

14 TIMES AT PHANTOM of the OPERA

BY SHERYL KAHN

I am a *Phantom* fanatic. It isn't something I am particularly aware of (actually, I thought I was over it) until it's pointed out to me. Case in point: my fiancé and I are scouring travel brochures for a romantic honeymoon spot. He suggests Paris.

"Did you know," I ask, "that the Paris Opera House has a secret underground vault that will be opened in 2007?" (a fact I committed to memory from a February 1988 *Vanity Fair* article about *Phantom*).

Later, I'm trying on wedding gowns in Bergdorf's, and my mom gives the thumbs down on a heavily embroidered number. "It looks like it weighs a ton," she says.

"Sarah Brightman's wedding gown in *Phantom* weighed 45 pounds," I pipe up.

Each *Phantom*-related bit of information I blurt gets the same reaction from friends and family: a long sigh that seems



("There are 150 pairs of shoes worn in each production;" "Six candelabras always rise from the underground lake"), and my apartment houses a Phantastic collection of tchotchkes: a *Phantom* musical snowglobe (complete with a realistic rendering of Christine's red rose!), porcelain masks, posters, pins, pillows, pop-up books — even a Michael Crawford jack-in-the-box (my most embarrassing and expensive — \$200 — purchase). I

beyond Lloyd Webber, will ya?"

Granted, it can get annoying: I am a fountain of *Phantom* facts and trivia

have 27 recordings of the score, everything from the original Canadian cast starring Colm Wilkinson to a black market *a cappella* album by an upstate New York barbershop quartet.

Ask me how it all started, and I can't recall — but in the past decade, I have seen *Phantom* 14 times (I pale in comparison to some members of the Unofficial Phan Club who have seen it well over 100 times), on both coasts, in three different countries. No one quite understands this obsession. I am, after all, a jaded New York entertainment editor. Yet I would have traded any of my interviews with Robert Redford, Mel

have been sold already. A journalism student up at Syracuse University, I am amazed at the press coverage: Dick Cavett coos, "Don't miss it." Barbara Walters admits it made her weep. Countless stars are photographed backstage with the *Phantom*: Kathie Lee, JFK, Jr., even Ed Koch. I beg my parents to buy me a ticket. After a five-hour Amtrak ride, I wind up in the

a temp job as a word processor. I spend my lunch hours in the mid-Manhattan branch of the library, searching for any articles on the show. About \$50 in Xerox copies later, I am a Phantomophile. The only thing I'm missing is a rare collector's edition of *TheaterWeek* dedicated entirely to the production. On a stormy June afternoon, I bribe the guy at the reception desk to dig



Colm Wilkinson takes Rebecca Caine for a ride in the Toronto *Phantom*.

ROBERT FASGSDALE

Gibson, or Arnold Schwarzenegger for just a brief tête-à-tête with with any of the *Phantoms* who crooned "The Music of the Night." Why? Maybe I'm a hopeless romantic. Maybe it's something about a man in a mask...

THE FIRST TIME: FEBRUARY 1988

The newspapers have been hyping this new Broadway show "from the creator of *Cats*" for months: \$17 million in tickets — at an unheard of \$50 a pop —

nosebleed section with my sister. So what if we have to squint to catch a glimpse of Michael Crawford's grizzly countenance de-masked? So what if the mammoth chandelier looks like a bunch of cheap Christmas lights from this altitude? The music is lush and sweeping, and I leave the Majestic Theater misty-eyed and humming, "Slowly, gently, night unfurls its splendor..." I return to school raving...and yearning for more, more, more.

2: JUNE 1988

Back in the city for the summer, I get

one out for me. (He charges me 10 bucks for the effort). "Do you guys have any internships?" I ask. The editors hire me on the spot. I celebrate that night by buying a \$15 SRO ticket to *Phantom*. After the show, I wait 45 minutes outside the stage door getting soaked. I thrust my soggy program at Michael Crawford for an autograph and he obliges. I head home elated, only to discover Michael didn't use waterproof ink. But that's okay — a fan letter I send him nets me an autographed glossy and a personal letter (opposite page): "If you don't like the photo, feel free to use it as a dartboard..."

3. JULY 1988

By now I have full-blown *Phantom* fever. I'm singing it in the shower; I'm playing it on my answering machine message. My mom and dad decide to see the show with me. We get seats in the back of the orchestra this time, and I am hoping they'll be as enthused and enamored with the show as I am. I elbow my mom during the infamous boat on the lake scene. "Isn't this awesome?" I whisper. Mom doesn't respond. I glance over and she's out cold, exhausted after a full day of work. As we leave, she yawns. "I thought it was too long."

4. FEBRUARY 1989

It's been more than six months, and I decide it's time to try Mom out again. I spring for a pair of house seats, and we sit fourth row, center. This time, she stays awake — *wide* awake, staring at the chandelier swaying just above our heads. "It's going to fall on us," she whispers. "It's rocking!" "It's supposed to," I assure her, but she doesn't buy it and spends most of the show worrying that we'll either be crushed like bugs or sliced to smithereens by shattered glass.

