

## For Carroll production, a memorable opening - After averting disaster when key player threatened to keep 'Phantom' offstage, high school theater students were determined to shine

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Last of two parts

It's not a bruised ego that threatens Southlake Carroll High School's first performance of The Phantom of the Opera.

It's a computer glitch.

A 500-pound, glittering chandelier is supposed to make the first big entrance, launching dramatically from the stage on suspended cables in the opening scene of the play.

Now, it is stuck on the stage that was to have delivered the country's first high school production of the Broadway play.

For months, students, parents and teachers worked round-the-clock to bring the daunting musical to this moment: opening night.

The production is an experiment for the play's New York City licensing company to determine if the rights should be released to the amateur market.

Officials with R&H Theatricals said they don't expect perfection from these performances - no one would learn anything.

Carroll is one of only four high schools and two colleges in the country chosen to stage Phantom.

And it produced the play in only three months, making it the first high school to stage the rock opera.

Now time is ticking away and a sold-out audience is waiting.

"Well, isn't this an exciting twist?" winks student Christian Genco, 16.

He is the auctioneer, the voice that is supposed to start the play. It is the former child actor's return to the stage after a long hiatus.

Now, he may not get the chance.

Overwhelming nausea has already subsided. So he's doing what he usually does in tense times: He hops around, trying to be positive, lightening the mood.

The other students have come to depend on him for this during the grueling months of preparation.

There is much to lighten.

Frantic co-director Roald Martinsen is on the cellphone with the company that helped the school suspend the behemoth light. It returned to the stage from its lofty perch earlier in the evening with no problems.

Something's gone haywire with the computer that controls the hulking prop - a show-stopping necessity.

It won't move an inch.

Life imitates art

Co-director Stacie Martinsen, who was intent on making final tweaks with the entire cast onstage until 25 minutes before show time, now huddles in a darkened corner offstage.

She is crying, trying to decide if she should cancel.

Giving up does not come easy in Carroll ISD.

Nestled in a community known for high expectations and competitive spirit, the school's actors are in the spotlight in more ways than one.

Phantom is, by definition, overwhelming.

Perfecting the accents, dialogue, acting, music, sets and props took all of the performers to the brink.

And now, the audience waits.

Mrs. Martinsen stalls, sending several cast members out to perform a few songs to entertain everyone while they try to fix the play's most infuriating prop.

The students, in full dress, creep hesitantly from behind the curtain. A few glare at the covered, immobile chandelier.

The irony is not lost on high school senior Robert Hudson. It's a case of life imitating art.

He plays one of the harried owners of an opera house haunted by the Phantom, who causes one calamity after another to keep the cast on edge.

"That may have been the best we've ever sung that scene," he mumbles as he departs the stage.

Another musical number is rushed out.

It's decided.

If they reach the end of the song and the chandelier is not working, they'll cancel opening night.

Backstage, students console one another.

A few draw ragged breaths. They smile weakly. Tears streak heavy stage makeup.

Principal Daniel Presley consults with a panicked passel of theater parents about when the school is available for a rescheduled performance.

Two minutes before they pull the plug, salvation comes.

The packed auditorium won't have to depart, disgruntled, into the drizzling night.

The chandelier is working.

Shoes scurry. Chorus girls squeak. And Christian Genco turns serious.

Dramatic beginning

The house lights dim at 8:43 p.m. to thunderous applause.

Mrs. Martinsen takes her seat in the audience, for the first time turning over full control to her students.

Christian's voice starts the bidding as the auctioneer on stage.

"Sold!" he barks confidently.

He continues flawlessly through his scene until the time comes to show the "buyers" the chandelier.

To spooky, pulsing organ music, the chandelier slowly ascends up the wires.

The spotlight hits and shoots sparkling beads of light.

It continues to lurch upward in small, shuddering movements, swaying menacingly above the crowd with each jerk.

Audience members crane their necks, cringing as it creeps upward, its glass beads tinkling menacingly.

They shudder as it hovers just over their heads. It finally comes to a less-than-confident halt, never reaching its peak height - just to be on the safe side.

Because of its troublesome past, they opt not to send it falling back to the stage at the climax of Act 1 as planned.

They'll save that for another night during the play's six-performance run.

A show to remember

It took hundreds of hours, thousands of dollars in fundraising and countless nights of lost sleep to get here. But there is only one opening night. For that, the theater troupe is grateful.

Despite the technical challenges, the actors seem to find the joy of the theater while onstage.

