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## Phantom

L&SI takes a look at this epic production, 21 years on from its first performance

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# The Phantom of the Opera is still here



As it reaches its 21st birthday, Andrew Lloyd Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera* remains as strong an attraction in London's West End - and around the world - as ever it was. Sarah Rushton-Read looks at the technical and design expertise that made the show possible in 1986, and how it has stood the test of time . . .

*"It's fantastic, fabulous and phantasmagorical! From the eerily flickering lights that greet you outside Her Majesty's Theatre to the last, glorious curtain call, Andrew Lloyd Webber's long-awaited new musical, *The Phantom of the Opera*, is a triumph."*

*"The special effects are among the most spectacular ever seen in the West End . . ."*

*". . . After all the well-publicised false starts and back-biting, Lloyd Webber has created a musical which deserves to be around well into the next decade."*

When John Blake of *The Daily Mirror* wrote these words in October 1986 - following the world premiere of *The Phantom of the Opera* - I don't suppose for one minute he expected the show to haunt the West End for a further two decades.

Not only that, but its touring offspring have visited innumerable cities worldwide. There are even plans afoot to produce a Chinese language version in the near future.

For 21 years, *The Phantom of the Opera*, has occupied Her Majesty's Theatre, London, performing eight shows a week, 52 weeks a year. The show remains, visually and technically, almost exactly as it was on the day it fitted up - a testament to the quality and appropriate application of almost all of the kit specified by the technical designers. That is not to say that it looks dusty or tired - far from it. Walk into the auditorium and in many ways it really is like stepping back 21 years, yet each performance is as crisp and as fresh as it was on its first night.

So what is it about *Phantom*, even after such a phenomenally long run, that ensures there are still regular queues for returns outside Her Majesty's most Saturday nights?





words by Sarah Rushton-Read  
 performance photography © Clive Barda

Production manager Kevin Burgess discusses: "Fundamentally it's down to excellent and therefore timeless design, good housekeeping and maintenance and a respectable turnover of well-rehearsed, well looked-after leading artists. Many of those first involved in the show still revisit it, re-stamping it with their mark. The stage staff and cast are supremely proud of the show and all have a deep affection for it."

It may also be that the setting for the story is actually the environment the audience watches it in and that set and costume designer Maria Björnson made the very best use of the space. Quite unusually for a proscenium arch theatre, Björnson has successfully blurred the boundaries of the typically solid and fixed fourth wall. Her magnificent sets, depicting the Paris opera of yesteryear, somehow encroach into Her Majesty's theatre of today. The proscenium subtly bleeds into the first few blacked out boxes of the auditorium, and indiscernibly fade into the main space. Martin Levan's sound design





From top:

A scene from *Phantom*;

Lighting designer Andrew Bridge;

The ingenious Howard Eaton.

and Andrew Bridge's lighting designs are also both supremely subtle in bringing the audience into the action.

Andrew Lloyd Webber's timeless musical opened at Her Majesty's Theatre in London on 9 October 1986. Less than two years later on 26 January 1988 it opened on Broadway at New York's Majestic Theatre. Uniquely, both productions are still running. Since then *Phantom* has been seen in theatres across the globe with productions in as far flung places as America, Las Vegas, New Zealand, Japan, Austria, Canada, Sweden, Germany, Brazil, Mexico, Australia, Holland, Switzerland, Belgium, Korea, Denmark and Spain.

The New York show became the longest running on Broadway, overtaking *Cats* with its 7,486th performance on 6 January 2006. At the time it was estimated that more than 80 million people had seen the production worldwide and that total ticket sales amounted to more than \$3.2 billion - to give some degree of perspective that's more than high grossing films *Titanic* and *ET*!

Impressively during its 21-year existence, *Phantom* has won over 50 major theatre awards including three Olivier Awards, an Evening Standard Award, seven Tony Awards - including Best Musical - seven Drama Desk Awards and three Outer Critic Circle Awards. The most recent was the 2002 Olivier Audience Award for Most Popular Show.

