

but they are only for a certain select audience. Usually they are not on in prime time. They are only available to us people whose wives get phone calls from work at five in the morning--that is a separate story--but for us, the few, the bleary-eyed, American enterprise has provided this extraordinary entertainment.

THE MT VOID

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These programs are for all kinds of products. In the early days they were just about financial matters: how to parlay beer money into millions in the stock market, how to get cash from the government, how to build a real estate empire on other people's money. These days they have branched to everything from paint pads to sexual aids to teeth whiteners. Honest! Can you imagine? You want to watch a half-hour program on teeth whiteners. You want to watch a half hour of before and after pictures of other people's teeth and be told how bleaching teeth improved their sex lives. (I wonder what games they're into.)

Now the first rule of advertising is get the victim's--uh, viewer's-- confidence. How do they do that? Protective coloration. Some try to blend in with television programs such as "That's Incredible!", some with talk shows, some with daytime women's news shows. They will start out with a come-on like, "Welcome to this special edition of 'That's Phenomenal!'" Darn straight it's a special edition. It's their first show, their last show, and their complete run. The audience is expected to believe this is a show that has been running for years with amazing pieces about parakeets that sing "The Star-Spangled Banner" and the man who put over 10,000 toothpicks at once in his mouth, and you just happened to catch it the day they are showing you the frame that goes up a turkey's rear end so it stands up like a begging dog when you roast it. (Uh, when you roast the turkey, that is. I have never roasted a begging dog.) I know you are thinking I made the begging turkey frame up, but you're wrong. So there!

2. Note that the Holmdel Science Fiction Library (and the librarian) has moved. The new address and phone number is above.

[-ecl]

Mark Leeper

MT 3D-441 957-5619
...mtgzx!leeper

Amid the turmoil of conflicting ideas in which we live ... there seems to be one proposition commanding nearly universal assent: The control man has secured over nature has far outrun his control over himself.

-- Dr. Ernest Jones

GREMLINS 2

A film review by Mark R. Leeper
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Capsule review: This is a film in which the parenthetical gags and in-jokes mutiny and take over the film like gremlins taking over a skyscraper. The plot was clearly too weak to stop the gags and comes in a poor second. Rating: high 0.

G_r_e_m_l_i_n_s_2 is a hard film to pin down and review. It is hard to criticize the story because it's not seriously trying to tell its story. Maybe it is working only half-time to tell its story and the other half is divided up among making film references, making comments about business and politics, and playing practical jokes on the viewer. As rationales for sequels go, this one is about par for being crass and high concept. The little monsters are back and taking over Trump Tower. Of course, they cannot call it Trump Tower so it is Clamp Center, owned by Daniel Clamp, an amalgam of Donald Trump and Ted Turner. The world needed a film with the gremlins vandalizing a skyscraper about as much

as it needed a toothbrush with disk brakes.

But while it seemed in G_r_e_m_l_i_n_s that the gags were getting in the way of the story-telling, in G_r_e_m_l_i_n_s_2 the story does a much better job of staying out of the way of the gags. Just as the gremlins take over the building, the gags take over the film. That is fine, I suppose, because while I cannot recommend the story, I did appreciate many of the gags. I rather hope that this film is marketed on videocassette with a complete list of the films parodied and the well-known people appearing during the course of G_r_e_m_l_i_n_s_2. Then the movie can be played like a word search puzzle.

The plot has likable young couple Billy Peltzer (played by Zack Gilligan) and Kate Beringer (played by Phoebe Cates) living together (in sin!) in New York and both working for Clamp (played by John Glover). All three work in the same building with a team of genetic scientists led by Dr. Catheter (played by Christopher Lee!). Billy finds out that the genetic scientists are playing around with his favorite Gremlin and we are off. Rounding out the cast we have Robert Prosky playing Al Lewis playing Grandpa playing havoc with Clamp's cable broadcast station. Having Prosky playing Al Lewis is like having Robert Duvall play Soupy Sales. The whole concept of the "Gremlins" films is that nasty accidents happen. But just to show that happy accidents happen also, at least for Dante, G_r_e_m_l_i_n_s has the Trump character discovering he likes a young woman working for him. Her name is Marla. Director Joe Dante insists that a_l_l filming was complete well before anyone ever heard of Marla Maples but, of course, the choice of that name fits very nicely with the theme of promising contrivances going wrong.

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Of course, much of the film is spent in little plays and blackout sketches that parody society and that star the very recently created Gremlin Repertory Troup. They act out scenes from films that logic tells you the creatures could have no way of knowing about. This apparently bothers nobody in the audience. It is supposed to be funny, not make sense. Actually somewhat funnier are the jabs at Ted Turner and his attitude toward classic film, including a great line about C_a_s_a_b_l_a_n_c_a.

