan Triumphant* he wants the company to perform. This is a deviation from the novel, where the masked ball was mostly an opportunity for Erik to intimidate the company and spy on Christine. But here, Raoul uses the pretense of the opera to hatch a plot to capture the phantom. Christine agrees, but only reluctantly, and goes to her father's enormous grave to wistfully beg for his guidance; again, paralleling the novel with a slightly different motivation. But the Phantom and Raoul both interrupt her grief to have a manly confrontation over her which involves fireballs and Raoul explicitly trying to shatter Christine's Elektra complex.

Don Juan is performed, except the tenor Piangi is killed and replaced by the Phantom, who sings another sexy number with Christine on stage until she pulls off his mask in front of everyone, at which point he kidnaps her and waits for Raoul to show up. When he does, Christine is offered an ultimatum: either she marries the Phantom, or Raoul dies. Meanwhile, a mob forms to avenge the murders of Buquet and Piangi and converges on the lair. Christine finally agrees to stay with the Phantom and kisses him. Having experienced that moment of kindness, he relents and lets them both go before retreating

back to his throne and disappearing behind his cloak, leaving only his mask for Meg Giry to find.

As we can see, a lot of the original elements have returned: Erik is the way he is from birth, he's got a tragic history (though with no hint of the criminal element from the novel), Christine and Raoul are childhood sweethearts, et cetera. Erik's own opera Don Juan becomes a huge plot point. There's a Punjab lasso and an attempted hanging, though not quite a torture chamber. The side characters, apart from the replacement of the Persian with an upcycled Madame Giry, are mostly intact. The whole story is streamlined, to the point where the Phantom doesn't even have a name, but in plot elements it's the closest we've gotten to Leroux since 1925. However, like that film, it introduces an angry mob to spur the finale action on a bit. Unlike that film, the Phantom does not explicitly die. It's clear the writers have gone back to the original source material.

Unlike the previous film versions we have explored, the plot of the Lloyd Webber musical does not contain the plagiarism thread that came to a head in last episode's *Phantom of the Paradise*. However, I can't resist a slight detour here to mention that Lloyd Webber has fairly continuously and credibly been accused of "borrowing" major segments of opera and popular music throughout his career without any attribution and, seemingly, without any embarrassment whatsoever, which is a very interesting example of real life paralleling the text in dramatically ironic ways.

While the Lloyd Webber version is the most clear adaptation of Leroux we've had in awhile, I would argue that it also represents a pretty big alteration in terms of what it's saying

and what it says about the culture, but I'm going to need to work up to that.

So to begin, how did this get made? Lloyd Webber's Phantom did not, of course, emerge from a vacuum, and the story of its creation involves antecedents both direct and indirect. The primary one is a musical first conceived and directed in 1976 by Ken Hill, commonly referred to as "Ken Hill's Phantom of the Opera" to distinguish it. Ken Hill, who had made a name for himself adapting works of literature and horror film to the stage, first staged Leroux's novel in 1976 with some original music and some repurposed Faust by Gounod. He revived it in 1984 except this time, all the songs were operatic arias with new lyrics, intended to mirror what would have been heard at the opera house in that time period. A dancer and singer by the name of Sarah Brightman was offered the role of Christine, but turned it down—fatefully, however, she was married at the time to composer Andrew Lloyd Webber, who was already pretty prominent due to his successes with Jesus Christ Superstar, Evita, and Cats. Lloyd Webber and musical producer Cameron Mackintosh saw Ken Hill's production, and originally were inspired to approach Hill and offer a partnership—they'd gussy up the show and get it launched as a more prestigious work, but as producers, not creators. Despite the West End gloss they intended to add to the production, the original idea was not a sweeping romantic musical, but something akin to the Rocky Horror Show.

This becomes more understandable when you look at what the original show was. Richard Corliss in Time magazine commented, "Hill's backstage farce is a kind of Noises Off without the wit, and the cast plays it as hammy gaslight farce." Despite the arias being deployed, the story is rife with

mockery of the upper and middle classes and, melodramatically, makes the Persian the Phantom's brother who survived his brother murdering their circus-folk parents. (But at least there is a Persian.) However, the romance we've been missing from previous versions is there, and this is extremely important.

As Lloyd Webber and Mackintosh were exploring the idea of turning Ken Hill's farce into big budget theater, several people and ideas converged to change that plan. First, they approached Jim Sharman, who had directed both *Rocky Horror* and the early Webber/Tim Rice hit *Jesus Christ Superstar*, but he'd moved on to legit opera. As a parting shot, he said, "you're missing a great romantic plot — you should compose the score." Lloyd Webber picked up a copy of the novel in a used book store, read it, and realized this was actually the project he'd been looking for. He was then engaged in attempting to adapt David Garnett's novel *Aspects of Love* but had stalled out because it wasn't quite the 'major romantic story' he'd been seeking. Phantom, in his eyes, was. Director Hal Prince was also looking for a big romantic show. Quote: "I said 'Yes' immediately. I don't usually say 'yes' right away. It was exactly the sort of show I wanted to do — I felt that there was a real need for a romantic show. I had done several that were hard-edged and bitter, even *Evita* is like that. I wanted a change as much for the theatre-goer as the director."