*The Phantom of the Opera* is a phenomenon that has made stars of its performers and launched hundreds of careers both backstage, onstage and no doubt FOH, plus numerous businesses all around the world. However,

these days it's the show itself that's the star and, having become an ensemble piece, a place where ambitious young performers can cut their teeth. It is a surprisingly gentle show, using some classic, age-old techniques in theatrical trickery and guile. Of course, when *Phantom* opened much of it was at the cutting edge of technical possibility.

21 years ago those present at the fit-up included Björnson - multi award-winning, celebrated and respected set designer who sadly died in 2002; Andrew Bridge - world renowned multi-award winning lighting designer; Martin Levan - a studio recording engineer/producer but also responsible for innumerable worldwide sound designs for which he has also has received countless awards; Derrick Zieba who now takes care of the live sound project management for the Brit Awards, amongst other things; Richard Rogers and Chris Jordan, formerly of Theatre Projects Sound and now at Blitz Sound, who continue to supply the PA and audio technology expertise; the irrepressible Howard Eaton, known to just about everyone in British Theatre for his ingenious solutions to special lighting effects, electrical and automated props, and Michael Odam - a renowned lighting designer in his own right and responsible for the countless relights of the show worldwide. These were to name but a few many of the bastions of British theatre involved with *The Phantom of the Opera* from the start.

Howard Eaton recalls: "My business was practically born from my work on *Phantom*. Pretty much all of the electrical props for the original London show were built in the basement of the theatre, the dry ice machines were made in my garage at home! Once the



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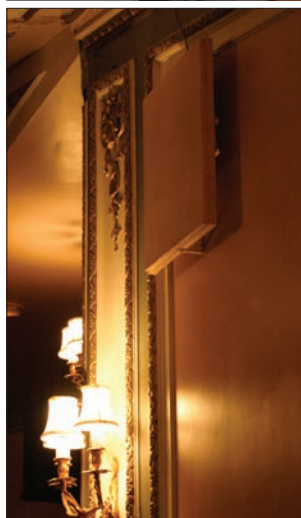




Top: L-R; Richard Rogers (left) and Chris Jordan (right) from Blitz, with stage manager Stewart Arnott.

Below, left: One on the surround sound tile speakers painted to blend in with the FOH décor.

Below, right: The Sennheiser radio mic station.



show started touring in the UK and then worldwide, building each new production kept me pretty busy."

Since then, Eaton has serviced inestimable numbers of *Phantom* productions around the world with special effect and ingenious electrical props. This includes bringing new technology to the show including LED-based flash effects on its Chandelier to replace the old photographic flash bulbs which previously had to be changed for each show.

The action opens in the evocative, dusty, gothic setting of the closed-down Paris Opera House as it auctions off chattels of former productions. As the characters reminisce, the old cloths fly out and the audience is transported back to a time when opera was still performed in the old theatre, the Paris Opera is revealed in all its former glory and there is a rehearsal going on onstage: basically a love story between a young singer - Christine - and the mysterious Phantom, it takes us on an atmospheric journey from the Paris stage across underground lakes to the Phantom's Lair.

To create this magic inside the auditorium Andrew Lloyd Webber insisted that audio be as discreet as possible, both visually and aurally. Sound designer Martin Levan was adventurous in his

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product usage. He explains: "This was an era when a lot of invention was required to move theatre sound forward. Very few manufacturers were actually developing products specifically for theatre, so we had to grab a bit from broadcasting, some more from recording and some from the live concert sectors. This we did, cobbling it together to construct a suitable framework to execute *Phantom* in."

Quite unlike a conventional PA rig, original sound hire company Theatre Projects (now Blitz Sound), had to make heavy investments to realise Levan's sound design. Richard Rogers, director of Blitz discusses: "*Phantom* was one of the first shows to use Sennheiser radio microphones, previous to that it had always been Micron mics and Meyer PAs. Levan designed his own PA system, removing Tannoy speakers from their boxes and suspending them in the set itself. Because discretion was imperative he also specified tile speakers for the auditorium surround system, all painted to blend with the colour of the auditorium walls."

