

CRAWFORD

THE FIRST PHANTOM LOOKS BACK AT THE ROLE OF A LIFETIME

BY SHERYL BERK

You could call it “The Music of the Morning”: At 9 a.m., L.A. time, Michael Crawford is crooning over what sounds like a cell phone.

“Christine, I lah-ah-ah-ve you,” sings The Voice, and even 3,000 miles away, it produces goose bumps. Crawford is good at goose bumps. “You know, the thing I’m proudest of as an actor, as a singer, is the ability to move people,” he says.

It’s been a decade since Crawford stepped into the Phantom’s shoes, yet the legend lives on. “No matter where I go, people ask me to sing ‘The Music of the Night,’” he says. “Every concert I do, I include it. I suppose other actors might find that a burden. But I don’t think that way. I actually had a critic say to me once, ‘Look at what happened to Yul Brynner in *The King and I*, Rex Harrison in *My Fair Lady*. They got stuck.’ And I said, ‘If you’d like to include me on that list of greats, feel free!’”

Crawford is happy — more than happy — to reflect on his Tony-winning role and on the



“Hal Prince coaxed me into being braver than I’ve ever been.”

impact it has had on his life. He promises a 15-minute phone interview, yet winds up chatting for more than an hour about music, memories, and creating “The Man.”

Did you ever think, going into this 10 years ago, that *Phantom* would be such a tremendous hit worldwide?

You go into a show just thinking you’ll do your best and hoping, praying, it will be a success. But about halfway through rehearsals, the character began to emerge. I felt the show was something very special, something of great substance, but I remember all of us being concerned that we’d be able to communicate all of this emotion, this intensity, as something that people could relate to in their lives. We tried to make it universal — to make people suspend cynicism and recognize their own emotions. For example, when the Phantom picks up Christine’s veil and smells it — that’s true loss, true grief. I still have a jacket of my grandmother’s, and if I smell it, it brings back memories of her. It was that recognition, that “I’ve been there, too,” we wanted audiences to feel.

How did you approach playing him?

UNMASKED

Well, a bit differently than was originally intended. The concept was a rock musical: Steve Harley did the recording with Sarah [Brightman] and it was a big hit. But it was very hard and edgy; "The PHAN-toom of the Oh-per-a is Heeya..." Good God! Then I show up for rehearsals and I'm sniveling and weeping and crawling across the stage. Everyone must have thought I was completely crazy. But Hal saw it too —

delier is old hat. What lingers — what we knew would keep it inside people's hearts and heads — was the love story.

I've heard many women in the audience say they wish Christine and the Phantom had stayed together.

I love when I hear that — because that means people are falling in love with this character, falling in love with his soul and not his appearance. I think

for interpretation. I suppose I got to put my money where my mouth was!

Your career had been slowing down for a few years...

Uh...let's be honest. It was in a coma! I remember going to a psychic because I was feeling very down on myself. I had no work — maybe I was too fussy. So I went to this Indian man for direction, and he told me that I would have a wonderful career — in 20



Opening night, January 26, 1988: Steve Barton, Hal Prince, Crawford, Andrew Lloyd Webber, and Sarah Brightman.

the depth of his pain — and he encouraged me to play it that way. He liked the romantic side of the piece, and he coaxed me into being braver than I've ever been. I used my body in ways I never had — almost balletic movement — to communicate the emotions that my mask hid on my face. And slowly, we turned this monster into a man.

Which had never been done before — the original Gaston Leroux novel was a horror story.

Yes, very scary, Lon Chaney and all. We could have gone there. We could have made it very dark and gothic. We also could have made this a big special effects show. But after a while, the chan-

he teaches that everyone loves and is capable of being lovable.

How did you land this very dramatic role? You'd been known as a comedian in England for years.

Yes, people were quite used to seeing me act like an idiot — I was known for farce. Even *Barnum* was comedy. And in the States, they hadn't a clue as to who I was — probably the last time they saw me was as Cornelius Hackl, dancing around pitifully after Barbra Streisand in *Hello, Dolly!* So, I had some preconceived notions to dispel, yes. But I always felt that comedy itself is very dramatic. It requires tremendous depth and concentration and use of the body

years. My life, he said, would change course. I thought he was crazy, but I guess I kept that thought, and that faith, all the years, hoping he wasn't a complete charlatan. So I'm happy to say it wasn't a waste of my 20 quid!