Lloyd Webber recruited lyricists Richard Stilgoe and Charles Hart, put together a sort of 'taster' of what he was trying to do, and mounted it at his annual Sydmonton festival in June of 1985, a theater event he held at his own estate. He got Maria Björnson to do the sets, got Sarah Brightman and Colm Wilkinson (then crushing it as Jean Valjean in the Cameron

Mackintosh produced Les Miserables) to play Christine and the Phantom, and as he says, "the festival revealed that it was potentially a great romantic musical, and that a campy approach would be counter-productive to the whole thing."

Once decided, the team went to work creating a lush, romantic, but still accessible Phantom. Prince and Björnson, now designing both sets and costumes, both did on-site research at the Paris Opera. They got provocative British director Ken Russell to direct a music video of the title song to test the waters, following it up with a version of "All I Ask of You" with veteran star Cliff Richard and, once Michael Crawford was cast, "Music of the Night." This was a way of seeding the idea of Phantom in the general populace and making sure they were on the right track. Though, no one seems to have had any doubts. Everyone involved shared a vision of Phantom that centered not just the romantic elements, but the sensual nature of Erik.

Director Hal Prince said, "I was watching a BBC program called The Skin Horse about people who were physically incapacitated, or deformed, a series of interviews with quadriplegics, Thalidomide victims, talking about what it was like, and I sensed that the thing that united them all was a very normal, healthy sexuality." He showed the program to Björnson, who agreed that, quote, "It was the core to the whole thing. It's fairly obvious: Why shouldn't they want to be in love? Everyone has a right to be in love."

While it's weird and dismissive for Prince to say that what 'united' these people with disabilities in their humanity was their sex drive and the whole thing seems not a little paternalistic and fetishizing, at least we're not talking about

the Phantom as if real people with disabilities and anomalous physicalities don't exist. We're talking about humans with normal needs who are not either monsters OR, as in the case with the revenge tragedy Phantoms, sexless victims.

Prince and Bjornson got Andrew Bridge, lighting designer, on board. According to Bridge, the Phantom is "not just a serial killer; he's an erotic character... He's a tortured sort of soul, and it's more exciting if he lures her into an erotic den than into a killing ground. The seduction is very present in our design—the symbol of the candles, the shimmering water on the lake... The attempt was to create an environment that was 'sinister with an erotic feel.'"

Romance and eroticism also played into how the Phantom was made up and cast. Christopher Tucker, who had created John Hurt's makeup for David Lynch's *The Elephant Man*, created the original makeup. While very different from the Lon Chaney style, these differences were largely necessitated by the visual and performative demands of live theater—it had to be visibly extreme from the back of the auditorium while allowing the actor to use his face to act, and further he had to be able to sing and perform a pretty strenuous show. This was also the reason that the full mask (still visible in the iconic poster, along with a rose in case we missed the romance vector) was replaced with the half-mask, allowing for better visibility and clearer vocals.

For the Phantom, who is never referred to as Erik in the libretto but is often referred to as such by the people behind the scenes, Lloyd Webber was picking up wife Sarah Brightman from a voice lesson and overheard Michael Crawford practicing, who shared the same teacher. While this

might initially have seemed like an incongruous move—Crawford was famous for a somewhat bumbling comedy persona—his physical chops and sensitive tenor voice turned out to be perfect for the type of romantic antihero they were going for. On top of that, Crawford played him sympathetically, saying,

“I feel incredibly sorry for Erik, I feel terrific compassion for him. And I think that the audience must also, because I have never seen such a reaction from men and women alike. They enjoy it in an emotional way. It’s as though anyone who has ever felt love will come out crying. They feel sympathy towards that man’s plea, that cry he makes at the end.”

If anything, he was underplaying the response. Phantom opened in London’s Her Majesty’s Theatre on October 9, 1986, arriving on Broadway in January of 1988 at the Majestic. Reviews, while sometimes complaining about shallowness or a lack of musical originality, nevertheless were mostly positive. Frank Rich in the New York Times wrote, "It may be possible to have a terrible time at The Phantom of the Opera, but you'll have to work at it. Only a terminal prig would let the avalanche of pre-opening publicity poison his enjoyment of this show, which usually wants nothing more than to shower the audience with fantasy and fun, and which often succeeds, at any price." It was a sensation with audiences both in London and New York and, later, on touring productions and international stages around the world. According to Wikipedia, the total worldwide estimated gross earnings add up to \$6 billion at this point, and it’s as of now the longest running show in Broadway history, closing only in April of 2023 when box office for what is a rather expensive show to mount failed to return to pre-pandemic levels. It’s estimated that over 140