During the fit-up, Derrick Zieba took on the task of painting the tiles and was told by the importer to paint them with a solvent-based paint! Chris Jordan of Blitz explains: "Just as he had finished painting the last one he noticed that the first few had started to melt caused

by a chemical reaction between the solvent and the polystyrene - suffice to say they all had to be imported again and repainted!"

Rogers continues: "Not long after the show opened all the radio mics had to be replaced because they changed the frequencies available from VHF to UHF - this was a significant cost and whilst it was not nearly as severe as the upcoming potential changes to the RF spectrum we face today, the changes were considerable at the time. The FOH console is the original Cadac desk - it has of course had some upgrades - all by the show and Blitz, with help from the manufacturers. We have also replaced all the old tape machines with multitrack hard-disk players."

Levan is passionate that theatre sound systems should not follow the format of a conventional live PA rig. He discusses: "One of the holy grails of those days and in particular that show, was to ensure it sounded as if the voices were coming directly from the performers as opposed to from loudspeakers - to achieve this we tested a lot of new ground."

This included the panels speakers: "We used them to create the surround sound for a few special effects including the *Phantom's* reverb / ambience at different points in the show. This worked very

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well and put him right into the walls of the theatre, giving a real sense of the Phantom's omnipresence."

The great advantage of this system is that it's effective without being overly loud. This is what really makes the show stand apart from many musicals in the West End today. Levan continues: "Virtually all of the newer *Phantom* productions, including the most recent production out in Australia, are still based on the original design, stylistically identical, albeit taking full advantage of technological advances where possible. People still say it sounds very fresh, not at all old-fashioned."

Her Majesty's is an intimate theatre, so how easy is it to roll *Phantom* out into bigger venues such as the two and three thousand seat venues? "These are big venues but essentially the same system is used and it fills the venues beautifully - its just a different philosophy or approach in filling a space with sound - we work with a lot of non-direct energy and use a building's ability to amplify sound. We don't try and fight the space, rather make it our friend, so it interfaces well with pretty much any venue. People are still shocked at how easily it translates from venue to venue."

Equally, Andrew Bridge's stunning lighting design remains timeless. Bridge paints Björnson's sets with a rich and suggestive palette of colours, layer upon layer of light, angle and gobo illustrating the story with classic effects such as mirror reveals and dissolves, strong up-lighting through floorboards and powerful side-lighting.

He discusses: "*Phantom* was originally designed to emulate the old 1800s Paris opera house with all its stage trickery and gas lighting. For the opera, ballets and rehearsals within the show we tried to reproduce a gaslight feel using very flat front-lighting from the circle rail and footlighting - all in a rather flesh/green colour. This was deliberately contrasted with the moment we come backstage into the Phantom's world where we emphasised the heightened drama with lots of beams, back and cross-lighting - Chiaroscuro style (dark and light). The big thing Maria and I learned on *Phantom* was that darkness is our friend. Even after 21 years, if one light is out of position, too bright or too dusty it gives the game away. For example, the little vignette where the Phantom's image materialises in the mirror of Christine's dressing room could not work unless every light is focused and shuttered precisely."

Looking around at the lighting equipment FOH, some of it is very old. However, over the years, Coloursettes made way for scrollers and Lekos for Source Fours, but there are still numerous Patt 23s and Cantata profiles on the front balconies lighting the swags of grey dustsheets of the opening scene in the derelict Paris opera. But the overheads are minimal and most lighting seems to come from the FOH, sides, perches and booms.

