

**Mindblowing Medical Breakthroughs**

**Home Insurance**

**Are You  
Really  
Covered?**

**The VERY  
private world  
of Shania  
Twain**



# Reader's Digest

**The New Way To  
Lose  
Weight**


**7 Self-Tests**

**Eat Foods You Love  
When Carbs Work**

JANUARY  
2005 \$2.99  
rd.com







The Phantom of the Opera (Gerard Butler) ferries Christine (Emmy Rossum) to his underground lair.

# Phantom of the Multiplex

What it took to bring  
the blockbuster  
Broadway musical to  
a theater near you

BY KENNETH MILLER

HOW DO YOU MAKE a movie version of the biggest stage musical of all time? Very, very carefully.

Which is why, on a Friday afternoon in June, the film *Andrew Lloyd Webber's The Phantom of the Opera* (that's right—the composer's name is part of the title) is getting its sound-



track polished to a shimmering luster. In a corner of the Fox lot in Los Angeles, Lloyd Webber, who dreamed up the *Phantom* stage show (as well as such hits as *Cats* and *Evita*), and director Joel Schumacher (*Batman Forever*, *Phone Booth*) sit in a tiny dubbing room, perspiring over vocal timbres and orchestral mixes. As well they should: In the world of Hollywood musicals, such seemingly minor details can separate a blockbuster from an expensive flop.


## "The question is: How do you give people **the same chills and thrills** in a different medium?"

*Phantom*, the movie, has an incredible heritage. The stage production, which won a Tony Award for best musical, has grossed \$3.2 billion worldwide since its 1986 premiere, thanks to 100 million theatergoers in 22 countries. As the action unfolds on a monitor in front of them, Lloyd Webber—a bushy-browed Brit in a neat plaid shirt and khakis—cranes forward to listen; the silver-haired Schumacher, in jeans and biker boots, languidly reclines. Both men smile as actress Minnie Driver, playing Carlotta, a high-strung opera star, begins an Italianate hissy fit. Both gasp a moment later when the screen goes black. Though the sound man blames a computer crash, Schumacher offers a more sinister explanation: "The Phantom strikes again."

IN FACT, THE PHANTOM has struck countless times since appearing in the 1911 novel by Frenchman Gaston Leroux. Leroux's book spawned a string of plays and films, including the 1925 silent screen adaptation starring Lon Chaney in the title role. The story, in case you've missed all these productions, takes place mostly in 19th-century Paris, at the fictitious Opéra Populaire, and revolves around a mysterious masked figure who haunts the catacombs beneath the opera house.

The Phantom, we learn, is a hideously deformed musical genius. He grows obsessed with a young soprano named Christine, becomes her tutor and develops a hypnotic influence over her as he transforms her into a star. When Christine's childhood sweetheart, the Viscount Raoul, arrives to reclaim her affections, the stage is set for an epic showdown.

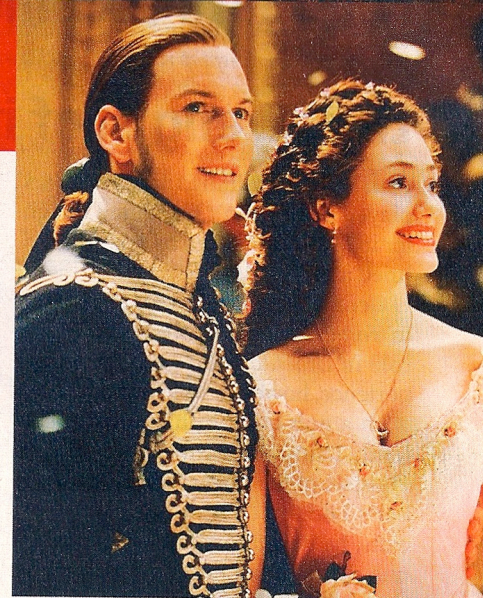
In his '80s update of the tale, Lloyd Webber added catchy tunes and spectacular production values. But his most crucial innovations concerned the characters. First, he emphasized Christine's romantic dilemma—should she give herself to the nice-guy nobleman or to passion incarnate, in the person of the Phantom? Second, he developed Leroux's Phantom into a full-blown antihero. "The Phantom's disfigure-



Director Joel Schumacher (above) prepares to shoot the movie's masquerade scene. At right: Raoul (Patrick Wilson) and Christine at the ball.

ment connects to a very primal thing in us," Schumacher observes. "It's a metaphor for whatever we think is unlovable in ourselves. We all identify with the Phantom."

