

Gothic Fiction Double Feature

Emma Cole

In mid-2008 two popular musicals played concurrently at Sydney's Star City Casino, Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Phantom of the Opera* and Richard O'Brien's *Rocky Horror Show*. Their simultaneity may have been an inconsequential coincidence, or alternatively, it may have been an incisive examination of the misanthropic psyche which requires consideration.

There have been innumerable performances, as well as a 2004 film, of Lloyd Webber's *Phantom*, since its 1986 debut. (Some may wish to argue the show's numerability, since the production's official website lists May 31 2008 as the nine thousandth performance at the West End and July 3 2008 as the eight thousand five hundredth performance on Broadway.¹) The *Phantom* is Gothic romance, at its best heartfelt, at its worst melodramatic. *Rocky Horror* has also been, not only a stage production, but a cult classic movie during its thirty-five year history. It is Gothic horror and science fiction parody, at its worst cheesy, at its best camp (or perhaps vice versa). Despite their apparent generic dissemblance, the two productions do in fact have much in common.

The *Phantom of the Opera* relies on visual staging, needing sumptuous sets and extravagant dress to impress its grandeur on its audience. This is nowhere more evident than in the spectacle of the Masquerade scene, a decadent display of choreography and costumes, including a memorable monkey suit. *Rocky Horror* also looks to eye-catching, if not eye-popping, exhibition to capture its audience. Be they stilettos, speedos or fishnets, the threadbare costumes of the show buttress its intentionally threadbare plot.

The productions are worlds apart not only in costumes, but also in sets. The flashy Star City Casino arguably proved less apt as a stand-in for the historic nineteenth-century Paris Opera House than it did for Frank-n-

Furter's outlandish castle. Yet, there was perhaps a superficial, even extra-terrestrial, similarity between the two shows in the *Phantom's* chandelier, hovering above the audience and described by one reviewer as "spaceship-like."² Another striking resemblance emerged between the *Phantom's* domineering ballet choreographer, Madame Giry, and *Rocky Horror's* resident French (though not French) maid, Magenta. Each had geometrical black arcs in lieu of eyebrows and a mouth meretriciously emphasised by crimson lipstick. Magenta looked as one would imagine Giry would sans the tightly-bound matronly bun and high-collared Victorian dress.

The main parallel which the conveners were almost indubitably seeking to evince between the *Phantom of the Opera* and the *Rocky Horror Show* is the mutual psychopathy of the main characters, the Phantom and Frank-N-Furter, and their concurrently repellent and attractive personalities. Both characters captivate their audiences, though constricted by a tight time frame. During the two and a half hour production the Phantom is on stage for just twenty-odd minutes, while Furter is allowed a somewhat longer (and odder) period of time.

One of the most conspicuous correlations between the Phantom and Furter is a ghastly exterior. (The *most* conspicuous is surely the nominal correspondence that the onomastically- and phonetically-inclined will have noted: their names are both disyllabic and have initial fricatives.) The Phantom has a face so distorted and deformed that he conceals it behind a mask, while Furter represents a cross-dressing Count Dracula. The characters allege that their exteriors are superficial; Furter admonishes the startled Brad and Janet: "Don't judge a book by its cover," and the Phantom advises Christine to look to see the man behind the monster. Both characters do in fact derive much of their respective personas from their superficial appearances, most notably from their vestments. The Phantom introverts himself behind the mask which comes to embody him. The iconographic mask was one of the final sights of the performance (together with the figure

of a monkey in velvet robes playing the cymbals which is also crucial to the plot). As much as the Phantom conceals behind his mask and cloak, Furter seemingly reveals in his corset and fishnets. The scantily clad Furter struts his extroverted stuff across the stage throughout the show.

Despite such apparent dissimilarity, the two share an unchecked megalomania. Each wants control and each will kill to get it. The Phantom lurks in the dark recesses of the Opera House, issuing instructions like the deranged director of a self-scribed production, while Furter uses violence and video cameras to monitor and manipulate those inside his castle. The characters' egotism often manifests as self-centred puerility. When the chronically antisocial Phantom does not get his way, he flies into rages or tantrums. He often finds consolation for his anger in his toy monkey. Frankie, meanwhile, is just out for fun. For him everything and everyone is a plaything.

Sexuality, either repressed or expressed, is palpable in both personalities. This was especially evident in Anthony Warlow's Phantom. As an audience member one did not know quite where to look during the Don Juan scene as he sat rhythmically rubbing his thighs. Such sexual frustration openly contrasts the freedom of the bisexual, transvestite Furter. If one dare probe the profound depths of a deliberately two-dimensional figure, the supreme self-confidence, even narcissism, exhibited could well be disguising an inhibited sexual anxiety. Furter does at one stage concede that he made Rocky "good for relieving [his] tension." Driven then by egocentrism combined with sexual anxiety, both characters try to shape their perfect partners. The Phantom works to mould Christine through singing lessons. Furter is more hands on, physically engineering his ideal man, like a hyper-libidinous Doctor Frankenstein. Yet, the Phantom is not devoid of creepy creativity, dressing a replica Christine in a wedding gown to resemble a kind of Bride of Frankenstein.

Despite misanthropic and homicidal tendencies which may be seen as personality drawbacks, the Phantom and Furter hold a mutual allurement of which they are aware. The Phantom observes to his pupil, “My power over you goes stronger yet.” Furter with more frankness notes, “A mental mind-fuck can be nice.” Eventually, however, the characters are recognised for their manipulative qualities (Janet: “You tricked me.” Christine: “Angel of Music, you deceived me”) and recognised for their brutal and inhuman natures (being labelled, among other things, “a wild and untamed thing/ A bee with a deadly sting,” an “animal” and a “murdering beast”). The Phantom does indeed seem ghoulish as he kidnaps and kills, but in the end he proves to be not a monster but a man. Furter, by contrast, is revealed to be not human at all, but an alien from the planet Transexual in the system Transylvania.

The bright lights of the Star City Casino then elucidate the dark inner workings of the ego-maniacal minds. Small visual likenesses in the productions highlight the similarities in the psyches of the outwardly dissimilar main characters: namely, their similar social and sexual disfunctions. When the Phantom and Frank-N-Furter seek to dominate their exterior appearance and environment, they may both be disguising inner uncertainty and vulnerability. Yet, ultimately, the analogy between the two is severely threatened by *Rocky Horror's* regrettable lack of a ubiquitous monkey.

¹ “Phantom Goes Digital,” 6 May 2008, and “Another Milestone for the Phantom on Broadway,” 3 July 2008, on *The Phantom of the Opera, The Official Website* (accessed 12 October 2008). Available from http://www.thephantomoftheopera.com/news_reviews/

² Bryce Hallett, “Preview: The Phantom of the Opera,” in *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 15, 2008.