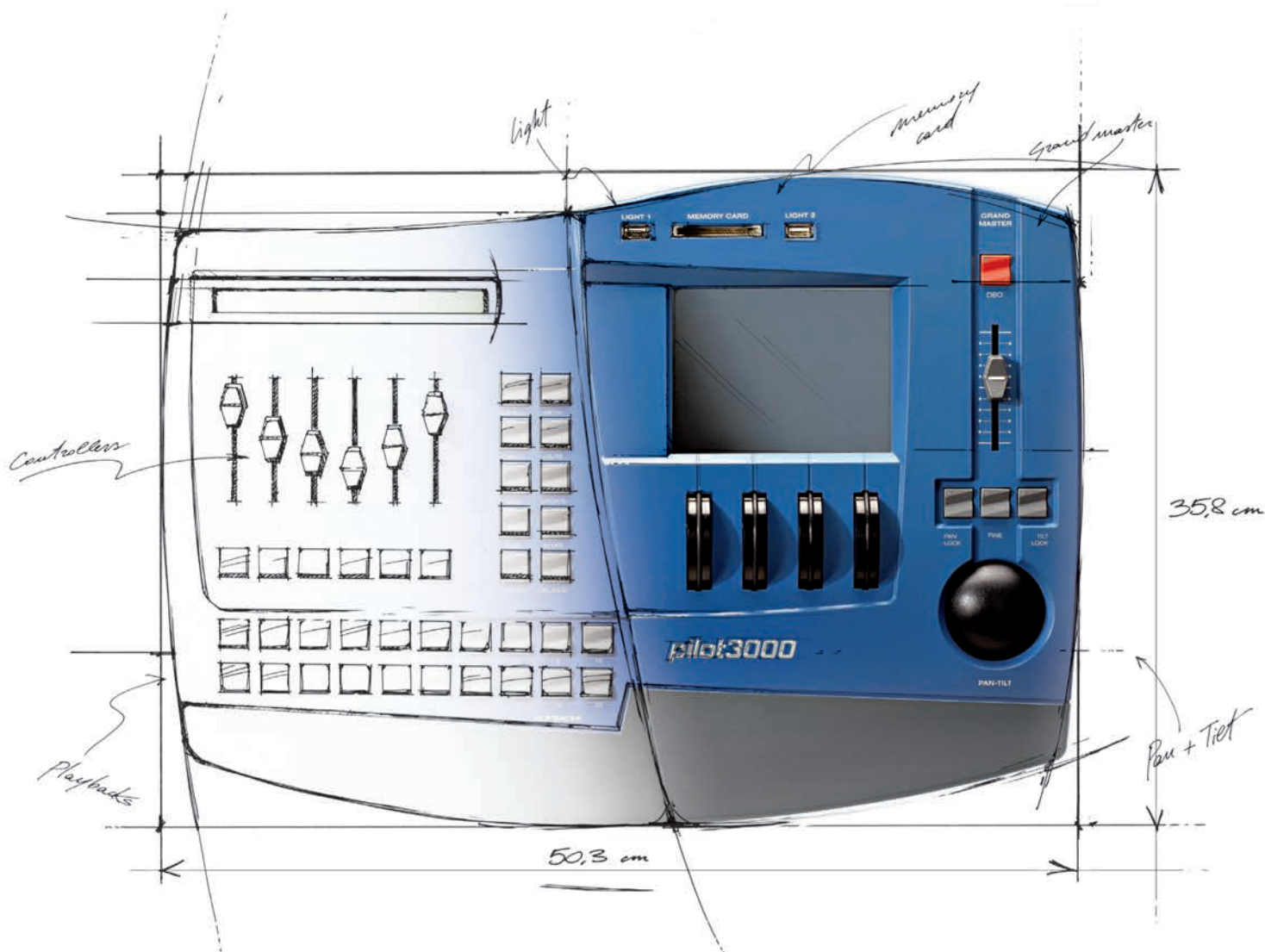
Eaton discusses: "Because the grid is packed so tightly with scenic elements there was no room left to light from overhead in the traditional manner. This made lighting the show a complex challenge. All cloths were ultimately lit from the side. We actually developed fixtures to deal with precisely this issue."

