

*Celebrating 30 years*

# PHANTOM OF THE OPERA

A SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE  
WORLD'S MOST POPULAR MUSICAL



KATHLEEN KENDALL-TACKETT, PHD

Take a deformed ghost, a virginal beauty, her rather drippy suitor, and a collapsing chandelier. Add lashings of lush romantic music, and there you have it. The most successful stage show in history, with songs you can't get out of your head—even if you try.

BBC, *Behind the Mask* (part 1)



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On October 9, 1986, the final curtain came down on the opening night performance of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera*. The audience responded with a stunning 10-minute ovation. It was clearly a good sign. Michael Crawford, who played the Phantom in the original cast, recalled the audience reaction.

It was astonishing. It was just astonishing. Then the reviews started to come in the next morning. I'd never read or heard anything like it. I spent more time in tears that day, after all the years you've been acting that you were reading such things about a show you were in was the most thrilling moment of my life (*Behind the Mask*, part 8).

Clearly, Lloyd Webber had another hit, but at the time, no one predicted that this show would break every record in theater history and go on to be the longest running musical of all time. Even 30 years out, it plays to full houses every night in both London and New York. It has won over 70 major theater awards. *The Phantom of the Opera* has been translated into 15 languages and played to audiences in 35 countries, totaling 140 million people and grossing \$6 billion. It has been called the biggest entertainment piece of all time. Andrew Lloyd Webber described it this way:

I know for a certainty that I'll never have anything as big as *The Phantom* again cause it would be very hard to see how a musical ever could be. I mean, when you look back over it all, it is extraordinary because, I mean, new productions keep opening all the time. I mean I wish I could explain it because if I could explain it, I'd write another one. But I can't, and I haven't (*Behind the Mask*, part 9).



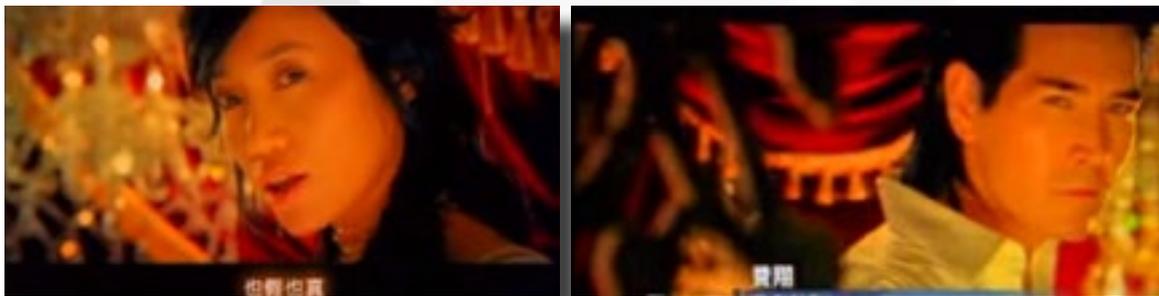
# PHANTOM GOES GLOBAL

For a show with English people pretending to be French people in the late 1800s, it translates surprisingly well into other very different cultures. Here, you can see the splashy premiere in Russia.



**Figure 1: The lavish premiere of the Russian *Phantom*.**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I6SWE1gqFF4>

Even in Chinese, it is quite recognizable. The singers may be Chinese people pretending to English people pretending to be French people, but they are clearly the Phantom and Christine.



**Figure 2: The Chinese version of *Phantom* is surprisingly recognizable as Phantom and Christine.**  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3AQJzxKTocs&list=RDeY\\_Xs3sXQDg&index=42](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3AQJzxKTocs&list=RDeY_Xs3sXQDg&index=42)



Younger generations have embraced it as well. Violinist Lindsey Stirling developed a video medley of *Phantom* songs that have been seen by more than 38 million fans on YouTube.



**Figure 3: Lindsey Stirling's medley of *Phantom* tunes.** <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TCL94-MsxYc&list=RDeYXs3sXQDg&index=26>

The Finnish symphonic metal group, *Nightwish*, have also produced a version that is very popular with its young fans, judging by the enraptured young fans singing along, ensuring another generation of *Phantom* fans.



