



BY JOAN MARCUS

Phantom Craig Schulman humanizes a highly technical production.

Theater

'Phantom': Spectacle With A Human Heart

By William Triplett
Special to The Washington Post

Even Andrew Lloyd Webber has claimed not to understand the seemingly bottomless interest people have in "The Phantom of the Opera", his 1986 musicalized retooling of the Gaston Leroux novel that just opened a *third* engagement at the Kennedy Center.

Lloyd Webber has speculated that, apart from the sheer dazzle of the elaborate sets and lavish costumes, audiences respond to the show's beauty-and-the-beast theme—a physically repulsive hero pursuing in vain the gorgeous woman he loves. Others, like the show's director, Harold Prince, have argued that it's mostly the story's erotic undercurrents that have pulled in more than \$2.3 billion in ticket sales worldwide, making it the most successful stage musical in history.

Both, I'm sure, are right. But there's also a more subtle

and yet obvious lure that lies at dead center of the tale — and that Craig Schulman uses as the hook for his powerful performance in the title role. That hook is the one thing that gives this overwrought extravaganza any lasting poignancy, and the way he impales himself on it is the main reason to see, for the first or the umpteenth time, how a technology-driven show can be made human...

...But then Schulman appeared, and his full-bodied singing seemed to galvanize everyone else's. His voice may not have the sensuousness of original Phantom Michael Crawford's, but he makes up for it in power: Schulman...sounded as if [he] could have done without microphones...

...Then again, the Phantom is really the only character written with any emotional resonance, and thus the only one who can infuse his songs with any convincing feeling. At first Schulman Phantom spirits Christine away to his underground lair not because he's immediately in love with her, but because he thinks she's perfect for his ludicrous opera.

Above, to the world, he's a horror of a man; below, safe in his home, he's like anyone else who's been spurned not only personally, but professionally. Christine, he thinks, will finally win him acceptance on both counts, and Schulman's naked portrayal of desperately needing acceptance is what makes his pain so palpable in the end.

When he is ultimately rejected—a fear that runs deep and wide in virtually every human being—you know you are seeing the moment Schulman has spent the last 2½ hours playing toward. This is the hook, and though his rejection is inevitable, Schulman arcs his performance toward it so intelligently and movingly that you can't turn aside even when the sets and effects keep getting in the way.

Prince's directing still feels fresh. His sculptural and at times geometric sense of stage space remains mesmerizing. That, and watching the Phantom take the last nail through his heart, ought to hold interest for a long time to come.

The Phantom of the Opera, music by Andrew Lloyd Webber; lyrics, Charles Hart; book, Richard Stilgoe and Andrew Lloyd Webber, based on the novel by Gaston Leroux. Directed by Harold Prince; choreography, Gillian Lynne; sets and costumes, Maria Bjornson; lighting, Andrew Bridge; sound, Martin Levan. Also featuring Sandra Joseph, Lawrence Anderson, Ian Jon Bourg, Donn Cook, Mark Calkins, Patricia Hurd, Jennifer Dawn Stallings, Olga Talyn. At the Kennedy Center Opera House through October 4, 1997.