However, because I am still hung up on films having plots and this

one is a pretty mediocre plot, I can give this film no better than a high zero on the -4 to +4 scale.

PHANTOM(S) OF THE OPERA
An article by Mark R. Leeper
Copyright 1990 Mark R. Leeper

Imagine a man born with the sort of genius and universal mind that Goethe had, but also born with a hideous face that sends people away screaming. Even Erik's mother is terrified by the face of her own son. Erik spent his early years in a freak show, but still found time to develop his keen mind, perhaps more so because he could have no social life. He was by turns a sideshow freak, an artist, a master magician and ventriloquist, a great singer, and the assistant to the Shah-in-Shah of Persia. For a while he was the most powerful man in Persia. He became a political assassin, a great architect, an inventor, and finally he retreated into anonymity as a common stone mason. Finally he gets a chance to apply his genius in a positive way, the design portions of the Paris Opera House, a fantastically intricate building in fact as well as in the novel.

When the work in the opera house is completed, rather than returning to the unfeeling world, he forsakes the sunshine that shows up his deformity and decides to live in the dark suffused by the divine music of the opera. It is a Chinese puzzle world that only he knows the intricate secrets of because he designed many of them in. And knowing all its many secret passages he is its absolute ruler. It even has an underground lake (actually used to buoy up the stage in the real Paris opera house) and as a remembrance of his past he has built a torture chamber. Then Erik hears a voice in the chorus whose owner he realizes he can, with proper training, turn into a supreme singer. He dupes the naive girl, who hears his voice but never sees him, into thinking he is an angel sent from heaven by her dead father to teach her to become a great singer.

These are all bits and pieces of background you pick up in the novel T_h_e_P_h_a_n_t_o_m_o_f_t_h_e_O_p_e_r_a by Gaston Leroux. Nobody has ever dramatized the story and done a sufficient justice to the tragedy of Erik. I am not claiming this is great literature, by any means. It is exaggerated, certainly. But it is melodramatic enough to be done really well in a dramatic medium. However, nobody has ever even attempted it except on the most superficial level. I do think that there is more of Erik in the musical by Andrew Lloyd Webber than in the Chaney version which made him a lunatic escaped from Devil's Island, but even the musical does not really do justice to the drama of the character.

As two different versions of the story of the Phantom have been released over the past six months and two more productions have been announced, this would be a good time to reassess the versions that have been made to date. Since they all have the same title I will identify them by the actor who played the title role.

know of Erik. The Persian is in the Lon Chaney version, but what we learn of Erik is purely the invention of the film. There we are told that Erik is a maniac escaped from Devil's Island. Where he learned what he must know about singing to teach Christine is never explained.

A recent article by Scott McQueen in the September and October 1989

American Cine-matograph suggests that it was originally intended to

have a much more accurate background for Erik, but that the scenes set in Persia were cut to save expense and screen time. This is a serious shortcoming in that if Erik has any credibility. We should be told something of the source of his talents. To say that he is a maniac who once was tortured in this same building and who escaped from Devil's Island does not reasonably account for his abilities.

McQueen's article also recounts that there were strong personality conflicts between Chaney and director Rupert Julian. In fact, even for the standards of silent films (which were acted mostly in pantomime anyway) the acting is not very good in Chaney's version. Mary Philbin's acting as Christine is over the top with exaggerated facial expression. The director does not seem to take the character seriously and it is hard for the audience to either. To my taste there is entirely too much comic relief, particularly because most of it works so poorly. The ballerinas flit around in fear and react to the most terrifying revelations by turning pirouettes. There is too much slapstick with Florine Papillon (Snitz Edwards) popping in and out of trap doors. The only decent acting is from Chaney himself. It is perhaps part script and part his acting, but his threatening with sarcastic civility is chilling. Tracy would later use the same sarcastic civility, dripping with menace, to terrorize Ingrid Bergman in Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

In spite of serious flaws, this is the version that brought the story to the attention of American audiences and had it never been made the story would very likely have been forgotten. Until the Crawford version came along it was the version most firmly implanted in the public's mind and likely will again be the best remembered version.

1943 Claude Rains

This was the first version of The Phantom

O_p_e_r_a that I ever

saw and it remains my favorite. I also believe that it is the most entertaining film version of the story. In spite of the fact that Erich Taylor's greatly re-written story bears only minor similarities to the original story, this seems to be the pre-Webber version of the story that was most popular. I have come to call this version of the Phantom the "Erich Taylor" version. By the "Taylor Phantom" I mean the relatively normal composer whose music is stolen and in the course of his rage his face is burned, rather than having had a face that was deformed from birth. Erich Taylor adapted the novel to a screenplay for this version and probably invented this often-repeated plot variation.