Getting 21st-century moviegoers to make that connection involves a whole new set of challenges. "Film can do things theater can't," says the director, "and theater can do things film can't." Onstage, for example, Christine's descent from her dressing room to the Phantom's underwater grotto can be shown, simply, by using a rolling gondola and ramps that lead down to a pool; theater audiences fill in the rest of the details themselves. On-screen, that dreamlike journey must be literal and realistic. "The question is: How do you give people the same thrills and chills in a different medium?"



Casting the film was a big task as well. Christine had to be a beautiful adolescent, but utterly unlike the worldly girls who populate most teen flicks. The Phantom had to be young and virile enough, despite his defor-



mity, to constitute a convincing love interest—but he also had to convey depths of suffering and madness. Raoul had to be handsome, wealthy, kind and brave, but believably human. “And,” says Schumacher, “they all had to sing.”

After considering more than 100 actors, some of them major stars, the filmmakers decided on three relative unknowns—a risky choice for a \$70 million movie. Emmy Rossum, who landed the role of Christine, was just 16 when she auditioned; she’d sung

tensively, permanently, annoyingly perfect Patrick Wilson,” as Lloyd Webber calls him. At the time, Wilson was a rising Broadway actor (he’d played the dad in *The Full Monty* and Curly in *Oklahoma!*) with a modest film career. But his sword-fighting skills and riding experience, not to mention his flawless voice, wowed the filmmakers.

The production headed off to London’s Pinewood Studios. There, across eight sound stages, lay sets that dwarfed anything in the West End or

## For all its technical wizardry, *Phantom* will succeed or fail on the strength of its performances.

with Plácido Domingo at the Met, and played Sean Penn’s murdered daughter in *Mystic River*, but had never headlined a major film.

Gerard Butler had played a bad guy in *Tomorrow Never Dies* and the title role in *Dracula 2000*. His singing experience, however, was limited to gigs with a pub band in his native Scotland. Launching into his audition (“Music of the Night”) at Lloyd Webber’s London town house, Butler recalls, he began to panic: “I’m singing one of the most famous songs of all time for one of the most accomplished composers of all time, and I have no experience or training.” Though his right leg was shaking, he won the part of the Phantom—and began voice lessons immediately.

The role of Raoul went to “the ex-

on the Great White Way. Conceived by production designer Anthony Pratt, the sets contained 73 tons of steel, 92 miles of lumber and 3,500 gallons of paint. Pratt’s set of the Opéra Populaire included a rooftop studded with giant gargoyles; an 880-seat theater; a warren of dressing rooms and rehearsal studios; the catacombs; the Phantom’s watery lair—and, of course, the giant chandelier that he hurls to the theater floor in the climactic scene.

Actually, the chandelier came in triplicate: There was a high-end version for day-to-day filming, a “stunt” replica for the crash-landing sequence, and an electric version for scenes set in 1919.

Shimmering with 20,000 Swarovski crystals, the chandelier measured 17 feet tall by 13 feet wide, weighed 2.2

tons—and was valued at \$1.3 million.

The score is similarly impressive, performed by 127 musicians hand-picked by Lloyd Webber himself. “In this movie,” the maestro says, “the orchestra is a special effect.”

For all its technical wizardry, the *Phantom* movie will succeed or fail on the strength of its performances. Back in the Los Angeles dubbing room, the sound man has fixed the

computer problem, and Minnie Driver has flounced offscreen. As a rapt crowd listens, Rossum takes up where the diva left off, filling the Opéra Populaire with her melting soprano. Lloyd Webber and Schumacher lean toward the monitor again, adjusting, polishing—and hoping their *Phantom* will strike it big.

**rd.com** Read our review of the film at [rd.com/phantom](http://rd.com/phantom).

### CALLING DR. FRANKENSTEIN

*Some scientists, such as Albert Einstein, who authored the theory of relativity, are given the Nobel Prize. For others, such as David Schmidt, who created a partial solution to why shower curtains billow inward, there’s the Ig Nobel. Here are some recipients of the 2004 Ig Nobel Prize.*

Jillian Clarke, for investigating the scientific validity of the five-second rule, which is about whether it’s safe to eat food that’s been dropped on the floor.



Donald J. Smith and his father, the late Frank J. Smith, for patenting the infamous hairstyle known as the comb-over.

Ramesh Balasubramaniam and Michael Turvey for exploring and explaining the dynamics of Hula-Hooping.

Ben Wilson, Lawrence Dill, Robert Batty, Magnus Whalberg and Hakan Westerberg for showing that herrings apparently communicate by passing wind.

### WORD POWER ANSWERS

On page 38, we challenged you to sort out the synonyms for the word *origin*.

Our solutions: source, root, beginning, inception, seed, nascence, fountainhead, derivation, genesis.