

Episode 7: Parallel Evolution: Yeston/Kopit and Song at Midnight

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. This entire season, we've been looking at *The Phantom of the Opera* and the way it morphed from a little-read French novel to a blockbuster musical sensation. The past two episodes, we've talked about the Andrew Lloyd Webber stage production and the massive popularity of that show and the fandom that arose around it. If you've been enjoying *this* show, please take a moment to subscribe, rate, review or tell your friends. Or drop me a line to tell me what I should do next!

Next episode, we'll delve back into Phantom's horror roots with an episode about the 1989 and 1998 versions, but today we're going to explore two entirely different examples of parallel evolution: the miniseries and musical written by Arthur Kopit and Maury Yeston, *and*, across the world, a wholly separate history of Phantom works that had been building in China all along.

But first, a few words on the very real phenomenon of the post-Lloyd Webber cash grab. It was probably fairly predictable in the mass media and consumerist paradise of the 1980s that in the immediate aftermath of the hype, publicity, and awards, there were of course copycat productions. I've counted at least twelve other stage versions that appeared in the ten years after Lloyd Webber, all clearly written as a budget alternative for school, community, or regional theaters who wanted to join in on the craze but, obviously, couldn't get the rights. (Incidentally, as of this writing, the rights to the show are still only available to high

schools, youth groups, and colleges so adult companies wishing to legally perform a Phantom of the Opera have to get it somewhere else.)

I've read a few of these scripts, and they're mostly either sort of by-the-numbers-let's-make-sure-we-don't-get-sued or reliant on bad backstage farce tropes to try to cover up for the necessity of a bare bones version of something known to be luxuriant and expensive. But that isn't to say there's nothing of value in any of that—without even looking at the content I do think it's important for any size company to be able to explore these stories that, after all, aren't even actually owned by the corporations making the most money off of them. So while I think the Chipmunks' *Phantom of the Rock Opera* is probably of little contextual import, looking at the various copycat versions can be interesting.

One thread we see in the ones I've been able to see or gain access to is that if they don't lean on humor, they lean on the continued romantic or even sexual tension between the Phantom and Christine. In one, commissioned for the Drury Lane Oakbrook Theater outside Chicago, Christine apparently takes off the Phantom's shirt. And Raoul and Erik are brothers, which is interesting.

Also from 1991 is a version that made its way onto video (and YouTube, hint hint) written by Bruce Falstein with music by Lawrence Rosen and Paul Schierhorn, starring David Staller and Elizabeth Walsh. This one plays up the literal *fantasy* nature of the Phantom's pursuit of Christine, with the stand-in for "Music of the Night" called "Perfect Music" and containing an even more explicit seduction sequence. In the end, though Christine rejects him, he moves onto his next target and uses the exact same lines

on her and since it's 1991 I'm honestly not sure if we're supposed to be turned on or call the cops. This one, at least, has the Persian.

There were also a few made for children versions that turned out surprisingly good. While clearly a cheaply made cash-grab, I do have to mention the 1988 animated TV movie version of the original novel, which is the sort of thing you used to be able to find at video stores that looked like it might be related to a thing that was popular, but wasn't that thing. Mostly, children's adaptations of works that had lapsed out of copyright or, in the case of fairy tales, were never restricted.

This film, clocking in at less than an hour and with some utterly atrocious animation that does not hide its cheapness or rushed production, would not bear mentioning except for this one fact: more than any other film version, including 1925, it keeps novel's story intact. It might be an attempt to make some quick cash off the musical's popularity, but writer/directors Al Guest and Jean Mathieson and whoever did the character designs clearly wasn't looking to Lloyd Webber, but to Leroux. The Phantom, while inexplicably green, *is* pretty hideous and pathetic. There's a Persian, albeit wearing a turban I guess so we are for sure he's a foreigner. There's a scorpion and a grasshopper and a tearful, repentant Erik at the end. The only other thing that comes close to this for book accuracy is probably 1995's "Pantin' at the Opera," a *Wishbone* episode where the dog plays Raoul and yes—we get our redemptive ending.

