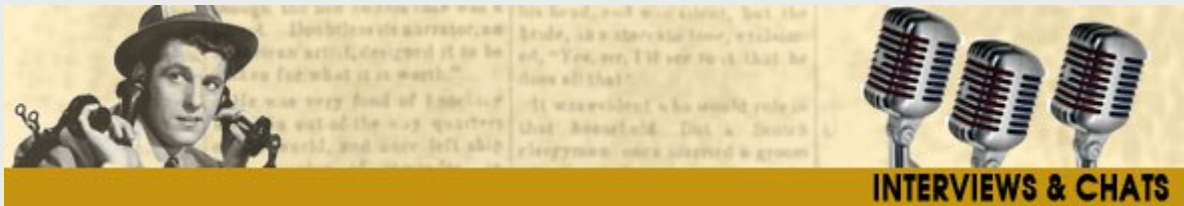


PHANTOM OF THE OPERA Cast Talks Challenges, Rituals, and Cake!



[Header image by Matthew Murphy, all other photos taken by me]

Phantom of the Opera is Broadway's longest running play at over 12,000 performances as of November 2016. Created by Andrew Lloyd Weber, it's arguably the best musical (okay, I'm biased because it's my favorite!), and is just one of the countless adaptations of the 1910 Gaston Leroux novel of the same name (translated). The story has taken many forms, including several movies like the 2004 film based on Lloyd Weber's play and starring Gerard Butler and Emmy Rossum.

Though the book itself is a horror novel, some adaptations have taken a more romantic twist, and others have turned the tale into a comedy. The current musical leans heavily on the romantic notions, but still incorporates many elements of horror into the story.

The show is about a disfigured man who lives under the Paris Opera House. Shrouded in shadow and feared by the residence, the Phantom forms a deep love for Christine, whom he's secretly trained since she was a young girl. When her childhood friend, Raoul, steps back in the picture, jealousy and tempers flare, culminating in a dark, emotional finale.

https://youtu.be/rHDO_3CufQ0

I had the wonderful opportunity to talk with two of the touring production's current stars: Derrick Davis, who plays the iconic Phantom, and Katie Travis, who plays his obsession/love interest Christine Daaé. While at the Music Hall, I also got the chance to see some of the fabulous costumes up close, including the Phantom's beloved cape, as well as the breathtaking chandelier featured in the show. I also spoke with Mitch Hodges, the stage manager for the production, about his role.



Mitch basically does it all!

Hodges got his start as a production assistant and worked on the original version of *Phantom* on an earlier tour. According to Hodges, he got started through a friend of a friend of a friend. He became stage manager of the new tour about six months ago, so with some experience behind him, I was curious what his favorite part of his job is.

“Working with these fantastic folks,” he said. Of course, he motioned to the wonderful Derrick Davis and Katie Travis to emphasize whom he was talking about. He added, “I like traveling a lot. Getting to be in every city is awesome.” It sounds about perfect to me, as well! Hodges was super nice and very accommodating. He even let one of the other press members wear the Phantom’s cape (color me jealous!!)

The stage manager is in charge of coordinating basically every aspect of the production, including the rehearsals, actors, props, and costumes, so he was a busy guy. While he bustled back and forth between the front of house with us and the stage, I got to spend some time with Davis and Travis, as well.



Davis (left) and Travis (right) are both fantastic!

Katie Travis has been a fan of *Phantom* since she was a girl and has been in the production for over two years now. When asked what her favorite role she's played is, she noted, "In college, I played Rosabella in *The Most Happy Fella*, and I loved doing that, but actually, to be honest, Christine, for sure!" She is extremely sweet and has a lovely voice, even just in conversation. I saw her portray Christine in Omaha, NE last year, so I know her singing is just as beautiful.

She gets herself ready for each performance with an extensive routine including meditation, vocal warmups, physical warmups, and makeup. Music and a coffee (or two!) are also involved, and "about a half an hour till [the show], someone comes and does my wig. Then at 5 till, my dresser, Erin [Haney], helps me get my costume on, and then we go do the show."



The red and green dress on the left is Christine's *Hannibal* dress.