**Figure 4: The symphonic metal band, Nightwish, sings their popular version of *Phantom*.** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zccEDofeEqQ>

*Phantom* also launched spectacular solo careers for its two original stars, Michael Crawford and Sarah Brightman. In fact, Brightman has become the highest paid soprano in the world. Michael Crawford described it like this:

*Phantom* has completely changed my life. It was the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me ... I knew the richness of it. It wasn't something that I took for granted and you look back on it and say "those were the days," I knew they were the days when I was doing it (*Behind the Mask*, part 9).

## WHAT IS IT ABOUT THIS SHOW?

The BBC documentary, *Behind the Mask*, placed part of the popularity of *Phantom* in context of the times in which it was created. Life in Britain in 1986 was grim; the economy was in the tank and unemployment was high. Novelist Kathy Lette noted that England "was the most grimy, gloomy place. It was like a whole nation of Eeyores" (*Behind the Mask*, part 1). And then, here comes this lavish, big production musical that was pure escape. By 1986, "there was a new appetite for sex, glamour and escapism. And *Phantom* caught the mood" (*Behind the Mask*, part 8). Lloyd Webber biographer, Michael Coveney, explains it this way:

It was a superb performance by a genuine star, and the first night, 9 October 1986, signaled a return of sex, glamour, wonderful costumes and designs to the West End musical stage after quite a long absence (p. 185).

That could explain its early success, but what about now? Why is this musical still so popular? We hear a phrase like that—longest running musical of all time—and really don't take in the significance of it. Think about it. *Phantom* has eclipsed *Sound of Music*, *My Fair Lady*, *The King and I*, *Cabaret*, and so many others. It even eclipsed *Les Miserables*, its closest competitor. Said another way, *Phantom* topped the complete works of Rodgers and Hammerstein, Lerner and Lowe, Cole Porter, Jerome Kern,

George Gershwin, and even the previous works of Andrew Lloyd Webber. *Phantom* became Lloyd Webber's biggest single hit, in an impressive career that included a great number of record-breaking hit shows. *Phantom* bested them all. Although he has written many musicals since then, he has never replicated the success of *Phantom*.

The success of the stage show is interesting, with plenty of juicy stuff that went on behind the scenes. But that is not what drew me to this story; it was what happened next.

## ENTER, ME

I came into this story largely by accident. I'm not a particular theater buff. Like 40 million others who purchased the CD with the original cast, I enjoyed the music. I finally had a chance to see a live performance in 1997 at the Kennedy Center in Washington DC. I liked it too, but then walked out of the theater and went on with my life.

## MOVIE CONTROVERSY

Another 8 years passed, and I finally got around to watching the *Phantom* movie. I had heard nothing about it, but rented it along with three others to watch over the long Thanksgiving weekend. It totally surprised me. I loved it. Why hadn't I heard anything about this movie? The actors and director were unknown to me, and I knew nothing about the production. That's not terribly surprising. I was living in a tiny town in New Hampshire at the time, and didn't follow the machinations of the entertainment industry. I generally couldn't care less. It's a very different world from the one I live in.

Being curious, I went online and was stunned by what I found. The controversy around the movie had been going on for years. People were so into it. I thought, "*Who has time for this?*" I had to admit that reading those websites became a bit of a guilty pleasure. The reviews were mean, but in some cases, they were wickedly funny. The people who hated the movie the

most were the stage play's most avid fans (sometimes calling themselves "Phans"). As a psychologist, I'm always fascinated by human behavior, and I had to admit that this little subculture was *interesting*.

The controversy over the movie started a good 10 years before production even began, and seriously picked up steam once production was under way. Protesters launched websites and letter-writing campaigns, particularly over the casting of the Phantom role. They wanted Michael Crawford to be Phantom.



**Figure 5: Fans lobbied hard to have Michael Crawford, who originated the role, play the movie version of *Phantom*.**

Several other actors were considered, including Antonio Banderas. He actually wouldn't have been a bad choice. He played Che in the movie version of *Evita*. He was definitely on the short list.