The Herbert Lom and Maximilian Schell versions of _ T _ h _ e _ P _ h _ a _ n _ t _ o _ m _ o _ f _ t _ h _ e

_ O _ p _ e _ r _ a as well as the homage _ T _ h _ e _ P _ h _ a _ n _ t _ o _ m _ o _ f _ t _ h _ e _ P _ a _ r _ a _ d _ i _ s _ e are not based on the book to any noticeable degree but rather are remakes of the Taylor version of the story.

The Taylor Phantom is essentially different from the Leroux Phantom in that his anger is sharper and generally more focused. Rather than being angry at the world in general, Taylor Phantoms usually have the person who wronged them as a particular object of their anger. The Taylor Phantom is less misanthropic since he has been wronged by a smaller set of people. In fact in this version Eriqre Claudin, as the Phantom is named here, is actually a misguided altruist. His only motive is to do all he can to confer success on the young singer from his village in Provenc ,e. Also he derives his power not from having helped design the opera house but because he has stolen a master key.

One of the ironies--and for once irony does not strengthen the story--is that most of Eriqre's efforts were paying off. Had he only waited he never would have been disfigured. We are shown that his music has been discovered by Franz Liszt only moments before his rage in which he murders Pleyel and has his face burned. There seemed to be a general theme in Universal Films around this time that social injustice was being corrected, albeit slowly. In the remake of _ T _ h _ e _ H _ u _ n _ c _ h _ b _ a _ c _ k _ o _ f

_ N _ o _ t _ r _ e

_ D _ a _ m _ e made four years earlier we were also told that society is changing and getting better. Injustices like the ones shown in the film would

soon become impossible thanks to new inventions like the printing press.

I seriously doubt that Victor Hugo, the author of H _ u _ n _ c _ h _ b _ a _ c _ k, would have found that theme in his own misanthropic novel. Oddly in P _ h _ a _ n _ t _ o _ m as in

H _ u _ n _ c _ h _ b _ a _ c _ k the force for society improving is played by Fritz Leiber, Sr.

In H _ u _ n _ c _ h _ b _ a _ c _ k he played a benevolent king and in P _ h _ a _ n _ t _ o _ m he plays Liszt,

who has recognized Eriquer's genius. Also, in keeping with the positive message, we are told that Eriquer's suffering and madness will be forgotten but his music will live on. In fact, it is likely that Eriquer's music would be remembered because of not in spite of the notoriety. Note that Antonio Salieri's music was remembered by only a select few until a popular play linked him with the death of Mozart.

While being inaccurate to the novel this version does not have a bad script at all. This is true in spite of a bit too much comic relief and not enough of the drama or horror it is intended to relieve us from. Surprisingly enough this version is even topical today. Eriquer is, after all, a terrorist and there is a discussion of whether his terrorism should be given in to or resisted. The question is inherent in most versions of the story, but it is given most discussion here of any version. Still this version has the sort of light story wartime audiences would have craved. There is no romantic triangle of Christine caught between the Phantom and her lover--Eriquer is too nice for that. But there is a triangle of Christine caught between Anatole the baritone and Raoul the police inspector. Christine is also caught between romance in general and her career. And finally Anatole is caught between Christine, whom he wants, and Madame Biancarolli, who wants him.

The entire film was aimed at wartime audiences' desire for escape. It was given a big budget production with splashy Technicolor and lots of intricate operatic production numbers. While these numbers may have been an inaccurate representation of what opera is really like, they are entertaining. And while the sets of the catacombs beneath the opera were more impressive in the Chaney version, here they occasionally appear to be just paintings and less than totally convincing. Still, even here the color serves the film very well. Ironically, while Claude Rains is nobody's idea of an athletic actor, here he comes off as a dynamic swashbuckler. Through much of the film we see him only as a shadow with a big fedora and a grand sweeping cape. That, in fact, is how he is pictured in the ads. When we see him masked he had a dramatic gray mask and wavy hair like Liberace. As a matter of taste, I would say that while the unmasking scene is less dramatic than in the Chaney version (though the acid scars are probably fairly realistic), the

chandelier sequence is the most dramatically successful of any film version of the story. It is as suspenseful as any scene Hitchcock ever directed. With scenes like that I can forgive the rather overly dramatic last scene we see below the opera house with Eriquer's violin and the mask artfully placed on it. The picture looks like something from a perfume ad.

The Lon Chaney version is the greatest artistic success, but to my taste this is the film version that is the most enjoyably watchable.

_ 1_ 9_ 6_ 2__ H_ e_ r_ b_ e_ r_ t__ L_ o_ m

Of all the versions of _ T_ h_ e_ P_ h_ a_ n_ t_ o_ m_ o_ f_ t_ h_ e_ O_ p_ e_ r_ a that I watched in

order to write this article, this one was the biggest revelation to me.

