

develop that vision. Mackintosh had already produced such hits as *Cats* and *Les Misérables*, while Prince was one of Broadway's blue-chip properties—his credits include *Cabaret* and Lloyd Webber's *Evita*.

The first production of *Phantom* opened in London in 1986, starring Michael Crawford in the title role and Lloyd Webber's wife, Sarah Brightman, as Christine. For that première, Prince worked closely with production designer Maria Björkstén to develop the look of the show. Prince says that, although the stage is often relatively bare, the overall effect that they strived for is one of richness. "Even though there is no incense or perfume on stage, you can practically smell both," the director said. There is also a heady sense of barely repressed sexuality emanating from the Victorian settings and the age-old story of Beauty and the Beast. Said Prince: "It's erotic as hell."

Toronto's Pantages has provided a suitably opulent setting for the heightened romance of the show. Restoring the 1920 vaudeville theatre on downtown Yonge Street to its former glory was a major challenge—the building had been transformed into six small movie theatres in 1972, and much of its original ornamentation was destroyed. When Cineplex completed its acquisition of the building in 1988, it set about refurbishing it quickly—in only 10 months. New construction enlarged the stage and the wings and added extra dressing rooms, accommodating 70 performers. Jean-François Furieri, head of Iconoplast Designs Inc., the firm that did the plastering, estimates that the building would have taken three years to restore if work had proceeded at a normal pace. Said Furieri: "I didn't have a day off for seven months." But the breakneck pace does not appear to have compromised the project. Murals, delicate plaster mouldings and surfaces painted together to look like marble come paired in a charming celebration of ornament.

Restoration of the theatre was in its early stages when *Phantom*'s producers chose the cast last winter. According to Prince, there was no shortage of talent—despite the fact that musicals on the scale of *Phantom* are a relatively new phenomenon in Canada. So far, only *Cats*, which opened in Toronto in 1985 and toured the country two years later, and *Les Misérables*, which opened last March and is still running in

Toronto's Royal Alexandra Theatre, come close. Said Prince: "There were more actors here to choose from than in any other country—certainly more than there were in London or New York. They have had the training but they don't have the work."

In the end, Prince chose an entirely Canadian-based cast, except for the three leads. Irishman Colm Wilkinson plays the Phantom, Toronto-born Rebecca Caine, who lives in London, plays

reminded her of the Broadway musical *A Chorus Line*. "They called me back onto the stage by myself, and there were all these people out there—I didn't know who anybody was," she said. Moments later, Prince told her that the part of Meg was hers. "I don't know what I did, but everybody cracked up," said Rubin, 26. "I was just so hyper."

The elation of being selected was soon supplanted by grueling rehearsals. The dancers



Peterson and his wife, Shelley: a stellar crowd for the reopening of an old vaudeville theatre

Christine, and New York's Byron Nease portrays Raoul, the handsome young nobleman who loves her. Wilkinson had been Lloyd Webber's first choice to play the Phantom. He had portrayed the character in an early workshop production at the composer's estate in Symonston, England, near London. But Wilkinson was sidetracked by *Les Misérables*: he created the lead role of Jean Valjean in the original London production of the show when it opened in 1985. Wilkinson said in an interview before

*Phantom* opened that he was happy to finally be playing the role that he helped to develop. "It has great melodies for singers to sing," he added. "It is very evocative and emotional."

The 33 supporting players in *Phantom*'s cast were selected from more than 1,500 performers who auditioned in several casting calls across the country last spring. Donna Rubin of Montreal, a former member of the National Ballet of Canada, plays the role of Meg Giry, an opera-house dancer. The final call-back for *Phantom*, she said,

and singers agree that rigorous classical training is needed to perform the roles. Said Caroline Schiller of Montreal, a member of the chorus and an understudy for the role of Christine: "About 90 per cent of us are opera singers. It's not easy musical theatre; *Oklahoma* this is not." But the show also demands skills not usually required in opera. Soprano Lyse Guérin, a native of Alma, Que., plays Carlotta Giudicelli, a tempestuous diva. "It is very difficult," she said, "because I run, I dance, I wave my arms around and I am singing all the time. It takes a lot of getting used to and it is exhausting."

For the man who plays the Phantom himself, singing and acting is only part of the hard work. Wilkinson says that it takes two hours for him and an assistant to put on his makeup. They start with a latex skullcap that is sealed with medical adhesive. Then, they glue chunks of latex onto his head and face, followed by false lips and a false nose. Said Wilkinson: "The face is actually quite hideous by the time you're finished." After the performance, it takes 45 minutes to remove the makeup. It is all part of creating what director Prince, in a succinct explanation of *Phantom*'s phenomenal appeal, calls "a very complex, simple show."

PAMELA YOUNG

#### Lloyd Webber: popularity

