Lair of the Phantom

By: David Barbour

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Photo: Matthew Murphy and Evan Zimmerman

A new, immersive *Phantom of the Opera* relies on sleight-of-hand lighting

We live in the era of Andrew Lloyd Webber 2.0, in which the composer's biggest hits are being repurposed, often in startlingly different terms. Recent examples include *Cats: The Jellicle Ball*, which reinterprets the now-and-forever musical in terms of Harlem's queer ballroom culture; Jamie Lloyd's modern-dress, minimal-scenery, video-heavy revivals of *Sunset Boulevard* and *Evita*, and *Starlight Express*, staged in a dedicated space located in a disused television studio in London's Wembley Park district. Even

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more attention-getting is *Masquerade*, an immersive walk-through version of *Phantom of the Opera*, which, with minimal publicity, has become a hot ticket in New York.

Diane Paulus' production takes over the site of the former Lee's Art Shop, a 57th Street store well-known to many Broadway scenic and costume designers. Described by the Landmarks Preservation Commission as "a beautiful example of French Renaissance in Indiana limestone, richly carved," it has a pleasingly rococo quality that makes it a likely setting for all sorts of Gothic/romantic intrigue. Scenic designer Scott Pask has filled the interior with many locations, most of them in and/or around Paris' famed opera house, the Palais Garnier. The action unfolds on multiple levels: We are backstage, in dressing rooms, up in the rigging flies (where the Phantom murders a stagehand), and even pass across the roof. Key stopovers include a seedy carnival, for a flashback to the Phantom's tormented youth, and the grotto beneath the opera house, where the Phantom lives in spectacular luxury. Yes, even in a production as peripatetic as this, room is made for the Phantom's gondola and the famous crashing chandelier.

This isn't exactly *Phantom of the Opera* as experienced on Broadway or on tour. The prologue, featuring an auction many years after the main action of the musical, has been eliminated. A new sequence delves into the Phantom's past, elucidating the abuse he suffered in a traveling carnival. A new song, "Come and Marvel at the Freak," has been added, and "Learn to be Lonely," written for the film version, has been interpolated, although used in a different context. The original version has three onstage opera sequences, one of which, "Il Muto," a pastiche of 18th-century music styles, has been eliminated. The result is a tighter, pacier production.

The action unfolds several times an evening, with audience groups of 60 (masked, of course) being ushered into the building at 15-minute intervals. As you can imagine, this is an engineering/coordinating challenge, requiring triple- and quadruple-cast principals, a large stage management team, and a small army of crowd-control staffers, who make sure that no audience member wanders in the wrong direction.

When *LSA* spoke with lighting designer Ben Stanton a few months ago about his work on the Broadway musical *Maybe Happy Ending*, he was already at work on *Masquerade*, noting that it was quite possibly the most challenging project he had ever taken on. Following his work on *Maybe Happy Ending*, with its seamless mix

Top photo: Andy Henderson; Bottom photo: Matthew Murphy and Evan Zimmerman

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of scenery, video, and lighting, that was really saying something. Having experienced *Masquerade*—it doesn't seem quite right to only say one saw it—we can only agree.

To be sure, the lighting of *Masquerade* is as much about what one doesn't see as what one does. Stanton's approach packs in compact moving units as unobtrusively as possible while making use of many practicals, including wall sconces and flicker candles. Using these, he carves out many chiaroscuro looks, creating a sinister atmosphere that at times recalls the Hammer Horror films of the 1950s and 60s, or perhaps film director Roger Corman's Edgar Allan Poe adaptations. Passing through room after room, one is left thoroughly disoriented, cut off from the modern-day Manhattan outside these four walls.

Mapping the rig

Stanton notes that his first task involved "allocating resources. We agreed very early on that we wanted to see as few lights as possible. The experience wants to feel environmental as opposed to overtly theatrical. But I also knew that some spaces and some songs would need a theatrical touch, so we would need to use some larger fixtures in certain instances. We worked to identify rooms that could be entirely in the architectural, candlelit world and rooms where certain songs or events would require a heftier package." Such an approach required a certain pragmatism, he notes: "I asked Diane for permission to add gear in certain places where we might need it, and if we didn't, we would strike it. There was a lot of adding and subtracting as the differing needs of the spaces became apparent."

Of course, it's one thing to design a play or musical that unfolds on a single stage. It's another to light a rabbit warren of spaces, some of which are redressed and repurposed during the show. "It took me weeks to

Top photo: Luis Suarez; Bottom photo: Andy Henderson

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Photo: Matthew Murphy and Evan Zimmerman

internalize the different routes and structures," Stanton recalls. "I am still in awe of Diane and her team, who worked out all the timings and logistics." As an example, for a scene set in the dressing room of the opera diva Carlotta, the audience is dispatched in small groups to three identical sets. "The sequence features three small scenes, and they take place in different orders in different dressing rooms," the designer notes. "I've never done anything like this before."

That last statement provided everyone on the production team with words to live by: "Early on, Diane said something really smart: 'This has never been done before. We need to make it, and we need to break it, and then we need to fix it.' She knew it would be a process of trial and error, that there were questions that couldn't be answered until we were really doing it. That was absolutely true. It was incredibly hard but also thrilling to work in an environment like this. I relied heavily on my associates and my programmer, Alex Fogel, who is a genius. There are dozens of cue lists firing at the same time, on top of each other. Briana Messina, our production electrician, made a Herculean effort to make this work with limited time and infrastructure."