This was a film I enjoyed a great deal as a teenager. I am a fan of Hammer Films of Britain and what they meant to the horror film. And this is reasonably good as a Hammer film goes. But as a version of the

_ T_ h_ e_ P_ h_ a_ n_ t_ o_ m_ o_ f_ t_ h_ e_ O_ p_ e_ r_ a it really is just awful.

There is no indication in the film that anyone involved has read the novel or even knew that there was a novel. The credits say that the screenplay is by John Elder "based on a _ c_ o_ m_ p_ o_ s_ i_ t_ i_ o_ n by Gaston Leroux." It seems unclear whether it was a novel, a story, a screenplay or something else. That is a quite justifiable ambiguity since this film was not based on the novel at all but on the Taylor Phantom. There is no evidence that anyone connected with the film saw even the Chaney version.

The film is full of embarrassing moments. The Phantom slaps Christine when she is not willing to put enough effort into her music, but his hand misses her by several inches, yet there is a resounding slap on the soundtrack. Michael Gough, who had been a credit to other Hammer productions, really chews up the scenery as the lecherous opera house owner and supposed composer. Rather than evoking any real emotion in the screenplay we are simply told how powerful the mystery is. One of the managers of the opera seems to have a speech impediment that makes him end each sentence with an exclamation point. "Parts of London are a lost world! We can never know what caverns and dungeons and labyrinths rest beneath us! Or what madmen and monsters inhabit them!" "Something _ e_ v_ i_ l is in this theater!" "Is it because any other explanation is _ j_ u_ s_ t_ t_ o_ o_ i_ n_ c_ r_ e_ d_ i_ b_ l_ e?!"

In fact, what is in the theater is a real letdown. Generally what makes the Phantom interesting is his combination of genius, pathos, and ruthless power. He is a Jekyll and Hyde figure. In this rendition they have split the Jekyll and Hyde into two characters, a good self who is the wronged composer, and the bad self who is a nameless knife-wielding hunchback. The result is that neither character has much depth or much interest value. Nor do the characters make much sense. Petrie is a

starving composer who must sell his music for a pittance. He apparently has never taught. Yet after a while in a sewer he has become a great

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Mark R. Leeper

music teacher. But for a couple of slaps, he seems to be a gentle sort. The actual murders are committed by the crazed hunchback for who knows what motive. At no point do we see Petrie tell the hunchback to commit murders.

The film does real violence to the story, making at least an effort to fit in all the standard scenes, but in a weird combination.

Screenwriter John Elder gets to the end of the film and apparently realizes that standard scenes like the unmasking and the falling

chandelier are not present. Christine _ C _ h _ a _ r _ l _ e _ s has been too demure and respectful and--let's face it--mousy to unmask the Phantom herself and

Petrie is too nice a guy to drop a chandelier on anybody. Elder combines the two scenes in the Phantom seeing the chandelier falling on

Christine, he pauses to rip off his mask for no really good reason,

leaps to save Christine and is himself crushed by the chandelier. Also

uncharacteristic of Hammer or of versions of _ T _ h _ e _ P _ h _ a _ n _ t _ o _ m _ o _ f _ t _ h _ e _ O _ p _ e _ r _ a ,

the chief villain remains totally unscathed. Presumably he will eventually lose his reputation if Harry, the hero, chooses to tell the world about the plagiarism, but earlier Harry had indicated that he probably would not do so.

Speaking of script problems, Elder wrote the screenplay to have us hear generous portions of a great and popular new opera. Then in the production somebody actually had to write these production scenes. Can you imagine poor Edwin Astley, who wrote the music, being confronted with the task of having to compose convincing portions of a popular opera? If he could write great opera, would he be writing for B films?

What he gave them was a thoroughly unpleasant and truly awful piece of imitation opera that the audience supposedly just _ l _ o _ v _ e _ s. Even the character Harry is exaggerating when he faintly calls it "a good tune."

The film is just chock full of things that should have been done better while not doing anything very good. But for the Richard Englund version, it is the worst English-language film of the story. It is certainly better than the Englund version, but that is faint praise indeed.

One ordinarily assumes that a made-for-television film will not be made to the standards of a theatrical film. The 1983 version of T_h_e P_h_a_n_t_o_m_o_f_t_h_e_O_p_e_r_a which starred Maximilian Schell and Jane Seymour is surprisingly a very watchable if somewhat revisionist telling of the story. In most ways it is probably superior to the later made-for-television Charles Dance version made with a higher budget. In fact this version is one of the better film versions.