I do think it's curious that at this point we're going to continue to get lush, romantic Phantoms and horror Phantoms but the only Phantoms that look anything like the book are going to be for

children. Or, basically marketed for children like the actually quite excellent 1993 video game *Return of the Phantom*. (Still, by the way, available on Steam as far as I know!)

But now that we've talked about how everyone was trying to get in on some of that sweet, sweet Lloyd Webber money, I want to back up for the rest of the episode and talk about two other strains of *Phantom* adaptation that actually had nothing to do with the Lloyd Webber musical. The first is another musical and movie version that not only hold a special place in my heart, but originated *before* the 1986 musical and brought yet another entirely different thread to the tale: the musical version by Maury Yeston and Arthur Kopit and the accompanying non-musical tv miniseries adapting the same script and starring Charles Dance, Teri Polo, and Burt Lancaster.

This is an example of that whole parallel development, zeitgeist thing we talked about when we did *Phantom of the Paradise*. Several people at the same time got the idea to turn this 100 year old novel into a musical, but time, money, and name recognition—and a very different production sensibility—resulted in one overshadowing the other. Because in 1983, Geoffrey Holder—producer, director, dancer, actor—approached Maury Yeston and Arthur Kopit to develop *Phantom* for the stage. Yeston and Kopit had just won a Best Musical Tony for *Nine* in 1982, and Holder had legally acquired the rights for *Phantom* from the Leroux estate. What Holder didn't count on was that the book was public domain in the UK, and would soon become so in the US. In 1984, Ken Hill remounted his production in London, and Lloyd Webber developed his show, but the three kept working thinking they would be safe in America. But by 1985, when Yeston had finished writing most of the score, and the three were

still raising money for a Broadway debut, Lloyd Webber announced his Phantom was coming to the US. Investors fled, and the project was shelved.

But when Kopit went to see the musical, he realized their version was so different it might still be artistically and commercially distinct enough to work. To test the waters, he rewrote the musical as a television miniseries which he sold to NBC. This ploy worked, and the musical finally received its debut at the Theatre Under the Stars in Houston, Texas in 1991. Since then, it's been mounted in at least 1000 unique productions around the world in various languages, including several by Japan's all-female Takarazuka Revue. Because of its smaller scope and scale, and the fact it can be licensed to regional and community theaters, it was able to infiltrate spaces the larger Lloyd Webber show could not go.

And it definitely goes places the other story doesn't go, in terms of plot, character, and tone. Again, while this version goes back to the novel for its primary source material, it seems that similar cultural forces were at work to pull it in a parallel but distinct direction. And as with the other musical, this is explicit in the original approach taken by the creators.

"I laughed and laughed," recalled Yeston in an interview. "That's the worst idea in the world! Why would you want to write a musical based on a horror story?.... And then it occurred to me that the story could be somewhat changed.... The Phantom 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."

This notion, both that this was ultimately a *romantic* story and that the Phantom himself was a point of identification, arose in several productions at the same time. We've already talked about this phenomenon a lot, but this is simply more evidence that these musicals were part of a wider cultural shift that they were responding to. Said Kopit, "People are coming to our show not because they can't get tickets to the Webber version, but because of the *Phantom* story. There is something dreamlike and mythic in the story of an innocent girl and a dark, foreboding, romantic figure who gets her under his power. We can identify both with the girl and with the deformed figure, who is perhaps not as ghoulish as he would seem."

And Yeston is explicit about the connection to the othered and the rise of and change in portrayals of people with physical anomalies: "There's a current fascination with disfigurement, not only of the face but of the soul. The Phantom is the outsider, the Steppenwolf. In many ways he captures a central irony of our times: it's the one who was the imperfect appearance who has a kind of moral perfection."

