

'Phantom' is here, in a \$40M haunt

Broadway phenomenon is the latest to be worthy of a Vegas spectacle

By Steve Freiss
Special for USA TODAY

It's *The Phantom of the Opera*, so you know what to expect. Young Christine will sing with melancholy about her romantic interest in both a handsome aristocrat and a masked opera house squatter. And, of course, a large light fixture will crash.

The real star of the 95-minute version that opens here Saturday may turn out to be the theater itself: a \$40 million edifice that adds an only-in-Vegas thrill-ride element. Most notably, the 1-ton chandelier made of hand-strung crystal hurtles down amid pyrotechnics from above only to stop a mere 10 feet above the heads of some in the audience.

Perhaps even more astonishing: *Phantom's* home at the Venetian Hotel-Casino is merely the latest elaborate entry in the Vegas side business of theater building.

"The reason one does this in Vegas is because one can," says David Rockwell, Phantom Theatre's New York-based designer. "There are the resources to do it; physically you can do it. You get to start over with something familiar."

Indeed, freed of the space constraints of Manhattan and London, and armed with money from casino conglomerates, show producers can dream bolder than on Broadway or in the West End. A single Vegas showroom can cost more than the combined budgets for all new Broadway productions for a given year.

Attracting some of the 40 million tourists who pass through Vegas each year makes it worthwhile for Caesars Palace to plunge \$95 million into a showroom tailored for Celine Dion or for the MGM Grand to build a \$165 million space for Cirque du Soleil's *Ka*.

In the case of *Phantom*, the version at the Venetian is actually one imagined by



Lifelike: Mannequins perch in balcony boxes, giving *Phantom* its theater-within-a-theater feel.

Lighting it up: The 1-ton chandelier rises and falls in the Andrew Lloyd Webber production.



composer Andrew Lloyd Webber and director Hal Prince when they first staged the tale in the 1980s.

"It's a dream come true," Webber says. "We can do things (here) that we could never have done in any other context."

To wit, this edition — rebranded *Phantom: The Las Vegas Spectacular* — will occur

in an 1,800-seat playhouse designed throughout to look like the 19th-century Opera Garnier in Paris. Because the narrative starts in a ruined opera house, the audience first sees the chandelier astrew and huge canvas draping the walls. When the tale flashes back, the canvas flies off, and the chandelier pieces assemble and light

up in an 80-foot-wide dome.

The trend of customizing Vegas theaters started in the early 1990s. Steve Wynn recruited Cirque to create *Mystère* in a \$32 million building at his Treasure Island resort. That showroom, where *Mystère* continues to run, led to more elaborate theaters, including the \$80 million O Theater in 1998 at the Bellagio and \$100 million Aqua Theater in 2005 at the Wynn Las Vegas resort for *Le Rêve*, a Cirque-style production by O show creator Franco Dragone.

Says Dale Hurt, Aqua Theater operations technical director: "It's not necessarily a matter of one-upping the others, but more 'Let's do something different.'"

Customized theaters have drawbacks, Dragone admits. *Le Rêve* was widely panned, and Dragone says he couldn't make some changes because the show-room is so specific. Dragone was recently removed from the show, in fact, as part of an effort by Wynn to overhaul it.

Another risk: that the technology could overshadow human performers.

Prince, who won a Tony for the original Broadway version, is unconcerned. "*Phantom* is the last show in the world that needs defending. The reason it has run so well for all these years is because it is an intensely romantic story that people love, not because of the chandelier. And that will be the same way in Las Vegas."

The Phantom Theatre

Show: *Phantom: The Las Vegas Spectacular*
Details: Opens Saturday (in previews through Friday) in the \$40 million theater at the Venetian Hotel-Casino. Has 1,815 seats.
Tickets: Start at \$75; 866-641-7469 or phantomlasvegas.com

See more photos and listen to interviews with Webber, Prince and Dragone at life.usatoday.com.