This is one of the film versions not really based on the book but on the Erich Taylor 1943 screenplay with the setting shifted to Budapest. The Phantom is not born deformed but is disfigured in a fire brought about by his own rage. In this case his rage is not over his

music but over how badly his wife, an aspiring singer, has been treated by critics. The critics were employed by the manager of the opera house after the wife spurned the manager's advances. The manager need not have bothered, of course. The singing of the wife, as we hear in the film, really is abominable. The poor quality of her voice may have been exaggerated so that the viewer gets the point, but it is an unrealistic touch that any singer this bad would really get a leading role in an opera. In any case, the wife is demoralized by a bad review which appeared too soon after the performance not to have been written beforehand. Depressed, the wife commits suicide and her husband goes to confront the critic only to cause the fire that disfigures him.

Four years later the Phantom, whose real name in this version is Shandor Korvin, hears a young singer, Maria Gianelli, who looks very much like his dead wife. And the story goes from there. He does not tell her that he is the Angel of Music but calls himself Orpheus. That is, I suppose, a literate transformation. Orpheus was a great music maker who goes underground, much like the Phantom, though for a very different purpose. Some of the music in the opera sequences is very nice in this version, but as with the later Charles Dance version it is poorly matched to the singers' lips.

Some mention should be made of the visual appearance of the

Phantom. Schell's Phantom when unmasked looks much like the original description in the Leroux book. In fact, of the live action versions only Chaney's makeup is arguably closer to the book's description of the skull-like face and no other version comes even close. In addition, Schell wears a variety of masks and for once they are as well thought out as his makeup. In the book we are given no description of the mask at all. One mask Schell wears is artistically detailed with renderings of facial features and one looks almost like a plastic version of Schell's own face.

Finally there is the end of the Phantom. This may have been at once one of the more dramatic and one of the more foolish ends for the Phantom. It is based not on the book but apparently on the dramatic film poster for the Herbert Lom version. In that poster the Phantom is seen hanging on to the flaming chandelier as it plummets into a screaming audience. It is a very dramatic scene and one which the film it advertised totally fails to deliver. It is inaccurate to the Lom version in about five different ways and would have brightened the Hammer version considerably. The scene pictured in fact appears almost precisely as depicted, but in this later 1983 version of T_h_e_P_h_a_n_t_o_m_o_f_t_h_e_O_p_e_r_a. The Phantom stands on the chandelier and cuts the suspending chain above his head. It is not apparently an act of suicide, though that is the effect. It appears to be just a very stupid mistake.

While there is little in this film that Gaston Leroux would recognize of his own book, it is a decent melodrama, explains the genius of the Phantom, and is of a quality at least comparable with any of the theatrical versions.

l_9_8_7_M_i_c_h_a_e_l_C_r_a_w_f_o_r_d_(T_h_e_a_t_r_i_c_a_l_V_e_r_s_i_o_n)

I review a lot of things and see or read a lot more. It is not all that unusual that I come away from some and consciously say that it is the best of a certain class I have ever seen, read, or whatever. I thought that the remake of C_a_t_P_e_o_p_l_e was the best shape-changer horror film I had ever seen. But of course that is the best of a small class. It is far rarer that I would say something is the best play. But I will say that for me P_h_a_n_t_o_m_o_f_t_h_e_O_p_e_r_a was the best play. By

artistic

merits alone. A m a d e u s was a better play, I suppose, but P h a n t o m o f t h e O p e r a was the most enjoyable and even the most meaningful play. It is a pot-boiler melodrama based on a pot-boiler melodramatic novel and I loved it. Sometimes even a pot-boiler can hit you squarely on target and you are absolutely floored. I hope Margaret Thatcher, who attended the same performance as I did, enjoyed it as much.

I really believe that the play may be more faithful to the novel than the Lon Chaney film. It certainly reveals more of the Phantom's background and tragedy. The Phantom is shown to be the genius he was in the Gaston Leroux novel and the victim of an unfeeling world. To fit as much of the plot into a musical of all play forms is incredible. They did eliminate the Persian, who is a major character of the novel, and many chapters from near the end of the novel, particularly those involving the torture chamber scenes which are telescoped to a few seconds on the stage, but I don't think the impact has really been lost.

Most of this could be told from the record. What I could not have expected is the brilliance of the set design. When you are first sitting in the theater, the stage seems small. What they do with that tiny stage is hard to believe. Many effects are impressive but none so impressive as the descent to the lake below the opera house, which has to be seen to be appreciated. It matches the scene in the film--no small feat for a stage play. Less impressive is the falling chandelier, which is much less convincing. But the moment when you first see the Phantom is a cold chill like nothing I remember seeing in any film or play. P h a n t o m o f t h e O p e r a is really a superb adaptation of a story I have loved for years.