Calling Erik a figure of moral perfection is an interesting interpretation of the source material, to be sure. As I've said before, it seems that people have had difficulty allowing Erik to exist in a grey area where he is both victim and villain, and must either excuse or erase his villainy. In this case, Kopit and Yeston *have* made their Erik into as figure of more or less moral perfection, by making the betrayal we've seen in other versions an even more formative aspect of his background.

And as a result, this may be the tamest version of Phantom yet. That sounds like an insult but I don't mean it to be—it's just

different. And it's really *about* something the original novel hinted at, but only just. Parental responsibility.

The main change, that is, is that they give the Phantom a father, and the central conflict is not actually whether Christine chooses him or the Raoul character (named Philippe in this version) but whether Erik's father can resolve his conflict over denying his son, and make amends.

To make this story work, other changes were made as well. In this version, the father is in fact the manager of the Opera, Gérard Carrière. He has hidden and protected Erik all his life, but without telling him of their relationship, while Erik essentially runs the place behind Carrière's name. Meanwhile, Philippe (who is basically a merging of the Raoul and Philippe characters from the novel) is a playboy who is friends with Carrière and, when he meets a pretty girl named Christine selling sheet music in the street, promises her he knows the manager of the Opera and can get Christine a job in the chorus.

However, when Christine arrives, things have changed. Carrière has been ousted by a new manager, Alain Cholet, who has installed his wife Carlotta as the prima donna and she's so horrendous that Christine's voice is too much of a threat for her to be allowed to sing. She *is* offered a job, but behind the scenes. Which is how she meets Erik, when he hears her and offers to give her singing lessons.

Here's the other big departure—he doesn't pretend to be an angel, or her father. He approaches her, masked but in the flesh, and his only lie is that he can't show his face because he's such an in demand music teacher that he wishes to remain

anonymous. The musical and the miniseries depart in plot to some extent, but basically he sabotages Carlotta and leads Christine to his underground lair. Even this, while technically an abduction, feels a lot less coercive than other iterations, and Christine seems relatively comfortable in his presence. In this version the mirrored iron 'forest' of the torture chamber has become in fact an entire fake biome in Erik's basement, complete with stuffed birds and deer and they go on a picnic. I'm not kidding. It's a telling transformation—Leroux's torture chamber is now a gentrified park.

Realizing why she's missing, Carriere finds her, and when his pleas to Erik to let her go fall on deaf ears he tells Christine Erik's backstory, including that he's the father and that Erik's mother, now dead, was the only living being to ever look upon his hideous face with love. Christine refuses to leave with Carriere, insisting that she can do the same. She is, however, wrong, and when Erik willingly removes his mask at her request, she recoils or faints. This sends Erik into a violent tailspin, though Carriere finally admits to him what Erik has always known. The rampage ends when Erik is cornered by the police. His father, having previously sworn to him that he won't let his son be taken alive to be put on display, shoots him—and Christine, at that last moment, is able to look upon him and sing her final goodbyes.

So as you can see, this is a very different plot from either the novel or any film that's come before. There's no ghost, no blackmail or trickery *until* Erik sabotages Carlotta, and Christine and Erik's relationship is much more based on mutual interest and trust—even if Christine is initially unable to follow through on the trust placed in her. Erik is in fact pretty much entirely nonviolent and uncriminal until his home is threatened, and while

not entirely excusable, he's been led to believe his entire life that he has no option but to live in the basement under Carriere's protection. Not to mention the fact he's figured out a long time ago that Carriere's protection stemmed from his unspoken paternal guilt, and is just waiting for his father to confirm it. In a way, it gets at Leroux's contention that "he had a heart that could have held the empire of the world, and in the end he had to content himself with a cellar." With even that tacit familial bond, Erik lives most of his life in relative peace, and has much less need to resort to underhanded means to provide for himself, meet Christine, or offer her lessons. In essence he's a kinder, gentler Phantom *because* he has at least some of that thing Leroux reminds us his Erik was lacking—love.