Stanton notes that he came to the project later than many of the creatives, at which point many decisions about gear and power had been made. Still, he makes excellent use of the rig. One of his workhorses is the Ayrton Diablo, a relatively compact mover that gets tucked away in vari-

ous corners and crannies. “It’s the largest fixture we use, except for a few units on the roof,” he says. “The Diablo is very small, although not for that space. But it has a good form factor.” Also useful for the same reason is the GLP FR1, which creates wash looks. “Any place where we needed versatility, we would pop in one of them. It’s smaller than a Leko. Obviously, it doesn’t have shutters, but it has nice colors and a good zoom; it was really helpful.” Noting that everything had to be LED because of limited power access, he adds that he also relied on products from Gantom, the specialist in tiny lighting units, which have found much favor in themed attractions—which, of course, is what *Masquerade* is. “We have Gantoms tucked into little corners; used as footlights, sidelights, and uplights; and sometimes as safety lights.”

Adding enormously to the atmosphere of the piece are Flawless Flames candles from the UK-based firm Lamp & Pencil. “We have more than 1,000 of them and every one of them is individually controlled,” Stanton says. “They don’t come as a whole unit; they were installed, one by one, by hand, into replica wax candles or these beautiful candelabras in the lake and grotto.” Featuring a continuously adjustable flicker set by a knob on the circuit board, each candle can burn differently, for a more realistic collective look. They operate at 12V DC and are dimmable with standard pulse width modulation dimmers.

In many cases, Stanton’s lighting functions as an act of prestidigitation, concealing infrastructure that would damage the illusion of opera house grandeur and directing the audience’s eyes as they move from room to room. “With a show like *Phantom*, shadows are as important as light,” he says. “In an immersive environment, it becomes even more important to direct the eye in a way that feels environmental. Some moments benefit from a big spotlight or a theatrical gesture, particularly when we’re onstage at the opera house. But elsewhere it wants to feel more organic. And yet, you can’t guarantee what any particular audience member will be looking at, and that’s part of the beauty of immersive theatre.” At the same time, he notes that, unlike many immersive shows, which have a choose-your-own-adventure aspect, “This is a new form, the first immersive musical; our mandate is that everyone experiences the show, while still having a unique experience. That was the line we walked. It put a lot of pressure on us lighting folks to make sure things that were supposed to be in shadow stayed in shadows and vice-versa.”

Fortunately, he adds, the practical and aesthetic mandates overlapped nicely. “*Phantom* allows for bold theatrical moments as well as deep darkness and spooky corners. It’s the perfect piece to try something like this with. Diane was excited to explore different ideas; she understood about keeping a dynamic environment. We were walking a line between honoring the musical and honoring the site-specific environment. That was really fun.” A big challenge was dealing with the sprawling layout: “We could only be in one place at a time. I would be working with Diane or an assistant director, calling down edits to Alex, who was in the basement, working on something different with my associate. It was wild, but we had to work in layers, creating a show, then adding in lights and cues. We also needed to learn from audiences what they needed and what resonated with them.”Imagine the challenge of programming and controlling this beast: “We had several consoles in the building, including, obviously, a mobile console that we could set up in different rooms,” Stanton says. “We had to tech in two or three spaces on any given day. At first, I dreamed we’d have several tech tables tethered together, and we would move through the space like a boat, which we could break apart or put together. But there is so little space in some of those rooms that I pretty quickly got rid of my tech table completely. We were just on foot all day, every day; the only person who had a station was Alex, the programmer.”

The show is run off an ETC Apex lighting console. “It’s the central Apex, located in a room that looks like CIA headquarters,” Stanton says. “There are 40 or 50 video feeds and an operator monitoring all the cues. Everything is automated: It’s all run off the sound department’s custom show-control software. Because six groups are going through the experience in 15-minute increments, the cues repeat and repeat and repeat, overlapping constantly. It gets really tricky when we reuse a room; we have different cue lists that address the same fixtures; in some transitional spaces, you have one cue list controlling some fixtures for a while until we switch over to a new cue list.” (The actors, singing live to recorded tracks, sport in-ears that keep them in sync with everything else happening.)

With so much going on, Stanton says, “Atmospherics need to be carefully monitored throughout the night. We have stagehands and stage managers who are moving about. Some automation cues are in proximity to the audience and, therefore, need to be triggered manually in the room. We also have a series of called automation cues, which would need to be paused for safety if there were a problem.”

The daily schedule is relentless: “Once the show starts, it doesn’t stop,” he notes. “The management of it is challenging if, for example, you have, for instance, a slow-moving group, which is still leaving the space when the next group is coming in.” He adds, “It’s challenging to make a Broadway musical, getting all the elements to speak to one another and creating something that feels unified

and meaningful. But I kept joking that this was like doing six musicals.

"I think the diversity in my career prepared me well for this challenge," he says. "I've done concert designs [for Regina Spektor, Sufjan Stevens, The National, and St. Vincent, among others], which is another world, with entirely different rules, complexities, and timeframes, as well as work in corporate design, and my theatre career. Masquerade, in some ways, fused all those things. It's a complex, delicate, and beautiful piece of theatre, but there was an element of working with the resources and limitations we had in the venue to make the best site-specific piece we could; that all felt more rock-and-roll to me. It was really, really fun. Those are the really memorable moments, when you're trying to do something you've never done before."

Masquerade, originally scheduled for a limited fall-winter run, is now extended through July 5. One suspects that additional extensions are in the offing.