Now for a few minor quibbles. Andrew Lloyd Webber's music is spectacular as long as he is simply having his characters sing, but he does some funny things when he is representing other composers' music. Presumably his song "Evergreen" is an aria from the opera H a n n i b a l by Chalumeu. From the style of opera of the period, and from what we do hear of the opera, it is clear that the song simply would not fit in. It is not of an operatic style and Webber did not want to take a chance on his audiences not appreciating the beauty of the operatic style. Further, it seems absurd that a musical genius like the Phantom would write an opera in which the music is just unappealing scales and with phrases like "Those who tangle with Don Juan...." That sounds like it came from a poverty-row Western rather than an opera written by a musical genius.

_ 1_ 9_ 8_ 7_ ?_ ?_ ?_ (_ A_ n_ i_ m_ a_ t_ e_ d_ V_ e_ r_ s_ i_ o_ n_)

As is probably obvious by now I do like the novel of _ T_ h_ e_ P_ h_ a_ n_ t_ o_ m_ o_ f_ _ t_ h_ e_ O_ p_ e_ r_ a and I consider one of the most important virtues of an adaptation accuracy to the source material. One cinematic version of the story stands head and shoulders above the others as an adaptation faithful to the novel. That is its main and just about its only virtue.

A British company called Emerald City Productions provides to cable animated films that are sort of the equivalent of the old Classics Illustrated comic books. Like Classics Illustrated comics they are written close to the plot of the novel. They take some liberties with plots but on the whole their adaptations are generally pretty artless turn-the-crank affairs. Take the plot of the novel, transfer it to script form, then animate it. The adaptation does simplify things, perhaps too much. This version eliminates Carlotta and her rivalry with Christine. By doing that the fall of the chandelier is misplaced in the plot, and it is left ambiguous whether the fall is sabotage or accident. Also Erik has a violent death as he does in all versions but the novel and the Webber play. On the other hand, the 1987 version includes the very important character of the Persian. Erik's background is vastly simplified to being just a killer who has escaped from the Persian police. This denies us the possibility of considering siding with the Phantom. It was an unfortunate decision. But I guess for a young audience murderers must be made villains and they must die in the end.

The face of the Phantom as illustrated here is exactly as Leroux described it. It is more accurate than even the Chaney visualization. Since the artists are not limited by makeup effects they can make it look like anything they want and they use the text of the novel, taking it literally. This requires little imagination, I suppose. But the history of adaptations of this novel has been plagued with too much imagination and not enough trust in the source to be sufficiently compelling. Emerald City's _ P_ h_ a_ n_ t_ o_ m partially justifies that mistrust. It certainly is not a particularly compelling telling. Luckily the Webber play, which is nearly as faithful, is also nearly as compelling as the book.

_ 1_ 9_ 8_ 9_ R_ i_ c_ h_ a_ r_ d_ E_ n_ g_ l_ u_ n_ d

It is clear that somebody was serious about making a version of the semi-classic story and somebody else was not. Nominally Dwight Little is the director of the new film, though his name is pasted over somebody else's on the posters. So what we get is an exquisitely clumsy cross between a lackluster but traditional telling of the story and an episode of "Freddy's Nightmares."

Christine Daae is an opera singer in modern-day Manhattan who finds

an old piece of music by a forgotten composer who was also a serial killer. She decides to use it for an audition for an opera. During her audition she is coshed on the head by a sandbag and suddenly, with no

apparent bewilderment, she is an opera singer from the chorus in 1884 London. The story that is then told is just barely recognizable as a version of _ T_ h_ e_ P_ h_ a_ n_ t_ o_ m_ o_ f_ t_ h_ e_ O_ p_ e_ r_ a. A great but unknown composer has made a pact with the Devil that if his music should become immortal he would sell his soul. The Devil adds his own little amendment by gouging pieces out of the composer's face. The Phantom can make himself almost normal, but only by sewing pieces of live flesh into his face--so much for the romance of the mask. The Phantom now lives under the opera house and teaches his Christine, mercilessly torture-killing anyone who gets in his way. He skins two people alive and beheads two others. Meanwhile Christine is bewildered as to why she is able to remember the words to sing to the Phantom's music--not remembering that she learned them in New York. Classic scenes such as the chandelier scene and the unmasking are dispensed with entirely--well, sort of. Later when the story returns to the present it turns more into a traditional supernatural molester story.