million people have seen it onstage in some form, compared to an estimate of 73 million for *Cats*. Compare this to the big winner at the 1988 Tony Awards that *Phantom* was up against, Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods*, which ran for 765 performances. Highly respectable numbers for a Broadway show, but nowhere close to the record set in 2012 for 10,000 performances of *Phantom* at the Majestic alone. *Phantom* was a sensation, and anecdotally, having been alive at the time, I can report that it felt like it was everywhere. I originally learned about it because a song from the original cast recording was being played in a shop. The original novel was reissued with the distinctive mask and rose cover. You could buy shirts, mugs, music boxes, jewelry, sheet music, even a weird sort of jack in the box the phantom popped out of. Someone sent me a postcard of an actual airplane with a *Phantom*-themed paint job at one point. I myself had a poster of Michael Crawford's *Phantom* on my teenage wall. I wish I'd kept the glow in the dark mask shirt, frankly. I don't like to talk about it, but there was a shameful part of my life where I thought I was too cool for it, and gave it away. I do still have a mug, but the mask doesn't quite disappear anymore.

Anyway, I probably don't need to hammer this point home, because unless you're a big silent movie fan, if you're here, you probably know about this story and the film versions because the Lloyd Webber show brought it to the forefront of popular consciousness. Even if you're not a fan, in a sense it's why we're all here, at this point.

But why? What about it made it hit so hard, and gave it the staying power it's had, spawning or at least influencing everything else we're going to talk about in this season?

There's a clue in Richard Corliss' intro to a 1993 article in Time Magazine about the proliferation of Phantoms in the years since the musical:

"He is a figure of power and poignance, horror and mystery. He dwells in the fetid cellar of the subconscious; from those depths rises the music of passions we hardly dare attend. He is the Id aching for the Ideal, loathsomeness wanting to be loved, unknown fear reaching up to touch or break our hearts... He is kin to Pygmalion, Cyrano, Quasimodo, Dracula, the Elephant Man and King Kong—artists isolated in their genius, Beasts pining for Beauty."

By 1993, at least, Erik had joined the pantheon not just of Universal Monsters or frequently-resurrected remakes, but a representation of something within us, no longer a threat external to women or order OR merely a victim of corporate greed. He was a romantic figure both capital and lowercase, now explicitly a figure of attraction and of self-identification. I would argue that this is a brand new development for this character—and possibly others in Corliss' list—in the 80s, born of a pair of cultural shifts larger than itself, though certainly in part driven by the success of the musical. The first is the acceptance of the Other, the anti-hero, the subculture, as something to identify with as opposed to as a threat. The second is a broader, class-related shift which probably could only have occurred in the 1980s.

This episode covers the first cultural shift; we'll explore the second in the next episode. There are several huge transitions between our last straight-up period Phantom in 1962 and the 80s, so allow me to set the stage.

Even a cursory understanding of cinematic horror and science fiction over the past hundred years demonstrates that society's fears fluctuate over time. In the 30s and 40s, we had a surge of "monster movies," with identifiable, often supernatural, 'others.' In a simplistic sense, these became passé with the advent of WWII and the Atomic Age, and a lot of Hollywood cinema became preoccupied with giant, radioactive creatures or threats from above, whether alien or manmade. This, in a sense, might help explain (if such an explanation is needed) the dearth of interest Leroux's Phantom during the bulk of the 60s and 70s. While never officially a "Universal Monster," Chaney's Erik fit better in the pseudo-gothic underworld, not the modern mad scientist's laboratory or alien craft.

But as we've seen, one of the biggest shifts in the approach Lloyd Webber, Richard Stilgoe, and Charles Hart (among others) took with Phantom has to do with a completely non-horror related development. And that is the way in which the musical is not really horror at all, but a romance.

Horror, in the 70s and 80s increasingly moved away from fear of the monstrous other towards fear of very human psychopaths, born or created. In turn, much of what was once thought of as "monstrous" and "other" came to symbolize something very human. In other words, we began to fear what man was capable of more and more—for instance, Norman Bates, the cute boy next door, was worthy of our suspicion and fear. Meanwhile, we also, it seems, came to empathize more and more with what society once ostracized. There was a rise in films and stories about the seemingly monstrous actually being the most human of all. David Lynch's *The Elephant Man*, from 1980 and starring John Hurt and Anthony

Hopkins, was about the real life of Joseph Merrick, once displayed as a sideshow exhibit but demonstrating true resilience and humanity and exposing the folly of judging by appearances. Indeed, since the 19th century great strides had been taken away from displaying so-called 'freaks' in circuses and, with varying degrees of success, towards regarding humans with disabilities and physical anomalies as worthy of empathy, not fear. A Broadway play about Merrick, starring David Bowie, even went so far as to not use any makeup on its star, as a way to highlight his inseparability from the rest of humanity.