Of course, because it's the *Phantom of the Opera*, and because we live in a society, that's not exactly enough. But the villain here is never the Phantom. The villain is maybe the new manager for buying the opera for his untalented wife, and *maybe* Carriere for being too much of a coward to own up to his paternity and give Erik a proper home. But this is the clearest version to date to promote Erik is the romantic hero, even more than the Lloyd Webber musical, where there is still some semblance of mystery. Especially in the tv miniseries, where Charles Dance's rich speaking voice and poofy poet shirts made him absolutely the more attractive figure than Philippe, who is okay but kind of a petulant whiner. And in the film especially, his childhood is tragic—his deformity, it's implied, is the result of a botched abortion, so he's essentially rejected by both parents from the jump even if his mother was able to "gaze at him and smile" at least once before she died. He's a Victorian orphan dressed like Lord Byron, who has a fantasy realm under the opera house.

Okay, I admit it—I was super into him when I was sixteen. There's also an odd sort of respect *finally* afforded the Phantom by not letting us see his face. It may or may not be a budget thing, but it *does* highlight by its absence that in every other version of this story, we are still looking to be thrilled by the sight of a person who has been traumatized by injury or by a lifetime of hatred and mockery based on their appearance. In a way, while telling a very different story, this version is actually the culmination of Leroux's afterward but cast into a different genre. Instead of a gothic mystery monster story, it's a gothic *family drama* but that part isn't just pulled out of the text or pasted on, it's first and foremost.

The miniseries highlights this aspect with a lavish production filmed on location at the Paris Opera house, and it's worth watching for that alone. But not just for that. It's directed by Tony Richardson, who was married to Vanessa Redgrave and part of the "angry young man" movement of British writers and directors. His early films like *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* are gritty and realistic, though he also won Oscars for 1964's lush period piece, *Tom Jones*. The cast, too, brings the joint some class—Charles Dance's attempt at sounding less British notwithstanding. Burt Lancaster as Carriere obviously puts the father/son relationship front and center. And Teri Polo's Christine is the only film Christine I know who looks the way she does in my head. Further, Ian Richardson and Andréa Ferréol as Cholet and Carlotta (they're both dubiously Italian in this) are scene-stealing comedy. It's also of interest because all of the music is actual opera, with Erik and Christine performing a bit of *Faust* at the end.

The film got generally good reviews in a time when period

miniseries were on their way out, with Dance and Lancaster pointed out as “elegant” and “dignified” respectively, though David Hiltbrand in *People* magazine pointed out that, “Lon Chaney must be spinning in his grave, seeing what a rakish romantic his ghoulish Phantom has become over the years.” So I’m not the first person to notice this trend, it seems.

The movie and the musical’s plots differ slightly but hit the same family relationship notes. The music is well-crafted and deliberately closer to the type of thing that might have been heard at the time it takes place than a modern musical theater piece. And when it finally hit the stage the next year, starring Richard White of Gaston (yes, that Gaston) fame, it similarly got favorable notices. In *Time*, William Tynan wrote, “the production is suave, intimate—a glittering bauble to Lloyd Webber’s grand chandelier.”

Far from being received as a cash grab, several compared it favorably to Lloyd Webber’s much grander piece. Alvin Klein in the New York Times called it, “no less bravura than Lord Lloyd Webber's, but ... far more affecting. Mr. Yeston's sophisticated score is the model of how a loving assortment of classical forms can make popular theater music bloom. Mr. Yeston's music charms and effervesces, valuing melodiousness and variety more than the extended leitmotif and endless bloated reprises.” Chelsey Plemmons observed in the *The News-Times* that “song for song and story for story, Yeston's score is richer and more varied, and Kopit's book provides a convincing, touching and resolved narrative that tops Webber's ambiguous ending.”

On [Broadwaybaby.com](https://www.broadwaybaby.com), Peter Scott-Pressland wrote that “as a piece of writing, Yeston's Phantom is altogether more engaging

than ALW's. It is tighter, more intimate and informed by more human sympathy."