I cannot imagine how this film turned into such an unholy mess. Only part of the mess can be explained by saying they had a gory version of the traditional story and well into the shooting they decided they wanted to turn it into a totally different film. That would explain the change of directors. It would also explain the credits "Screenplay by Duke Sandefur, Based on a screenplay by Gerry O'Hara." Somebody must have decided they could not sell Robert Englund as anything but a supernatural, unstoppable killer like his Freddy Krueger. The result is a sort of a _ P_ e_ g_ g_ y_ S_ u_ e_ S_ i_ n_ g_ s_ f_ o_ r_ t_ h_ e_ P_ h_ a_ n_ t_ o_ m_ o_ f_ E_ l_ m_ S_ t_ r_ e_ e_ t that is a crude hoax that will disappoint Phantom fans, Freddy fans, and everybody in between. I would like to say this film has no redeeming value and is not really an adaptation of the story at all. But for a little nice opera and a few scenes that were almost an okay adaptation of the story I will count it where I do not count only slightly more bastardized versions like _ P_ h_ a_ n_ t_ o_ m_ o_ f_ t_ h_ e_ P_ a_ r_ a_ d_ i_ s_ e. _ 1_ 9_ 9_ 0_ C_ h_ a_ r_ l_ e_ s_ D_ a_ n_ c_ e

The day that Tony Richardson's made-for-television version of T h e
 P h a n t o m o f t h e O p e r a was due to be shown, my local newspaper did a

feature on it quoting the writer Arthur Kopit as saying, "[After having read the novel] what struck me was that this story ... wasn't very good. Still it captured the imagination of people. Why? What bothered me about [the previous dramatic] versions, what I thought they essentially missed, was that you never knew why the Phantom was in love with Christine."

I had very high hopes for this version. There were four announced film adaptations in the wake of the success of the Broadway play. One starred Richard Englund, whose most famous role was the razor-gloved Freddy Krueger; one was simply a film version of the musical; one was set in Nazi Germany. Of the four versions, the only one that sounded like a genuine new adaptation of the novel was the announced four-hour television version. Then I read Kopit's quote.

Phantoms

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Mark R. Leeper

What Kopit is saying is that he has no respect for the material itself, only for its ready-made market. He also thinks that the dramatic versions missed the point of why the story is popular. I could easily believe his comment if it really were the novel that people remember but, in fact, the book has not been what people have liked. For most of the years the story has been liked, Gaston Leroux's novel has been hard to find. Andrew Lloyd Webber tells an anecdote about how difficult it was to find a copy of the novel when he wanted to read it. The dramatic adaptations that Kopit thinks missed the point of why the story is remembered are really what made the story popular. And here they cannot have missed the point. Actually I would contend that they have all missed what I like in the novel, but not what has made the story popular.

The novel is about a man with a great intellect and a horribly deformed face. All his life he was treated as a freak and just occasionally exploited for his genius. Eventually he finds the opportunity to build for himself an empire in the darkness beneath the Paris Opera House. There he can enjoy the music and can be seen only when he wants. This is Gaston Leroux's Erik but he has never been done satisfactorily in a film or play. I had hoped that in the three and a

half hours or so of story there would be time to show Erik's history. In fact, this version did show Erik's history but it bore little relation to anything in the novel.

Kopit missed the point entirely by making his Phantom a petulant young man (played by Charles Dance of T_h_e_J_e_w_e_l_i_n_t_h_e_C_r_o_w_n), who is being shielded by a former manager of the opera house (over-played by Burt Lancaster).

Kopit's screenplay intends this Erik to be likable and steers clear of the question in the novel of whether Erik might be psychotic. This Erik does not kill, at least in the course of the film. Oh, his face may startle and early on this causes a death, but that does not appear to be Erik's fault. This Erik has lost the feel of the sinister and instead controls the fate of the opera house with practical jokes. Even the cutting down of the chandelier is not a murder attempt but an act of angry vandalism intended to vent rage and for which the audience was intentionally given time to get out of the way. Of course, this Erik had less reason for rage than the one in the book. The script claims that Erik's mother at least found his face "flawlessly beautiful." In the book Erik's mother gave him his first mask because she could not stand to look at his face.

There are a few nice touches to the script. One of them is the issue of how to handle the unmasking. Sort of independently of the quality of the rest of the production there is the question of how to shock audiences when they do see the Phantom's face. The approach here was unusual and not badly done, though it was perhaps dictated by the screenplay's efforts to keep Erik as a romantic Phantom. Less endearing is Erik's unexpected forest beneath the ground. It isn't like the metal

forest of the novel but a real forest with live trees and unexplained sunlight. It appears that Erik must have built himself a holodeck.

Charles Dance is a little whiny for my tastes, as well as not being sufficiently sinister. Lancaster as the former manager is overripe and Teri Polo as Christine Daae (in the book Daae') is unmemorable. She and her lover Adam Storke as Phillipe, Comte de Chagny, are pretty people but boring actors. (Again, they got the name wrong on the Comte. The

character's name was Raoul. Phillipe is the name of Raoul's brother, older by twenty years.)