**Figure 6: Antonio Banderas was short-listed to play Phantom in the movie version. Here he performs the title role with Sarah Brightman. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7jSwn6etw>**



The movie stalled out and was put on hold for 10 years following Lloyd Webber and Sarah Brightman's divorce. In 2004, the movie project was up and running again. By then, Lloyd Webber had purchased back the rights and now had complete creative control over it. It was a go. The question on everyone's mind was, "who would play the Phantom?" A few possibilities were considered, and then Lloyd Webber surprised everyone.

## **CHOICE OF PHANTOM AND DIRECTOR**

Fans were apoplectic when then-unknown Gerard Butler was cast. It made no sense at all. Gerard Butler was an actor, not a singer, and an admittedly strange choice for this key role. Even Butler's mother was surprised that he had been cast. But Gerard Butler was a deliberate choice. It wasn't as if they suddenly discovered he wasn't a singer. Lloyd Webber and director Joel Schumacher both knew it and thought it actually added to the role (Interesting reasoning for casting a non-singer in a musical, but Lloyd Webber has actually done that before and since). Fans interpreted this choice as a deliberate thumb in their eye, and in many ways, it was. In response, Schumacher and Lloyd Webber asserted their right to cast whoever they wanted in their movie, and of course, it really was their choice.



**Figure 7: Joel Schumacher and Andrew Lloyd Webber describe decisions they made for the movie version of *Phantom* on *Theater Talk*.**

The choice of director also made fans go ballistic. Joel Schumacher, director of *Batman and Robin*, was best known for adding nipples to Batman costumes—a comment that came up with surprising frequency. Schumacher was feisty and defiant when questioned about his choice of Phantom, actually taunting people who challenged his choice. In a rare nod to propriety, he pointed out that it was not seemly for the then 60ish Michael Crawford to be groping a 16-year-old Christine. Good point, that. Schumacher further enraged fans with his announcement that he was going to do a “younger, hotter” version of *Phantom*. The Phantom may be hideously deformed and living in the basement of the Paris Opera House, but that’s OK as long as he is “hot.” In the end, a 30ish Butler was the one who got to grope 16-year-old Christine. Somewhat better, but still felonious. Good thing he was “hot.”



**Figure 8: The choice of Gerard Butler as the “younger, hotter” *Phantom* enraged the Phans. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=77umP7IRxD4>**

The critics, by and large, were not impressed with the movie. In fact, many were downright venomous, focusing particularly on Gerard Butler’s voice. They pretty much hated everything. One critic said he half expected a gondola from the *Pirates of the Caribbean* ride to appear. Another said he expected Christine to leave those two “warbling losers” and run off with the “first cute guy from the audience.” Noted film critic, Roger Ebert, actually

broke ranks with his colleagues. He liked the movie, commenting many times on Schumacher's vision and lavish production. What he hated was the *Phantom* musical itself and couldn't understand why anyone else would like it.

When the negative reviews poured in, and they did, the letter-writing fans could hardly contain their glee. Each review was lovingly posted on their sites, and webmasters didn't even try to hide their "we told you so's." I actually felt bad for the stars, particularly Gerard Butler. No one could be immune from that much free-flowing venom. Fortunately, it didn't seem to have hurt his career, but he didn't get his big break until the movie *300*.

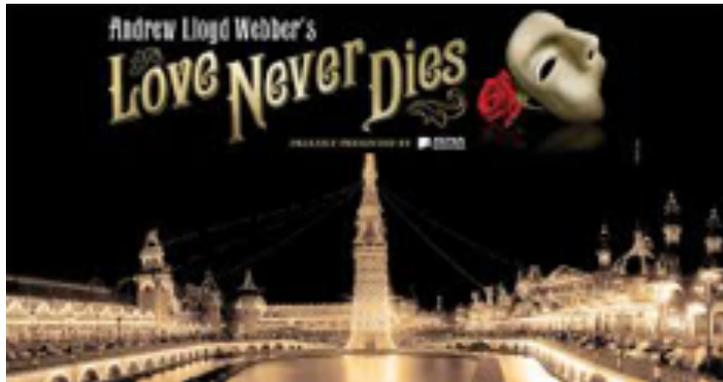
Surprisingly, the overall audience reaction was actually okay. When you compare the audience reaction on the movie review site Rotten Tomatoes, 84% of audiences liked it compared to only 32% of critics. It's not the first time that critics were out of sync with the general public, nor would it be the last.