What these reviews, and the continued licensing of this version, all highlight is that humanizing Erik and making him a more "affecting" and sympathetic character are positive notes. And that goes to show how far the culture had moved by the early 1990s from merely shivering in horror at the monster in the basement. I think there's an argument to be made that while this, in some ways, flattens Erik's character in that it makes him more of a victim of circumstance without asking us to question his darker actions, it's interesting that he's been flattened in a way that evokes compassion and asks us to judge, instead, the actions of those who brought him into the world and then failed to take responsibility. Certainly we're getting at least part way to what Leroux was asking of us in his novel.

Then again, Leroux was also writing a gothic potboiler, and was *also* asking us to shiver with fright and suspect Erik of the worst. So again, we've only achieved sympathy by character alteration. In the last musical, it was sex appeal that made the difference. In this one, social transgression is displaced from both Erik as the would-be villain and the viewer as the would-be lover of that villain and onto the father.

But why is that? Why, after all this time, does the Phantom finally have a family? It likely has to do with the story Yeston and Kopit wanted to tell and their own personal narrative biases, but I think we can also locate it in a rising social awareness of the role family plays in a person's life. Not that parental responsibility has ever been a non issue, and nature vs nurture debates have gone on in the modern sense since at least Darwin. But the 20th century

gave rise to succeeding theories and, following those, recommendations for parents. And as it became possible to apply psychology to child rearing, it strengthened the notion that monsters, or less dramatically, criminals, weren't necessarily born, but made. This of course very much predates 1990, but perhaps it took a pair of writers born and raised during those mid-century debates to think of the father/son angle as the part to tease out and develop.

The other quite ironic thing about this, of course, is that while being almost entirely motivated by mommy and daddy issues, none of this plot involves Christine's issues in this regard. She is not threatened by Erik, nor is she tricked into thinking he has anything to do with an absent father. The focus is no longer on any lingering Freudian issues that Christine and Erik displace onto one another, but on literal familial abandonment. Which, just perhaps, says something too about the late 20th century's divorce rate, if that's not too far a reach.

Either way, this is not Leroux's Phantom of the Opera. But it's different in a way that's new and interesting, remixing many of the elements we've seen before into something wholly itself.

The same is true when we rewind and look at an entire set of adaptations I haven't touched on yet, because I wanted to tackle them in one piece, and that's a series of Chinese movies and remakes beginning in 1937 with *Song at Midnight*. Directed by Ma-Xu Weibang (wey-bong), it's actually the first Phantom talkie. And it's clearly influenced by Hollywood horror films, especially in the classic Universal mode. But maybe because he was working within a particular, non-western historical context, and maybe because there hadn't been time for the later elements we see in

Phantom adaptations to start accreting to the story, this film and its 1942 sequel, as well as the series of remakes that would begin in the 50s, also take some of the themes of *Phantom* and then run pretty far with them.

The plot concerns a theater troupe that takes up residence in an abandoned theater in the 1920s. When one of the actors, Sun (su-un) Xiao'ou (she-ow oh), has trouble with a part and asks to be left alone to practice, he's surprised to hear a ghostly voice offering to help him learn the part. He accepts the help and learns that the voice belongs to Song Danping, a former revolutionary from the failed Second Chinese Revolution. Because of his revolutionary politics, he and his lover Xiaoxia were forbidden to be together, and at her father's bidding Song had been tortured and scarred by acid by his rival, Tang. Rather than reveal his disfigurement to his lover he faked his own death—which in turn, drove her insane.

Sun Xiao'ou agrees to become Song's disciple, as well as pose as him to comfort Xiaoxia. Ultimately, the new company's great success remounting one of Song's plays leads to the old rival discovering Song's survival, and the two have a final confrontation as an angry mob converges on an abandoned tower. Song leaps into the river to his supposed death, but the young Xiao'ou and a recovered Xiaoxia agree to fight on for Song's causes.