The whole mediocre revision of the story is directed by Tony Richardson, who directed T_o_m_J_o_n_e_s. I am not a fan of that film but it certainly was better directed than this slow-moving version. If I had never heard of the story before I would have liked this version better, but as it is, I would call it the better than only the Herbert Lom and Richard Englund versions.

C_o_m_p_a_r_i_n_g_t_h_e_V_e_r_s_i_o_n_s

Now that I have had my say about each of the versions individually, it would be a good idea to ladder them from my favorite to my least favorite. It should be fairly obvious from what I said above, but just to make it a matter of record.

1. The 1 1 1 19 9 9 98 8 8 87 7 7 7
M M M Mi i i ic c c ch h h ha a a ae e e el l l l
C C C Cr r r ra a a aw w w wf f f fo o o or r r rd d d d
((((T T T Th h h he e e ea a a at t t tr r r ri i i ic c c ca a a al l l l))))
version -- Amazingly well-

staged and well-written. While being surprisingly accurate to the book it is also the most compelling rendition. Best point: Erik really is the tragic genius that Leroux wrote about. Worst point: Erik's makeup is not at all accurate to the book and not really believable.

2. The 1 1 1 19 9 9 94 4 4 43 3 3 3 C C C Cl l l la a a au u u ud d d de e e e
R R R Ra a a ai i i in n n ns s s s version -- A more engaging story than even the Chaney version. We never really sympathize with Chaney's Phantom and with Rains we do. This version probably had more influence than Chaney's version. The story is just a little over-sweet. Best point: For the first time you really sympathized with the Phantom and to some extent found him dashing, even with Claude Rains in the part. Worst point: What happened to the original story?

3. The 1 1 1 19 9 9 92 2 2 25 5 5 5 L L L Lo o o on n n n
C C C Ch h h ha a a an n n ne e e ey y y y version -- This remains the classic version and the most impressive makeup job of any version. I put it just a tad beneath the first remake because of script problems not giving enough plot and having too much comic relief. Best point: Some of the visuals are stunning and even haunting. This is a simply beautiful rendition. Worst point: There is not very much of the novel in this adaptation. The pacing of silent film is just not time-efficient enough to tell much story.

4. The 1 1 1 19 9 9 98 8 8 87 7 7 7

A A A An n n ni i i im m m ma a a at t t te e e ed d d d version -- An animated comic book version, but

it is an adaptation of the original novel; it is not based on any film version. Best point: generally the most faithful version to the novel. Worst point: dull acting that tells the story but is not at all involving.

5. The 1 1 1 19 9 9 98 8 8 82 2 2 2

M M M Ma a a ax x x xi i i im m m mi i i il l l ll l l li i i ia a a an n n n S S S Sc c c ch h h he e e el l l ll l l l version -- Unexpectedly watchable

television version based on the '43 version, but still Schell makes an impressive phantom. Best point: Dramatic climax with Schell riding the chandelier into the audience. Worst point: The opera is not very convincing. Schell's wife would never have sung on the stage.

6. The 1 1 1 19 9 9 99 9 9 90 0 0 0

C C C Ch h h ha a a ar r r rl l l le e e es s s s

D D D Da a a an n n nc c c ce e e e version -- Not based on any other version

or on the book. It does not always make sense. This version could have told the story in the novel but wasted it on an entirely different story. Lancaster forgot how to act years ago and in some scenes is really bad. Best point: This Erik, while not Leroux's, is somewhat interesting on occasion. Sometimes whiny, sometime almost Byronic. Worst point: Totally absurd treatment of opera. There is no respect for opera as an art form. And operatic excellence, in part, is what the story should be all about. The book's Erik is willing to murder for the perfection of the art form.

7. The 1 1 1 19 9 9 96 6 6 62 2 2 2

H H H He e e er r r rb b b be e e er r r rt t t L L L Lo o o om m m m version -- Hammer's version does not work, is

not Leroux, and at times is overripe. It is hard to generate any sympathy for the Phantom and the musical chords intending to generate it only make the effort seem the more pitiful. The villain is never punished more through oversight than plan, I think. Best point: The story does generate some suspense in spite of itself. Worst point: The malignant hunchback who does all the dirty work.

8. The 1 1 1 19 9 9 98 8 8 89 9 9 9

R R R Ri i i ic c c ch h h ha a a ar r r rd d d d

E E E En n n ng g g l l l lu u u un n n nd d d d version -- Oh geez, where should I start?

It mixes the Faust legend, and time travel and mostly is just an excuse to make an unkillable-killer film. It clearly had two different directors with different styles. Best point: It's short. Worst point: It's not nearly short enough.

There will certainly be more versions in the future. There have been at least two announced. One is unfortunately set in Nazi Germany and starring, it has been suggested, Dustin Hoffman. The long awaited film version of the stage play is also planned. Perhaps there will be opportunity to update this article in the not too distant future.

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