

Staging a legend - From auditions to opening night, Southlake Carroll finds producing 'The Phantom of the Opera' an epic task

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First of two parts

His footsteps echo on the empty stage.

The sound isn't as unsettling as it was long ago.

Sixteen-year-old Christian Genco has been onstage before.

But in this dark, cool auditorium, no one knows that. No one knows him.

He is a wild card, auditioning for the nation's first high school production of the daunting The Phantom of the Opera.

Southlake Carroll High School is home to a powerhouse football team in one of the state's few academically "exemplary" school districts.

Expectations are high in all areas, and theater is no exception.

In many ways, it is not a surprise that director Stacie Martinsen would try to stage a play as elaborate and demanding as Phantom with high school students.

Only four high schools and two colleges around the country were given the rights to try the rock opera, with only the play, the lyrics and Broadway itself as a guide.

But Southlake's opening night curtain would rise before the other high schools', Mrs. Martinsen decided, in three months.

During that time, her cast and crew would take a frenetic journey through dozens of rehearsal hours, fundraisers to help raise more than \$75,000 for the lavish play and finally a pivotal evening that teaches them all the true meaning of "the show must go on."

But now, in this early audition, Mrs. Martinsen has already sketched some of the cast in her mind.

The lanky Preston Lee can act and sing tenor and bass, a tricky combination required to pull off the Phantom's sweeping solos.

All-state choir member Marie Sanders - pitch-perfect virtually every time she opens her mouth - is a good fit for the lead of Christine, the Phantom's muse.

But whom will Christian play? Mrs. Martinsen wonders.

He has the inflection and poise seen in veteran theater actors, but he's never been in a single Carroll play or drama class.

He further stokes curiosity when he fills in his audition sheet as "Eric," the Phantom's real name. He has obviously read the novel on which the play was based.

Mrs. Martinsen doesn't know he is a former children's theater performer who did professional voice-overs and performed magic.

Or that he retired at age 11, matter-of-factly telling his mother he wasn't interested in film auditions.

Just two days ago, Christian found out about the Phantom auditions and took a shot at the two male lead roles. He has long loved the gothic drama for its pulsing music, sweeping lyrics and breathless dialogue. Christian had not planned to return to the stage, but a chance at Phantom was worth a change in course.

He's already memorized every line.

It is the voice of a man, not a boy that soars out over the school auditorium.

Not the lead, but a leader

Mrs. Martinsen decides to cast Christian in several roles, including the auctioneer who opens the play.

None are lead roles, but Christian, a formerly home-schooled Colleyville student who attends Carroll's medical academy, becomes a leader in the group.

He commands the stage in the chorus scenes and proves such a valuable asset in rehearsal and backstage that the director keeps giving him more to do.

"I wish I had 60 more just like him," Mrs. Martinsen says after a rehearsal.

Christian was an early talent. By age 8, he was a children's theater veteran beginning to make the crossover into commercials and films. His Dallas agent was working with casting directors and his parents say he seemed on the cusp of a career.

Christian says his abrupt decision to turn away from acting was not a rejection of the craft, but of the entertainment industry's star-making machine. Computers and other interests shifted his attentions.

But now, the thrill and adrenaline is powerful and it feels better than he expected.

"I missed it. I really did," Christian says. "I didn't realize how much until now."

Through months of arduous rehearsals - from the choir room risers, to the band hall floor, to the stage - Christian takes it all in, always watching intently when he's not performing. Prodding, nudging, encouraging the others.

When he arrives for practices, he removes his serious brown glasses.

It isn't something he thinks about, but when rehearsals are over, he puts them back on, slings a weathered khaki messenger bag over his shoulder and he is transformed.

Once again, he is a high school junior who skipped a grade, juggles five Advanced Placement classes and is widely considered a computer whiz with plans to be a doctor.

Director at the helm

Mrs. Martinsen lives and breathes theater.

She and her husband, Roald, co-direct the school's theater department. He supervises the set-building and stage logistics.

They met while performing in a Batman play at Six Flags Over Texas. She was Catwoman; he was The Penguin.

Mrs. Martinsen has appeared on television, in film and on stage in Dallas and Los Angeles.

Her own acting background is brought to bear many days as she sometimes pushes the teenagers like professionals rather than high school acting students.

"Verbs are action words," she reminds as they sing. "That's where your passion comes out."

During intense acting rehearsals, she presses for bigger, grander gestures.

Tighter, more succinct diction. More emotion, more heart, more intensity.