I cannot pretend to be able to unpack the specific historical and cultural impact of this film on a Chinese audience, but there are some interesting elements to tease out here. First of all, by making the scarred protagonist a revolutionary, director Ma-Xu risked censorship and was deliberately giving his wronged artist a

current-day relevance—Song cannot live out his revolution *or* his art because of his shame over his face. Second, it's interesting that the mentor/mentee relationship is displaced from a sexual pursuit onto a more Cyrano de Bergerac type of relationship, hinting that for Ma-Xu, at least, the interesting aspect wasn't not the romantic obsession with a female singer. Or, perhaps, a desire for two male leads? Further, while certainly specifically Chinese in nature, the film has decided Western influences compared to Chinese horror of the time. In fact, the style and even plot elements seem highly influenced by films such as James Whale's *Frankenstein*, while much of the soundtrack is made up of classical Western pieces. The sequel ventures even further from the plot of *Phantom* and continues the revolutionary themes, except for a sub plot where a doctor experiments on Song Danping's injuries and results in making him look... a lot more like Lon Chaney's Erik.

But the biggest question, for me, is where the idea to make the Phantom character almost completely sympathetic came from. Does this speak more about the cultural context, or Ma-Xu's politics? It's an element other adaptations will find and then lean into, to various degrees, but here's a second generation iteration already completely positioning the Phantom as the protagonist. Perhaps it's not so unnatural a human impulse as it might seem.

The film was remade in 1956, 1962 (with a sequel in 1963), 1985, 1995, and 2005. The 1995 version named *The Phantom Lover* was the highest profile one, which starred handsome pop singer Leslie Cheung as Song Danping and, in a move familiar to anyone who's already seen the 2004 film of the Lloyd Webber musical, only covered half of its star's face in acid burns so as not to alienate his fans entirely. Interestingly, the revolutionary

aspect is removed, and the romance is amped up even further with references to *Romeo and Juliet* explicitly evoked in the musical numbers.

As I said, I can't begin to fully interpret these films myself from a cultural standpoint, but from my watching as well as reviews it seems that many found subtle political commentary in the revolutionary themes of the early films, and parallels to Mainland China versus Hong Kong identity issues in the challenge to bureaucracy highlighted in *The Phantom Lover*. While the plot has changed, and the historical context is different, these are more examples of horror, and *Phantom* specifically, being used to explore and being influenced by real world events.

And to go back to the main theme of this episode, these films constitute an entirely different thread of development of the Phantom story. While the original 1937 movie and the sequel are clearly made with reference to not only Leroux but the 1931 *Frankenstein*, they also recast the useful elements of the story into a framework that make sense for the context of 1930s China. And then that thread gets pulled again and again in various remakes, just as we've seen in English language adaptations.

The point of this entire podcast as a long term project is really this: that by looking at how the same story is retold by different people in different times and different places, we learn something valuable about those people, time, and places. And I think both the Yeston/Kopit *Phantom* and the *Song and Midnight* cycle serve as testaments to this idea. In both cases, creators took something that was of interest in one form, and altered that form to tell a different but related story—still within the pantheon of *Phantom of the Opera* figures, but highlighting the differences

those creators found notable or valuable at that time. Any story, even a mostly-ignored serialized gothic tale in a French newspaper, can eventually come to be about Chinese revolutionaries or parental responsibility, if you want it to.

But next time, we're going to change gears yet again. Some might say in reverse, as the Brad Little and Dario Argento films from 1989 and 1998 go back to *Phantom's* horror roots, but as we dig into it I think you'll find that these two also had plenty of new things to add to the *Phantom* story.

Until then, thank you for listening to Re:Adapted. This show was written and produced by me, Kris Pepper Hambrick. If you like the show, please rate and review and tell your friends. And feel free to contact me at readaptedpodcast at gmail, Facebook, or instagram, or readaptedpod on twitter with comments, questions, and suggestions. Until next time, I'm just not used to killing people; it's thrown me off a bit. See you then!

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