I actually wanted to write about this story back in 2005, as I was absolutely fascinated by all these characters. Unfortunately, the logistics at the time were just too daunting. I just didn't have the resources to do it properly. So I put the project aside and went on to other things. I'm so glad I waited because there was much more to this story.

Eventually, Lloyd Webber produced a sequel.



## THE SEQUEL: SHOULD LOVE DIE?



**Figure 9:** The *Phantom* sequel, *Love Never Dies*, was set in early 20th-century Coney Island.

Andrew Lloyd Webber was determined to produce a sequel to *Phantom*—a story in which the Phantom gets the girl. The sequel was eventually called *Love Never Dies*, and was another project that was years in the making. Lloyd Webber’s clout was such that he persuaded a respected novelist, Frederick “Freddie” Forsyth, to write a sequel. The result was a novella called *The Phantom of Manhattan*, widely acknowledged by his fans to be a serious piece of crap. (I read it. It wasn’t that bad. Just kind of silly and certainly not up to the caliber of *The Day of the Jackal*.)

In the end, it didn’t matter. Lloyd Webber and his crew changed the story so much from the original novella that almost none of the story elements remained the same. Forsyth is still listed as an author of “the book,” along with four others, but that is another problem. Books by committee are usually not good. Along the way, the new contributors to the book changed the story so much that the characters were unrecognizable. Hence, the seeds of its destruction were sown.

The controversy over the film was minor compared to the controversy that surrounded *Love Never Dies*. In some ways, it is a modern David-and-Goliath story. Twelve people with a Facebook page and website effectively

challenged Andrew Lloyd Webber, a man with almost unlimited financial resources—and prevailed. They named their website and Facebook page *Love Should Die*, and launched a major campaign. They even had merchandise (including *Love Should Die* shoes!). My first reaction to this campaign was to shake my head in wonder. *Who had time for this?* By the end of researching their story, I had to admire their pluck.

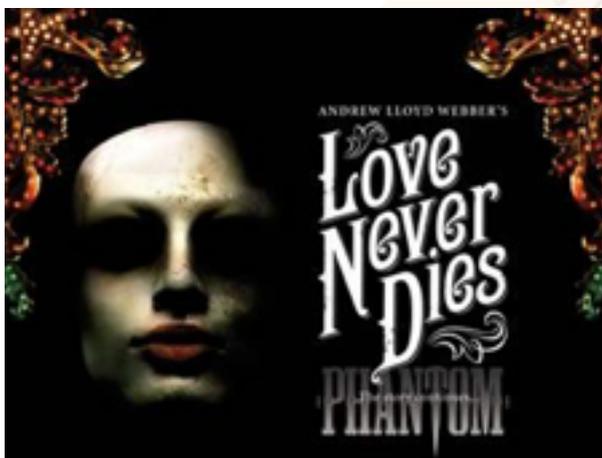
The movie came out in 2004. The sequel in 2010. By then, much had changed in the world, including the rise of social media. Fans now had more tools at their disposal. It also marked a fundamental shift in the relationship between creators and fans. Social media leveled the playing field. Suddenly, the rabble had a say. Instead of a select few critics who got to decide what was good, fans had a chance to broadcast their views to a much wider audience. Creators and critics suddenly found themselves on the same side—and they were not amused. *They* were the experts. Fans were just supposed to buy tickets and show up. Why should they have a say?