Bridge elaborates: "Howard Eaton and I invented MR16 [Howie] battens. We were very limited on space in the overheads but wanted to light the cloths authentically like gas battens, so we did it from the side. We were also after water and gas light ripples - in those days there weren't any suitable moving effects and some of the old Strand effects were very large, so we invented KK wheels. Strong beams were created by German beam lights - lots of them - as effective 240 volt PAR cans were still a thing of the future. We also had to develop smoke, dry ice, haze and pyro systems to service a show which realistically had to be reproduced eight times a week - quite difficult to do accurately in those days. The first few pyro charges we set off actually blew the stage up! We forgot to put air pressure holes in the deck! We learned how to make smoke that disappeared and haze that would not kill actors - it was a big learning curve."

Bridge also specified the then new Strand Galaxy console to cope with the large number of circuits and more specifically the cue structure of the show. Then the unique playback facilities of the galaxy were exactly what Bridge required to create the subtle transitional cue structure that transposes the characters and action from one environment to the other. When the show went to Broadway, the theatre had a Palette console, the operator had to make two live disc changes because the memory could not cope with the amount of cues.

Bridges points out: "When we first produced *Phantom* there were no computers, no mobile phones. The plan was drawn with pen and





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ink and paperwork was minimal. We recently reproduced *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat* - first done 17 years ago - and it amazed me just how much, in the four years between the two shows, things had changed. *Joseph* did have moving lights and computers, mobile phones, scrollers and stuff like that - on *Phantom*, none of that existed."

Bridge originally made use of the theatre's two existing carbon arc followspots because, as Eaton says, "he liked the idea of the flicker and lime colour - although if you ran those spots properly there shouldn't have been a flicker!" Today the flicker has gone and the old spots have been replaced with Robert Juliat followspots.

*Phantom* had a three-month fit-up period, pretty much seven days a week. These were the days when theatre was tough, drinking was an integral element of the occupation and health and safety, risk assessments and method statements simply part of the unconscious process of carrying out your job! Consequently, the lighting crew worked long hours, with few breaks and little money, often seven days a week. To compensate they would hold champagne teas on the roof of Her Majesty's every Sunday. Here they would compete to see who could get the most corks into the pond at New Zealand house, situated next door!

The pub became the R&D lab for the electrics department of the day. It was here that many of the technological solutions for the show's staging challenges were thrashed out. For example, they managed to modify model aircraft radio controllers to remote control props like the huge chandelier flashes, the boat movement, the lanterns and the organ candles.

Bridge explains: "The chandelier was our first challenge - because it appears to crash to the deck and hang in midway without cables attached, we had to come up with radio-controlled lighting - unheard of then. There's also a scene where the Phantom menaces another character, Raoul, with a candle. Basically, the candle arrives on stage on top of an organ, it's then picked up by the Phantom who uses it to menace Raoul, it then explodes and the candle goes out! This simple idea ultimately involved a mains unit on the organ switching to battery as soon as the candle is picked up; it had a pyro that had to detonate and also cut the battery out - just one small element of the show! There are lots of little things like that - in those days that was really quite radical."

*The Phantom of the Opera* has left quite a legacy in British theatre, both in the technical craft and wizardry of its designers and in the fact that it was probably one of the first productions to forge a new international touring circuit of big musicals, which are reproduced exactly as the originals in the West End or on Broadway. Today it's much easier for a big show to go worldwide.

Before *Phantom*, touring versions were often minimal - literally a bus and truck. Instead of solid scenery there would be a painted backcloth. However, on tour, *Phantom* was not a compromise: it could generate a lot of box office so the producers invested in producing full-blown, all-singing, all-dancing touring productions and today, *Phantom* requires between 17 and 23 artic' trucks to tour.

Some may argue that *Les Misérables* is the longest running West End show today. However, *Les Mis* has moved theatre twice, making *Phantom* the longest running show to remain in the same theatre it opened in. The show is not loud, it does not have hundreds of flashy special effects or moving lights, the scenery looks traditional and the story is a classic love story, yet somehow *The Phantom of the Opera* remains one of the most enchanting and magical shows the West End has to offer.