Does fame have its price?

Well, in the beginning, I got to wear a mask, so no one recognized me without it. Now people do recognize me, because of the concerts and the albums. And I am grateful for my fans, grateful when people tell me I've touched them in some way. I got a letter a few years ago from a woman, Fran Meyer, who was dying of ovarian cancer. I brought her backstage at Radio City when I was

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"Softly, gently..." Crawford's Phantom seduces Brightman's Christine.

in concert and she told me I helped her find the strength to go on a little longer. She passed away, but I carry that note with me. And I recently met a 16-year-old girl named Anna Murdoch at a benefit concert for The Children's Foundation. She was simply an incredible singer. When I asked her why she started singing, she said, "You. I saw you in *Phantom* when I was six." That blew me away — I got chills! So I think it's wonderful that people find inspiration in my performing. That's a great, great gift — I'd never complain about that.

After doing *Phantom* in L.A., you went on to do several concerts of Andrew Lloyd Webber's music.

I really find Andrew's music so breathtakingly beautiful. I'm swept away by it. So I wanted to sing it *all* — even songs like "All I Ask of You" that I yearned to do in *Phantom* every night. Now I could.

Then you did a high-tech casino show called *EFX* in Las Vegas.

That was an experience! I thought, "Oh, why not? It's the show biz capital of the world." Wayne Newton and all. And it really is an

extraordinary place: You'd never be able to afford that kind of a show on Broadway. It was a lot of fun.

Now you've done a new religious album, *On Eagle's Wings*, for Atlantic — a different direction for you.

Well, it's spiritual — I wouldn't call it religious. It came from my childhood, really. I used to sing in the choirs in St. Paul's Cathedral and Westminster. I went to a Catholic school, and it supplied choruses to all these big churches every weekend. I didn't realize the impact it had on me at the time. I think I was too busy listening to Elvis and Chuck Berry to appreciate this glorious music. So now I've gone back to listening to these songs. I've discovered this spirituality deepening inside of me. I also think the timing is right for people to embrace this kind of music. There has been so much talk about angels and spirituality in the past few years.

Are you religious?

I'm not religious — I don't go to church every Sunday. But I do believe in God and angels and miracles. I have faith.

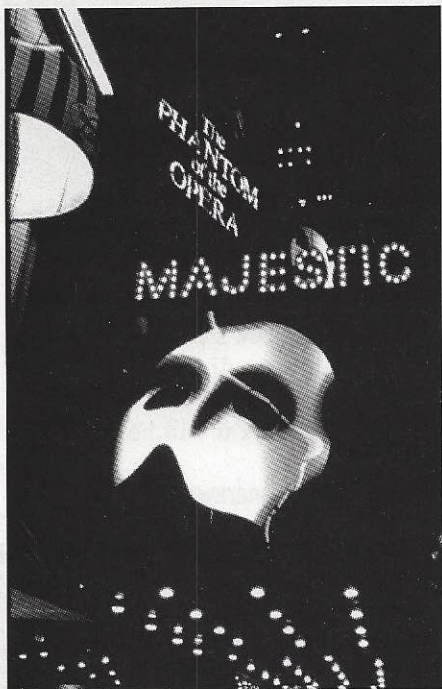
What will you do next?

I'm rehearsing now for a PBS spe-

cial. It will be a lot of the Lloyd Webber music, including *Phantom*. Dwight Hemion, who did the Streisand special, is directing it, and it will be on in March. I'm filming it in Orange County February 3 and 4.

And you'll tour?

Absolutely. I love live performance. I love the feedback from an audience. I love the power of music — it can make you laugh or cry or fall in love. It can heal. How could I not keep singing? But as for specifics, I like to leave things to luck and fate. It's such a fickle business, and I have been extremely lucky. I always seem to get such nice surprises.



Like?

Like Barbra Streisand calling me up and asking me to sing with her on her album. Like *Phantom*.

Would you ever play the Phantom on Broadway again?

Yes.

No hesitation there!

No — no hesitation. I never say never. I loved it too much. I loved everything about playing him. I spent five years of my life playing him, and I carry him with me wherever I go. So yes, I think our paths might cross again one day. ■

SHERYL BERK is entertainment editor of *McCall's*. She wrote "My 14 Times at *Phantom of the Opera*" in our 10/10/97 issue.



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