Throughout the first act, their faces beam as they sing, strut and emote with newfound vigor.

Their voices fill every corner of the auditorium.

"Everything just stepped up a notch," Christian declares breathlessly, as he rushes offstage at intermission. "It was great."

Sophomore P.J. Sook emerges as an anchor to his fellow actors onstage. Mrs. Martinsen credits him with several important saves and improvisations.

"Hey, the worst happened and we still went on," P.J. shrugs as he prepares for the second act.

As Raoul, P.J. steadily morphs into his character: a positive-thinking straight arrow who steadfastly refuses to let the Phantom, or anyone else, destroy his happiness.

P.J.'s mother, Sandy, can't quite believe his evolution, the maturity from her son in front of her onstage.

"I can't believe that's my baby," she says later, shaking her head.

Marie, a teen with a pristine voice who struggled for emotion in her acting, finally inhabits the conflicted lead character, Christine.

After a haunting solo, the crowd spontaneously roars. The applause cascades over the girl and she allows a tiny smile to creep at the corner of her lips.

The second act, which the cast has never fully rehearsed onstage, includes the rousing success of the "Masquerade" scene. The ballet lifts added by choreographer Jeremy Dumont, a 21-year-old Carroll graduate, are crowd-pleasers.

Mrs. Martinsen finds herself again weeping.

Improvisation

There are a few other mishaps. The Phantom's boat halts. A candelabra crashes. A few costumes gape.

Any time something happens onstage, the actors don't freeze. They improvise.

There is not a sound in the auditorium as the three lead characters square off dramatically in a final scene. They burn with anger and desperation.

The crowd rises to its feet before the red curtain drops.

"Only a few things went horribly, awfully wrong," one actor groans.

"I can't believe we pulled it off!"

"Oh my God, I've never been happier in my life!"

Christian flits from one new friend to another.

Unknown to this theater crew three months ago, he is now an unofficial leader of the group.

"You did a good job!" he tells all those he embraces.

Christian is energized by his first play in more than five years. It was Phantom that brought him back, that made him realize he had left behind a part of himself he wanted to keep. His plans to become a doctor are unshaken, but Christian says theater and acting have returned to his life for good.

"It was exhilarating," he shouts, wiping sweat from his face, grinning. "It's a high. There's nothing like it."

Christian and the other actors head off into the wet night, to the red and black booths at a nearby Steak-n-Shake. Mrs. Martinsen muses about the experience.

All of her speeches about singing and diction, the endless repetition of scenes, the attention to blocking, the obsession over prop placement and set tapestries paid off.

But, in the end, she could never completely prepare them.

"It all comes down to thinking on their toes," she nods, smiling knowingly. "That's theater."

KEY PLAYERS

Christian Genco: A former children's theater actor making his return to the stage, he is enrolled in Carroll's medical academy, with plans to be a doctor. Christian plays multiple roles, including the opening voice.

Marie Sanders: The choir standout is acting in her first Carroll play as the female lead, Christine, the Phantom's obsession and muse. Marie plans to major in vocal music performance in college.

P.J. Sook: P.J. performed his first Carroll Theater role in the fifth grade in Les Miserables. In Phantom, he plays one of the lead male roles, Raoul. He is also a center on Carroll High School's junior varsity football team.

Preston Lee: In his third year in the Carroll Theater Department, his vocal range allows for the Phantom's soaring solos. Preston auditioned for and won a spot in a masters class at Casa Mañana Theater in Fort Worth with Tony-award winning actress/singer Betty Buckley.

Stacie Martinsen: As co-director of the Carroll Theater Department, she directs the overall musical; her husband, co-director Roald Martinsen, handles the stage logistics and set design. Mrs. Martinsen has performed in film, television and stage. She sought letters of recommendation and other testimonials on the school's behalf to land one of the Phantom pilot projects.

- Caption: PHOTO(S): (Photos by NATHAN HUNSINGER/Staff Photographer)1. As the Phantom, Preston Lee hovers over Christine, the Phantom's muse and love interest, played by Marie Sanders.2. The elaborate costumes and scenes and hours of rehearsing almost didn't make it to the stage on opening night, after the huge chandelier that takes on life refused to budge from the stage.3. From left: Pim van Amerongen, Katie Hamilton and Christian Genco perform on opening night.4. After the initial fiasco with the chandelier was resolved, the cast was ready to make opening night memorable with dazzling performances by all, including the ballerinas. CHART(S): KEY PLAYERS

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