Other Vegas megatheaters

The Colosseum

Show: *A New Day* with Celine Dion
Details: Opened at Caesars Palace in 2003 at a cost of \$95 million. Has 4,148 seats. The farthest stage-to-seat distance: 120 feet.
Tickets: Start at \$87.50; 877-423-5463 or www.caesarspalace.com
Bells and whistles: Stage is backed by the world's largest indoor high-definition screen (34 by 110 feet). It cost \$6 million to build a door into the bottom center of the screen so Dion could appear to be stepping out of the video when she first comes out.
Challenges: Dion's doctor, fearful the singer's voice would be hurt by the desert climate, told her the showroom needed to be 55% humidity, so engineers built steam-pumping ducts into the stage.

Aqua Theater

Show: *Le Rêve* by Franco Dragone
Details: Opened at Wynn Las Vegas in 2005 at a cost of \$100 million. Has 2,087 seats. The farthest stage-to-seat distance: 42 feet.
Tickets: Start at \$88; 877-323-7469 or www.lereve.com
Bells and whistles: The theater-in-the-round has a 1.1 million gallon, 26-foot-deep pool kept at 89 degrees. Five lifts in the stage move the water up and down for various scenes. Six 32-by-36-foot rear-projection screens line the lower part of the dome.
Challenges: To put scenery atop the watery stage, a 62-foot-wide, 48-ton carousel was built in the ceiling to carry set pieces up and down 10 steel cables.

Ka Theater

Show: *Ka* by Cirque du Soleil
Details: Opened at MGM Grand in 2005 at a cost of \$165 million. Has 1,951 seats. The farthest stage-to-seat distance: 110 feet.
Tickets: Start at \$69; 877-264-1844 or www.ka.com
Bells and whistles: The main performance stage, a 25-by-50-by-6-foot platform, is able to twirl and flip and appears at different parts of the show as a boat, the side of a mountain, a sandbox and a battlefield.
Challenge: The four 75-foot hydraulic cylinders that hold and power the stage didn't fit inside the theater. To keep them from being exposed to the elements outside the roof, special chimneys were built to sheath them.

O Theater

Show: *O* by Cirque du Soleil
Details: Opened at the Bellagio Hotel-Casino in 1998 at a cost of \$100 million. Has 1,800 seats. Farthest stage-to-seat distance: 110 feet.
Tickets: Start at \$93.50; 888-488-7111 or www.bellagio.com
Bells and whistles: The 1.5 million-gallon performance pool is at times covered and at times open so divers can plummet from nine stories above. The water is kept at 86 degrees and cleansed with bromide, which is gentler on costumes than chlorine.
Challenges: Audiences complained that the room felt warm and damp, so engineers designed an air-conditioning system that cools viewers from beneath the seats.

Stunt chandelier adds thrills to musical

The chandelier in *Phantom of the Opera* comes to life at the beginning of the musical — and crashes at the end. Making those dramatic moments even more so for the Las Vegas *Phantom* was the challenge for Scott Fisher of Fisher Technical Services. He shares what went into the combination of technology and artistry:

At the opening

The chandelier is in four pieces covered in cloth, one on the stage and the others scattered about, as the opera house's contents are being auctioned off.

- When the auctioneer announces "lot 666," the piece on stage rises up and joins the others, which travel over theater-goers' heads in various flight patterns controlled by 40 computers.
- The chandelier pieces are lifted and pulled along the tracks by a series of thin steel cables painted black.
- It appears to self-assemble into one piece.

The chandelier pieces move across a 52-foot track system that is also the ribs of the theater's dome. The skeletal structure is hidden beneath an elaborate exterior.

Dome 80 feet in diameter

Movable pulleys and winches

Chandelier

At the climax

- The chandelier appears to be in a free fall as it travels 45 feet in three seconds.
- The chandelier appears to crash into the audience (aided by a blackout).
- After the crash, it "disappears" because it is pulled up into the dome, hidden from view.

267 candles that rise up from the floor to form the Phantom's lair

250 automated effects

\$4.5-\$5 million cost of the chandelier

29,444 individual crystals in the chandelier

45 engineers, programmers and fabricators created the chandelier

16 feet

Sources: Scott Fisher of Fisher Technical Services Inc.; Kirvyn Doak Communications; The Rockwell Group

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