The people behind *Love Should Die* were *Phantom* fans who thought that a sequel was sacrilege and wanted to make sure it didn't happen. It did, of course, and Lloyd Webber threw all his considerable resources behind it. However, that was not enough. *Love Never Dies* closed after an 18-month run, but not before it lost £5 million. Lloyd Webber referred to these fans as “sad, little people,” sicced one of his pet journalists on them, got his lawyers involved, outed them on his social media pages, and demonstrated that he was not above cyberbullying. Unfortunately for team Lloyd Webber, the *Love Should Die* crew were perfectly within their legal rights to share their views. And the couple he outed as the masterminds behind the plot were from Canada. Seriously. If they were that good, he should have offered them a job.

*Love Should Die* likely would have not have been successful had *Love Never Dies* been a good show. Unfortunately, in its first two iterations, it was not. It was long and gloomy, poorly lit, with very strange staging. The characters of the Phantom, Christine, and particularly, Raoul, went through major personality changes that were never explained. Raoul was a jerk. Christine and the Phantom had a love child. Madame Girya was

different, and more than one critic compared her to the famous psychotic housekeeper, Mrs. Danvers, from Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*. Even the climactic death scene was too long, according to critics, with one suggesting "euthanasia" and another saying "die already." Clearly not the reaction Lloyd Webber was going for.

The graphics for *Love Never Dies* were also gloomy and awful, providing further fodder for people who did not like the show. Two bloggers known as the West-End Whingers, dubbed it "Paint Never Dries," and that name stuck. That pretty much finished it off.



**Figure 10: One of the original *Love Never Dies* images. This one was a screensaver available to the public.**

Lloyd Webber was immensely sad over the closing of his show, considering it some of his best work to date. The closure made him finally open to feedback. (According to his first director, Jack O'Brien, whom he subsequently fired, Lloyd Webber hadn't been open to feedback and was unwilling to change a thing. Negative feelings ensued. O'Brien vowed that the show will open on Broadway "over my dead body.")

Lloyd Webber was finally willing to let someone new have a crack at it. His production team moved the entire production to Australia, recast it, edited it quite a bit, and designed all new sets. The result was quite good. It still has major plot holes (e.g., how does a single kiss result in a love child?), but the music is excellent.





**Figure 11:** The original graphics for *Love Never Dies* were ripe for parody, and the West End Whingers did just that. Unfortunately, the name “Paint Never Dries” stuck. It contributed to the demise of the first two versions of the show on the West End.



**Figure 12:** The Australian version of *Love Never Dies* was a significant improvement across the board. *Beneath the Moonless Sky* is the song where Phantom reveals himself to Christine for the first time in 10 years. It is one of the pivotal scenes of the show. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r7GaFyD1r1w>

The process of how that third version came to be tells us lots about the creative process and how shows are often “works in progress.” What’s interesting here is that there are many video clips from all three productions. By studying them, we can actually see how the changes were made. It gives us an awesome opportunity to see in detail how a musical is created. It’s a fascinating process, and the videos allow us to take a good look.

## THE MAN BEHIND THE MUSIC

We cannot talk about the story of *Phantom* without considering its creator, Andrew Lloyd Webber. Lloyd Webber has broken every record in the theater, including several of his own. He has made more money than anyone in the theater—ever. He’s been knighted by the Queen in 1992, and in 1997, become a Baron, so he is now Lord Lloyd Webber. He’s received honorary doctorates, and scooped up dozens of awards, including an Academy Award, Kennedy Center Honors, numerous Tonys, Grammys, and a pile of Oliviers. He’s had hit records on both the pop and classical lists.



**Figure 13: Lloyd Webber appears on CBS Morning News to celebrate the 25th Anniversary of *Phantom*.**



This list of accomplishments is astonishing. Even the skeptics, and they are a legion, have to admit that his productivity and number of honors are unprecedented. He has changed the face of musical theatre. He also has the resources to bring back classic musicals, such as *The Sound of Music* and *The Wizard of Oz*, often with a new twist. He is an impresario who cares deeply about the craft. He really is without peer. And yet, he can make a statement like this.