Several versions of Beauty and the Beast also emerged, as did films like Mask and, after Phantom, Edward Scissorhands and Darkman, all of which posited that the ostracized and different were often the most worthy among us—or were us. This isn't to say that this message was entirely absent before this: Tod Browning's Freaks from 1932 is an attempt to humanize sideshow performers that was not well received at the time, and there are other stories about not trusting appearances, of course. And there were certainly people who found the Creature from the Black Lagoon sexy all on their own, as The Shape of Water has allowed us to admit. It's also not to say that these depictions were free from their own problematic elements. But by this point, it became much less acceptable for Hollywood to simply rely upon so-called "monstrousness" to depict evil, and more common for the visibly different to be used as a stand-in for our own feelings of otherness.

And this is explicitly reflected in the way that everyone involved in the musical Phantom conceived of it as, primarily, a romance, not between Raoul and Christine, but between Christine and the Phantom. The writers, producer, set and

costume designer, and lighting designer are all on record as being attracted to this story because it was an opportunity to create something lushly romantic. And this, of course, is a huge change from anything we've seen before. At least in Phantom.

We were invited to pity Chaney in the 1925 *Phantom of the Opera* a little, even as we feared what he might do to the young lovers. We were asked to empathize with the plight of Rains and Lom in the 1943 and 1962 versions, and especially Finley in *Phantom of Paradise*, even as we found them perhaps a bit too extreme to identify with. But by the time we get to Michael Crawford, we are not only invited to identify with his desire, we are asked to revel in it. We're going to go into this in more detail in another episode, but the audience-slash-fan chatter around Phantom was often highly sexual ... and that sexuality was pointed right at the masked ugly dude. And not in the way it might have been had someone developed a crush on one of the former incarnations, which would have been perfectly valid but probably seen as unusual. It was pretty much the expected reaction, highlighted not least by the writhing, naked statues that made up the proscenium of the original set. Raoul might be the one who gets the girl, but he never sings a song about fantasies unwinding or bodies entwining or anything like that. And while I do not think this is very good armchair psychology, it's probably telling that more than one writer found some kind of commonality between the unassuming looking Lloyd Webber and the Phantom, both musicians, both getting Sarah Brightman. That said, it's also telling that Lloyd Webber's memoir is titled *Unmasked* and that he eventually wrote a sequel to Phantom in which ... well, we'll get to that.

These feelings of compassion, romance, or even lust for the differently-human or even inhuman weren't new, but they had previously been, perhaps, further underground, appearing as outliers. Bela Bartok's 1911 opera based on the Bluebeard legend already contained elements of sexual exploration as part of the wife's journey, indicating a shift in meaning as to notions around marriage and choice. In 1929, Fernand Noziere wrote a *Beauty and the Beast* play (as part of *Three Gallant Plays*) wherein Beauty is manifestly disappointed when her beast becomes just an ordinary young man. Marina Warner, in her book *From the Beast to the Blonde*, identifies this trajectory as a larger part of the cultural shift in meaning around the animal/monster husband story: "At first, the Beast is Identified with male sexuality which must be controlled or changed... but later the Beast is perceived as a principle of nature within every human being... and the stories affirm beastliness's intrinsic goodness and necessity for holistic survival."

As a side note, when I said romance was a huge change from anything we'd seen in *Phantom* films before, I was lying a little. There was a made for television *Phantom of the Opera* in 1983 starring Maximilian Schell, Jane Seymour, and Michael York in which Schell's wife, played by Jane Seymour, dies as the result of a betrayal and he gets vengeance in the name of a new singer at the opera who looks exactly like his dead wife, prefiguring the added romance plot from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (the film) we'll probably get to in another season. It's just hard to know where to fit this one in, given the fleeting nature of TV movies. The point is, even before Lloyd Webber got there, we were on the cusp of a sea change.

But while all of these elements were swirling around the

culture for awhile, perhaps touching on the Phantom story here or there, I would argue that the musical is where they become synonymous with the Phantom story.

It's not simply that we were ready to love the Phantom. Other changes relating to the economy and the general tenor of the 1980s were essential to letting a work like this become popular—and it wasn't merely the sympathy engendered by the title character.

And next episode, we'll explore just what those changes meant and how that sympathy shapes what this story means from then on, including but not limited to: Susan Kay, the fandom response, and the element of music itself. Until then, thank you for listening to Re:Adapted. This show was written and produced by me, Kris Pepper Hambrick. Please feel free to contact me at readaptedpodcast at gmail, Facebook, or instagram, or readaptedpod on twitter with comments, questions, and suggestions. Until next time, it's over now, the music of the night. See you then!

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