5. MARCH 1990

Horrors — it has been over a year since I've seen *Phantom* in New York (chalk it up to senior year studies). I satisfy my Phantomless days and nights by playing "The Highlights" cassette in my Walkman.

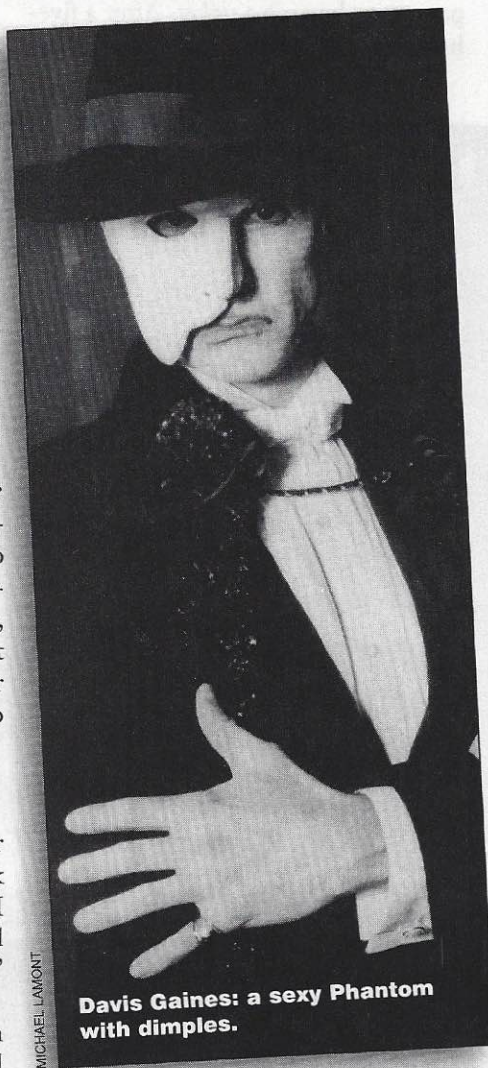
I try to talk my vocal coach (inspired, I have somehow managed over these past two years to take two dozen voice credits and make opera my college minor) into letting me pass on Puccini and sing Lloyd Webber for my recital. "That," she sniffs, listening to "Think of Me," "is not opera!" We compromise on an airy aria that Sarah Brightman sings on her "Songs That Got Away" album.

I convince a group of friends to take a roadtrip to Toronto to see the Canadian company of *Phantom*. I'm wowed by Colm Wilkinson's booming, gravely voiced Phantom, although I keep waiting for him to build a barricade.

6-10, 1990-1994

A host of people parade through the role of the Phantom. Some memorable moments:

- Steve Barton — the first Raoul (sigh) — steps into the Phantom's shoes two years later. I wait at the stage door and he dashes out (what was he late for



MICHAEL LAMONT

Davis Gaines: a sexy Phantom with dimples.

at 11:30 at night?), in the process stepping on my foot.

- My beeper goes off in the middle of one of Mark Jacoby's performances. I'm in the front row fumbling in the dark to turn it off. I think he actually gives me a dirty look from underneath the mask (was it the white eye or the blue one?).

- Davis Gaines groupies descend on the Majestic Theater with flowers, stuffed animals, underwear. He's the first Phantom with dimples — hence the hysteria.

- After a six-hour flight to L.A., I get the crazy idea to see *Phantom* at the

Ahmanson Theater. Jet lagged, I doze during the first hour. Thankfully, Robert Guillaume's booming Phantom keeps me awake for the remainder of the show. (Hey! Benson can belt!)

11. JULY 1995

My friend Holly and I get invited on a free business trip to Germany. After a nine-hour flight and a two-hour train ride to Echtingen (translation: "in the middle of nowhere") we arrive at a tiny bed-and-breakfast sans air-conditioning and hot water. "What do you do here at night?" I ask the front desk clerk. "You know — clubs? Entertainment? Music?" She points to a poster tacked on a bulletin board: "Das Phantom der Oper." I pilfer the poster and wrangle a ticket through our hosts. They are very impressed (considering I speak no German) to see me weeping as the lead sings "Der Musik of the Nacht..."

12. OCTOBER 1996

An Australian friend comes for a visit and wants to see *Rent*. I tell him tickets are sold out for the rest of the century (okay, so I lied). Guess what we see?

13. DECEMBER 1996

Peter and I have been dating six months now. I figure it's time I took him. As I squeeze his hand during a romantic Raoul and Christine moment. I'm amazed to find myself actually watching my date more than the show. Wonder how he'd feel about "All I Ask of You" for the first dance at our wedding?

14. LAST WEEK

InTheater gives me this assignment, so you know I gotta go. There are some old familiar names still in the cast (Leila Martin as Madame Giry, Jeff Keller as Andre). Don't these people get sick of it? What a question! I never seem to. And now I hear there's a 10th Anniversary performance coming up January 26. Ironically, I'll be on my honeymoon. But that's okay — our cruise ship has a "Tribute to Broadway" one night in the Princess Lounge, and I hear they take requests... ■

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