"That's it, bring it!" she shouts at a mid-November rehearsal.

Mrs. Martinsen knows the subject matter is dark.

Jealousy, longing, rage, scorn, menace, even murder, are sometimes tough to get across to teenagers.

She struggles with Marie, the talented young singer playing her lead. Marie has never acted before.

Phantom is her opportunity to try her voice in musical theater.

She'll have to learn to act as she goes, because there's no time to stop and teach her, Mrs. Martinsen decides. So she spends time with her during each rehearsal.

"It's got to be more desperate, Marie," Mrs. Martinsen tells her, halting an emotional scene.

Mrs. Martinsen steers Marie away from the group, her hand on the actress's arm, talking softly but firmly.

"Let your guard down. You have to open yourself up," Mrs. Martinsen tells her. The teen nods quietly, her brow furrowing in quiet frustration.

Marie's mother, Robbi Sanders, worries about the pressure her daughter is putting on herself to deliver.

"She so much wants to do this well," she sighs. "The only disappointment I'll feel, as a mother, is if, at the end of this, she's disappointed in herself."

Part of the difficulty for Marie is that she is surrounded by engaging, experienced actors, many of whom have worked together for years. Her fledgling acting skills evolve day by day.

For Christian, it all comes easier.

He pantomimes and mouths the words behind the scenes with the intense physicality the director is trying to pull from Marie.

Even the veterans are struggling with the combination of opera music and emotional performance.

Preston, who plays the Phantom, is becoming aware that the tone of the play, the major scenes, rest on him.

A few days before the play's Nov. 30 debut, he stays behind after rehearsal. By a lone side stage light, he sings his part over and over with voice teacher Lou Ann Fisher and accompanist Maryanne Lange Visconti.

He's exhausted by the effort and only wants to retreat from Phantom to video games and popcorn.

Opening night

Mrs. Martinsen gathers the entire cast and crew onstage for final fixes. The cast practices bows as the clock ticks past 7 p.m. The play is supposed to debut at 7:30.

She finally dismisses the cast and the flurry begins.

Bodies scatter in a thundering herd toward the dressing room as the crew sets the stage.

Preston skids down the hallway and drops into the makeup artist's chair.

"Hurry, hurry, let's go!" he gestures wildly. His complex makeup and slicked-back hair take an hour to complete. It's 7:05.

Shaking hands fumble with buttons, tug uncooperative wigs and lace corsets.

"Ya'll, it's 7:15. We'll never make it!"

Panicked voices call out for misplaced shoes. Actors careen down the darkened backstage hallway, making one last trip to the bathroom.

Suddenly, the crescendo of activity grinds to a halt when they make a chilling discovery.

One of the play's pivotal stars refuses to go on.

Coming Monday: A last-minute crisis descends as an expectant audience waits.

ADDING IT UP

-Phantom's run on Broadway: 20 years

-Number of schools nationwide given the rights to perform it: 6

-Number of cast, crew, orchestra and chorale members in the Carroll production: 152

-Number of rehearsal hours for cast, crew and orchestra: More than 155

-Average number of costume changes: 6

-Estimated budget to stage the play: More than \$75,000

-Ticket sales revenue: Nearly \$90,000

SOURCES: Carroll Theater Department; Carroll Theater Boosters

PUTTING ON 'PHANTOM'

Southlake Carroll High School's final performance of The Phantom of the Opera is this afternoon, the last of six sold-out shows that began Nov. 30. This two-part series chronicles the making of the play, from auditions in September through opening night. The story is based on dozens of interviews with cast members, co-directors and parents.

• Caption: PHOTO(S): 1-5. (Photos by NATHAN HUNSINGER/Staff Photographer)1. Ballerinas secure their hair during dress rehearsals as the Southlake Carroll High School theater department prepares to be the first high school group to stage The Phantom of the Opera. The performances end today.2. With three days until the curtain rises, Christian Genco, who plays multiple parts, is ready to shine.3. P.J. Sook walks onto the stage and into his part as one of the two male leads, Raoul, the Phantom's nemesis and Christine's love, during dress rehearsals.4. Right: A ballerina takes a spill while rehearsing in an ornate mask. The rock opera is a challenging production, but the Carroll Senior High performers are stepping up to the task.5. Above: Mary Caroline McIngram helps Christian Genco with his wig. With the elaborate costumes and sets in Phantom, the Carroll theater department had to help raise more than \$75,000. CHART(S): 1. ADDING IT UP2. PUTTING ON 'PHANTOM'

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