

## CALENDAR

Monday, June 26, 2006



Photographs by LAWRENCE K. HO, Los Angeles Times

**BEAUTY-AND-BEAST STORY:** At the Venetian, Sierra Boggess is winsome of voice and manner as Christine opposite Brent Barrett as the Phantom.

## THEATER REVIEW

# Heavy on the light

A gaudy, shorter 'Phantom' comes to Vegas, and the eye is drawn to a chandelier.

By CHARLES MCNULTY  
Times Staff Writer

**W**HENEVER the real star of "Phantom — The Las Vegas Spectacular" makes an entrance, it's an automatic showstopper.

Who could compete with that old-school glamour, glittering flamboyance and, yes, high-flying sophistication? Of course, the diva I'm referring to is none other than the chandelier — and pity those who challenge its top billing.

Harold Prince's deluxe reduction of Andrew Lloyd Webber's commercial masterpiece, which had its Vegas premiere Saturday, reunites the original creative team — a no-brainer, since their show is the longest running in Broadway history.

This much-anticipated opening inaugurated the Venetian Resort Hotel Casino's \$40-million Phantom Theatre, which was expressly built for the production.

The venue is meant to invoke Paris' legendary Opera Garnier. To that end, the walls have been



**REVELRY:** The lavish production's cast in "Phantom's" raucous masquerade scene.

covered in charcoal-colored dust covers (nothing like them, apparently, for that "Old Europe" feel), though you'd have to be pretty leached on free cocktails to think you've stumbled into France.

Still, it's a marvelous addition to the left houses multiplying like wild cactuses on the Vegas Strip. The acoustics are superb, the seats

are comfortable, and the aerial space is large enough for a "Miss Saigon" helicopter to hover in — not that another super-sized musical spectacle is likely to replace the masked juggernaut any time soon.

This latest "Phantom" may not be definitive by any measure, but the production fills the bill well enough to ensure that it will lucratively haunt its spacious new home long into its mortgaged future.

In Vegas, size definitely matters. The gasps of approval at a 15-foot-tall, 16-foot-wide chandelier are par for the course in a city whose unofficial motto is "The bigger, the better."

Though there are plenty of special effects on hand, including a mini-fireworks display when the Phantom's evil high links reach their crescendo, nothing compares to that initial launching of the crystal colossus.

Heightening an effect that can be described only as Spielbergian — a close encounter of the rocco kind — is the terror of an audience not fully certain those pulleys are going to hold the 1-ton weight dangling above them. It's at moments like these that a new hybrid of entertainment

[See "Phantom," Page E5]

# Show is both pared down and juiced up

['Phantom,' from Page E1] seems to have been spawned out in the frolicsome desert, a combination that's one part Broadway, one part amusement park, one part circus extravaganza.

Worldwide, "Phantom" has been seen by 100 million ticket-buyers and counting — a figure more in keeping with hamburger chains than musicals. Vegas was inevitable and already seems like home to this pared-down, juiced-up version.

Condensed to 95 intermission-less minutes, the new production skims through a book that many felt could use a little skimming. But opera, even of the pop Lloyd Webber variety, needs time, and the shorter version leaves too many plot points fuzzy.

The Phantom, the deformed protagonist with strong musical likes and no tolerance for disobedience, seems more mysteriously elusive than before. For example, his coaching of Christine, the Opéra Populaire chorus girl he's been grooming into a star, is only hastily sketched.

We're never clear on the depth of her attachment to him. To follow the hairpin turns in their not entirely one-sided relationship seems to depend on the audience's previous knowledge of the musical.

Yet these problems are far from crippling. The basic outline of the love triangle with Raoul, the handsome noble who is the Phantom's chief rival for Christine's affections, is all that's needed to enjoy such lush romantic ballads as "Think of Me" and "Wishing You Were Somewhere Here Again."

Say what you will about Lloyd Webber as a composer; the music has a Puccini-esque accessibility that can rescue even the most turgid of Charles Hart's lyrics. And "All I Ask of You," one of the loveliest songs Lloyd Webber has ever written and the emotional glue of the show, still has the power to move hearts of stone — one reason men who don't like musicals tend to like "Phantom."

It's a testament to the work's



Photographs by LAWRENCE K. HO, Los Angeles Times

**SHARING:** Barrett and Boggess alternate with other performers because of the demands of the show's performance schedule.

strength that its underlying sentiment isn't completely lost in the pyrotechnics, much of which seems like a decorative afterthought. This Phantom may literally hang from the chandelier, as though he has wandered in from "Zumanity," "Mystère," or one of Cirque du Soleil's other acrobatic carnivals, but what keeps us engaged is the dark fairy-tale currents in this beauty-and-the-beast retread of Gaston Leroux's frequently adapted 1910 novel.

And what a beauty Prince has found in Sierra Boggess, a singer with a soprano as winsome as her manner. When Boggess launches into song, the beautiful simplicity of musical theater momentarily cracks through the production's gaudy shell.

If her beast (Brent Barrett) played Phantom in the reviewed performance) didn't have the burden of Michael Crawford's Tony-winning precedent, he may have come off better.

Barrett's voice is rich, but his acting lacks the necessary gravitas of a character who has long been prisoner of his own scarred freakishness.

Because of the demands of a 10-performance-a-week run, Boggess and Barrett alternate with Elizabeth Loyacano and Anthony Crivello. Carlotta, the temperamental opera star Christine comes to replace, is also a shared part, which Elena Jeanne Batman delivers in broad strokes.

Tim Martin Gleason is the sole Raoul — and a fine one at that. Though his handsome tenor can occasionally grow thin, he possesses just the right dapper confidence for a fantasy figure meant to leave the fair sex aflutter.

The rest of the production has an expensive-looking competence. Basically, it's a solidly cast road show, with lavish sets and costumes that play up that "Phantom," in addition to being



**DIVA:** Elena Jeanne Batman as a temperamental opera star.

## 'Phantom — The Las Vegas Spectacular'

**Where:** Venetian Resort Hotel Casino, 3355 Las Vegas Blvd. South, Las Vegas

**When:** 7 p.m. Sundays and Thursdays, 7 and 10 p.m. Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays

**Ends:** Open run

**Price:** Starts at \$75

**Contact:** (866) 641-7469, (702) 414-7469 or [www.phantomlasvegas.com](http://www.phantomlasvegas.com)

**Running time:** 1 hour, 35 minutes

a romantic melodrama, is a feverish love letter to the stage.

This especially comes out in the opera bits (the show-within-the-show numbers that are presented in the brightest of colors); the raucous masquerade scene, in which everyone gets to revel briefly in the freedom of disguise; and the loving detail with which a famous old theater is explored from top to bottom.

It's a shame, however, that all the resources at Prince's disposal seemed to have gone into the design of the production. Given that so many of us have already experienced a "Phantom" at least as good as the one in Vegas, some fresh perspective on the drama would have been welcome — or at the very least more clarity.

But not for nothing is the show called "The Las Vegas Spectacular." This isn't just a marketing ploy — it's an aesthetic for those whose art is the business of producing hits.