I haven't had a hit in 20 years. I've written six musicals in that time. I'm resigned now to the fact that anything I do probably, nobody is going to like. <http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-26336382>

Reading this statement reminded me of what a famous biographer said about Richard Nixon. Even though Nixon had achieved the highest levels of political success, including winning the presidency—twice—he was still convinced that he had experienced nothing but failure and that everyone was out to get him.

I've often observed that fame is a double-edged sword. It can bring money, adulation, and clout. People who are famous often long to have control over what they create. Lloyd Webber has achieved that, but it doesn't seem to bring happiness or contentment as the bar for what constitutes success keeps moving. "Yes, you won an Academy Award, but you haven't received an Emmy." Or "you haven't been nominated this year for a Golden Globe." Or "your current show did not sweep the Tonys." So you can make a statement about how "no one" likes what you write, even with a personal fortune approaching a £billion.



Also central to the story of *Phantom* is Lloyd Webber's brief marriage to Sarah Brightman. It was widely known that Lloyd Webber wrote *Phantom* for Brightman. Brightman was his muse and often stood by his side as he wrote. The BBC describes it this way, noting that *Phantom* was a:

show about a man obsessed with a beautiful, young singer, written by a man obsessed with a beautiful young singer. Had it not been for a real-life love affair, *Phantom* may have never been created in the first place.

Yet, in a recent interview celebrating 40 years of Andrew Lloyd Webber, Lloyd Webber denied that he had written it for Brightman and said he hadn't had anyone in mind when he wrote *Phantom*. His interviewer responded with shocked silence.

Brightman and Lloyd Webber's marriage was born in scandal. Lloyd Webber left his wife and young children for her after "falling in love with her voice." Oddly, most biographers let Lloyd Webber off the hook for the breakup of his first marriage and place the blame squarely on Brightman's shoulders. According to one biographer, he just couldn't help himself as Brightman was "sex on two legs." *Sex on two legs?* Last time I looked, it takes two to have an affair, but the "homewrecker" moniker was to follow Brightman for years, and it colored the way people judged her and her performance in *Phantom*. People said just awful things about her, and she was the only one in the cast who was not nominated for a Tony. Even years later, in an interview for the BBC documentary, *Behind the Mask*, critic Howard Kissel said this.

She wouldn't have got the part if she were not married to the composer. She's not all that attractive. Her voice, I don't think, is a very attractive voice. It's kind of thin, with very little support. She was OK. She was fine. And no one was unaware of why she was there.

After only 6 years of marriage, Lloyd Webber discarded Brightman—by press release—and announced his new "friend," who became Mrs. Lloyd Webber 3. Given critics' general animosity towards Brightman, and the



view that she wouldn't have gotten the part of Christine had she not been married to the composer, being chucked aside could have finished her career. It didn't. Her rebirth as a highly successful solo artist is an inspiring story in and of itself.

Lloyd Webber and Brightman continue to collaborate, and seem genuinely fond of each other, but that doesn't stop Lloyd Webber from taking periodic shots at her in the press. Their relationship remains "complicated."



**Figure 14:** Brightman's mega-hit, *Time to Say Goodbye*, with Andrea Bocelli, cemented her position as an international superstar. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SqYG3f4PaWc>

# THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF PHANTOM

Ultimately, the tale of *The Phantom of the Opera* is a story of people—the people who made it and the people whose lives were touched by it. It is a story of a divorce, a celebrated marriage, and a divorce, and a Svengali-like relationship between a composer and gifted young protégé. It is a tale of fans so caught up in the original that they would have no other version be made. It is a story of the creative process, how it is often iterative, and how constraints often encourage, rather than discourage creativity. It is a story of a composer who has achieved every type of honor, is famous and very rich, but still is described as unhappy and is convinced that “no one” likes what he writes. It is also a story of the love-hate relationship that exists between creator and fans, and the public disdain Lloyd Webber has shown for the people who have made him rich.

In short, *Phantom* is great. The story behind it is even better. I hope you enjoy this social history of the world’s most popular musical. I have a feeling it will hook you too.

Kathleen Kendall-Tackett, PhD  
Amarillo, TX, October, 2016



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