

AROUND TOWN

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The 'Phantom' never dies

Andrew Lloyd Webber's blockbuster paean to romantic love and obsessive stalkers *The Phantom of the Opera* is back in Taipei for a two-week run at Taipei Arena, beginning tonight.

While Lloyd Webber and his production crew are busy preparing to launch a long-anticipated sequel to the 23-year-old mega-musical, titled *Love Never Dies*, the *Phantom* continues to draw big audiences around the world, with productions currently on stage in New York, London, Buenos Aires, Budapest, Copenhagen, Warsaw and the Venetian Resort in Las Vegas, as well as a national touring show in the US. The *Phantom* is the most financially successful musical of all time, and has outperformed cinematic blockbusters such as *Titanic*.

This is not the first time Taipei has played host to the *Phantom*. A production by The Really Useful Company Asia Pacific, featuring American Brad Little in the title role, sold out a record 63 performances at the National Theater in 2006.

Little, who has played the role more than 2,000 times since 1997, is back for the Arena run, and the two-hour make-up process that each show entails.

For those who may have been desert island castaways for the past two decades, here's a brief synopsis of the musical's plot, which was based upon Gaston Leroux's novel *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*.

A mysterious and masked "Angel of Music" who haunts the lower depths of the opera house befriends Christine, a young singer in the chorus of the Paris Opera. He offers to help her by coaching her in singing but later shocks her by telling her that he is in love with her. He also tries to boost her career by demanding that she be given the lead in a new opera, *Il Muto*. The opera house managers refuse his demand, giving the lead to their prima donna Carlotta and giving Christine the second lead. However, disaster strikes on the opening night of the new production when a stagehand is killed, Carlotta loses her voice and the massive opera house chandelier comes crashing down (it's quite a crash — the "traveling" chandelier is 3m wide and weighs one tonne).

The action advances six months; Christine has become secretly engaged to a young nobleman, Raoul. The Phantom once again demands a new opera, *Don Juan Triumphant*, be staged. This time the authorities decide to use Christine as bait to trap the opera house's mystery man. As the opera comes to its end, the Phantom takes the place of the lead

singer and confronts Christine on stage. He escapes with her to his lair, where he demands that Christine stay with him or he will kill Raoul, who has followed them down into the depths of the building. Instead, she kisses him and the Phantom allows them both to leave while he waits for the mob that has been hunting him. While it appears that time has run out for the elusive Phantom, he has one more trick up his sleeve.

Lloyd Webber has been dropping hints about a sequel for years and last December he said plans were underway to bring the new production to the stage later this year in three cities including London and Shanghai.

The launch has now been pushed back to next spring in London and it looks like the plot has been inspired by Frederick Forsyth's 1997 book, *The Phantom of Manhattan*, and involves a mysterious maestro who runs a theater on Coney Island. He invites Christine to give a concert and she arrives in New York with her husband Raoul and their son.

If the sequel does make it to the stage, it will have a lot to live up to. The *Phantom* turned its original Christine — Lloyd Webber's then-wife Sarah Brightman — into a star and it has racked up a record number of awards over the years, including three Olivier Awards (London stage) and seven Tony Awards (New York City stage).

Each performance of this mega-musical sets its own records, with 230 costumes, 22 scene changes, 281 candles and 250kg of dry ice. Taipei is simply another cog in the machine that is *The Music of the Night*.

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: The Phantom of the Opera

WHEN: Tonight through July 26, except for Mondays. Evening performances at 7:30pm, Saturday and Sunday matinees at 2:30pm, except for the last day when performances are at noon and 5pm

WHERE: Taipei Arena (台北小巨蛋), 2, Nanjing E Rd Sec 4, Taipei City (台北市南京東路四段2號)

ADMISSION: Tickets range from NT\$800 to NT\$6,600; available by calling (07) 740-3466, online at www.kham.com.tw or through 7-Eleven ibon kiosks

ON THE NET: www.phantomtaiwan.com.tw

The world's most successful musical returns for a 10-day run at Taipei Arena

BY DIANE BAKER
STAFF REPORTER



Australian Ana Marina sings the lead role of Christine in *The Phantom of the Opera*. PHOTOS COURTESY OF KHAM



Taiwan's premier dance company goes outdoors

Expect a massive crowd tomorrow for Cloud Gate's annual free summer performance at the National Taiwan Democracy Memorial Hall plaza

BY DIANE BAKER
STAFF REPORTER

There may be a hint of thunderstorms in the weather forecast for this weekend, but that is unlikely to deter Cloud Gate Dance Theatre (雲門舞集) fans from taking advantage of the annual free performance by the company as part of the Cathay Life Arts Festival at the National Taiwan Democracy Memorial Hall plaza tomorrow night.

This year the company will be presenting a mixed bill of four excerpts from longer works, mostly solos, and two short pieces by founder and artistic director Lin Hwai-min (林懷民). The

show begins at 7:30pm but experienced hands know to bring a cushion, drinks and perhaps a picnic dinner, and get there early to ensure a good space on the tiles.

The evening begins with *Adagietto*, created in 1984 and set to Movement 4 of Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 5.

This will be followed by a solo for one of the company's prima dancers, Chou Chang-ning (周章愷), from *Cursive* (2001) and a pas de quatre from *Wild Cursive* (2005), which will also serve as a reminder to dance lovers that the company will be staging a *Cursive* festival in the National Theater in September, performing all three



Whisper of Flowers is set to Yo-yo Ma's recording of Bach's *Six Suites for Solo Cello*. PHOTO COURTESY OF LIU CHEN-HSIANG

works in the trilogy inspired by Chinese calligraphy between Sept. 2 and Sept. 20. It will be the first time that all three — the middle one is *Cursive II* — will be performed together.

Next on tomorrow's program will be a solo by Huang Pei-hua (黃佩華) from *Moon Water* (1998), which is one of the troupe's signature pieces. Then Dung Shu-fen (董淑芬) will dance the exquisite *Requiem*, which Lin created for the late Cloud Gate 2 director Lo Man-fei (羅曼菲) in 1989.

Requiem was conceived in response to the Tiananmen Square Massacre and is a study in anguish as the dancer literally spins for the

entire 10-minute work, only once showing her face to the audience. Cloud Gate is dedicating this weekend's performance of *Requiem* as a memorial to 10th anniversary of the 921 Earthquake.

After an intermission, the company returns to perform the first half of Lin's newest masterpiece, *Whisper of Flowers*, which premiered last September. Set to Yo-yo Ma's (馬友友) recording of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Six Suites for Solo Cello*, the work is a celebration of youth and of spring, danced amid thousands and thousands of pink petals. It should send audience members home with a spring in their step.