Something that not many people usually think or ask about is the challenge that comes specifically from doing an enduring show. “Before I did this long running show that is so vocally demanding, I didn’t really know [the long-term challenges]. When you see someone on a Tuesday night, they’re also a human, and that’s where they’re at on a Tuesday. They may have gone through a breakup, and they may have been getting over a cold, and so your job is to try to calm whatever that is down, whatever you’re going through in your life. I think there is a spiritual grounding component of this, whatever your spirituality is, to keep yourself together even when you’re going through whatever it is that you’re going through in your day.”

Adding to that, Travis also mentioned that “you can’t really coast. You have to really be present, so it’s a challenge to kind of keep yourself there, but it’s a beautiful challenge because you have to force yourself to work through whatever it is you’re dealing with in your life to do your job the best.”

After Travis flitted away to go begin her performance routine for the 2:00pm show, I got some 1-on-1 time with Derrick Davis. He’s a newcomer to the cast, having just done his first performance in October of last year, replacing *The Voice’s* Chris Mann. He’s been Mufasa and Scar in the *The Lion King* and played Curtis Taylor Jr. in *Dreamgirls*. Now he stars at the Phantom himself.

There have been many Phantoms, so I'm always curious who a person's favorite is. "Davis Gaines would probably have to be the one," he told me. "He was the first one that I saw, and you kind of get a connection with the first one that you see. Everyone has been different, everyone has been amazing in their own right, but he was my first." I completely understand the sentiment. I was introduced to *Phantom* via the 2004 movie, so Gerard Butler has always been my standard by which I compare other Phantoms.

Because he's worked on other touring shows, I was also wondering what the most surprisingly challenging thing about *Phantom* has been for him. It was fun listening to his answers to questions. His voice, like Travis's, is wonderful to listen to, and he speaks so sweetly. "The most surprisingly challenging thing is the stamina that you need to get through the show and to get through the work week," he answered in response to my question. "It's a very emotional show, and in order to be that emotional, I just hold that emotion in my entire body, so there's a lot of tension that's held in my muscles. It gets exhausting."



It's difficult being so sparkly all the time, and those beads really do glisten under stage lighting!

The show is definitely an emotional one from the audience perspective, too, so I can only imagine what it would be like playing such a trying character. There's more to the role than just the popularity and emotion of the Phantom, though, which adds to some of the pressure on Davis. He

is only the third African-American to play the role, and he's the first to take the Phantom on a national tour. Robert Guillaume was the first African-American to take the lead role in the Los Angeles production, and Norm Lewis was the first to do so on Broadway.

Following in their footsteps, and still paving the way for future performers to break boundaries, Davis mentioned that "the role itself puts pressure because you don't want to mess up such an iconic role. But I feel like the country, the world, the theater world is watching, and I don't want to make a bad name for people of color or for people to be non-traditionally cast in a role. We've made great strides in the past few years, and I'd love for it to continue to move in that direction."

Down to my last minute to talk with Davis before he had to go back to prepare for his upcoming performance, I wanted to ask one last, very important question. I had read in a previous interview that he is a self-proclaimed cakeaholic, with carrot cake being his favorite. I wanted to know, though, if there was any cake that he actually didn't like. The question garnered a hearty laugh and led to a quick discussion on the fact that he gets so much cake from fans now that he's afraid he won't be able to fit into his costume. His answer, by the way, is dry cake. He hasn't found a flavor he doesn't like, and he may be persuaded to try a cake that is purposefully on the drier side, but a slice that is not supposed to be dry is not fun. "Let them eat cake!" he said, gleefully, before graciously taking one last picture with me and saying goodbye to our group.

After all of the interviews were wrapped up, I got to go into the theater for a view of the legendary chandelier, which is featured in one of my favorite parts of the show. Though it was lowered so it could be worked on, we weren't allowed to get close as they were loading some pyrotechnics into it. The whole thing weighs over a ton and travels in one giant piece, always put together. The design is beautiful, and the sheer size of it is breathtaking.



This chandelier is amazing!!

The Phantom of the Opera is currently in Kansas City through February 19th. It's performing at the Music Hall, and if you're in the area I highly recommend seeing this darker, fantastic production while it's here! You can get tickets and more information through [Theater League](#).

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