

2023

The Art of the Adaptation: An Analysis of The Phantom of the Opera

Alaina B. Westee
Kennesaw State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/emergingwriters>



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Modern Literature Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Westee, Alaina B. (2023) "The Art of the Adaptation: An Analysis of The Phantom of the Opera," *Emerging Writers*: Vol. 6, Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/emergingwriters/vol6/iss1/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Emerging Writers by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.

The Art of the Adaptation: An Analysis of *The Phantom of the Opera*

by Alaina Westee

Throughout the existence of the entertainment industry, adapting material from one form of media to another has been a consistently popular trend, catering to preexisting fans as well as allowing for the story's exposure to a wider audience. This is certainly the case with Gaston Leroux's classic novel *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* (1910), which is arguably one of the most adapted narratives in history. From the mostly accurate 1925 silent film starring Lon Chaney to the loosely inspired *A Monster in Paris* (2011), this miniscule tale has encouraged a plethora of projects in every category imaginable. However, the pinnacle of *Phantom* adaptations is undoubtedly Andrew Lloyd Webber's 1986 musical, which has been crowned the longest-running show on Broadway and the West End to this day. Despite a few missing characters and many altered plot elements, the stage play successfully brings this story to life through unforgettable songs and vivid sets and costumes. The limitations of the stage, though, allowed for Webber's specific vision of the novel to be brought to the big screen—a rare case of an adaptation acquiring an adaptation. Joel Schumacher's *The Phantom of the Opera* (2004) does indeed excel at visually capturing the magic of its predecessor yet fails at respecting overarching themes and fundamental details, an amalgamation that simultaneously enchants new viewers and disappoints traditionalists.

As was previously stated, the transition from novel to musical embraced numerous differences while remaining inherently similar, presenting the story of a disfigured man haunting the Paris Opera House, chasing after a young soprano at the chagrin of her childhood sweetheart, and eventually realizing the error of his ways through an act of kindness. The book was

unequivocally one of the first stories at the time to have pity on the “monster” and acknowledge the psychology of such characters, a pivotal attribute heavily embraced by the musical via an increased emphasis on romance rather than horror and mystery. An acceptable adaptation will interweave underlying characteristics such as these with any necessary changes that are required for the new medium or that will enhance the story. For instance, the musical had to replace the Phantom’s skeletal deformity and full-face mask with prosthetics inspired by real medical conditions and the iconic half mask to accommodate for singing and ease of application. With a larger budget of \$70,000,000 and post-production effects, one would believe that the film disfigurement would outshine stage make-up and even allow for the possibility of novel accuracy (“The Phantom of the Opera”). However, filmmakers instead cast the conventionally attractive actor Gerard Butler and made a quarter of his face appear to have been slightly sunburned, an adjustment that was clearly accepted for the purpose of making the character more “romantically appealing” to general audiences.

Therefore, casting is essential in adaptations—especially where singing is involved. In fact, even if it were not a musical, the entire plot of *Phantom* is centered around music, which is why Gerard Butler was such a disrespectful choice to both the source material and all of the talented vocalists that have preceded him. The Phantom is meant to possess a voice that mimics an “Angel of Music,” described as almost supernatural in its ability to hypnotize and perform ventriloquism. As one of the most desirable actors in Hollywood, Butler was unquestionably the best choice from a marketing standpoint, but his appearance and lack of vocal talent defeat the purpose of the story. One would never believe he would be ostracized from society or tutor Emmy Rossum’s Christine Daaé—who, admittedly, was classically trained in Opera, and despite being a bit too young for the character, was well cast. Considering the fact that the majority of

the cast were also quite accurate and musically talented, there was absolutely no contrast with the Phantom possessing a bewitching, otherworldly voice. This decision further impairs characterization as the costume department dresses Butler's muscular physique in tight pants and open-chested pirate shirts instead of the modest evening wear of a gentleman like in the novel and stage production. The Phantom's entire character revolves around a yearning to be normal and hiding insecurity behind luxury, so there is no way the man would wear revealing clothing. Such mockery occurs again with his Red Death costume, switching from being intimidating and flamboyant to plain and simple, which does not match the scene's manic energy of him crashing the masquerade and revealing his return.

As for the actual plot and pacing, the film is almost damagingly accurate to the musical but contains minor additions that mar the source material. For instance, the stage play commences with an older version of Raoul—the childhood sweetheart—at an auction. This scene is solely meant to serve as an introduction to the notorious chandelier, a whole spectacle with the overture and theme playing in the background. With no real purpose to the story, this could have easily been cut, but instead, the filmmakers included extra sequences of an elderly Raoul reminiscing over Christine. As she is the definitive main character, this time should have been designated for her development or interactions with the Phantom—especially as she is somewhat one-dimensional in the musical compared to her feminist characterization in the novel. Additionally, the stage production attempts to respect the context of the novel, which is loaded with French history. Thus, both are set in the early 1880s, yet the film was pushed back a decade. This generates historical errors as the Palais Garnier was still being built, and Paris was also under siege in 1871—meaning that the rich would obviously not be attending shows. The movie

makers could explain this away, but as was stated, realism has always been important to *Phantom* as a period piece.

Undoubtedly, it is crucial to also assess an adaptation through an unbiased lens, judging whether a viewer would enjoy it with no prior knowledge. Based on the music alone, it can be asserted that *Phantom* (2004) is a solid standalone movie. The style is atypical for the preconceived notions of how musicals should sound, already highlighting its uniqueness. When a song is beautiful and catchy, it naturally leaves a lasting impression, which can be observed with the iconic main theme. The greatest appeal of the movie, though, is its overly dramatic gothic aesthetic. Every scene has something to look at, and there is never a lull in the story as each song transitions into the next without any dialogue. The sets are also intricate and magical, with the stage being slightly underwhelming in comparison due to the lack of space. In the film, there is a sense of scale, transporting the viewer within and under the Paris Opera House. For instance, the audience can almost feel as though they are descending with Christine as the Phantom guides her to his lair, distorting reality with implied hypnotism and drugging via the visuals. This scene is slightly awkward in the stage production as they are merely walking around to mimic descension, but the film excels at depicting the labyrinth of tunnels. The budget and space also permit the inclusion of the Phantom's various torture chambers and traps that lead to his home, a key aspect of the novel that is excluded from the musical.

It is incredibly difficult to please everyone when adapting a known story. Creators must focus on producing a piece of media that can stand on its own while also respecting the source material. In the case of *The Phantom of the Opera* (2004), the story was too comparable to the stage production for its few changes to be acceptable to fans, yet it still manages to enthrall the average viewer with captivating songs and gorgeous visuals. Nevertheless, such an accurate film

plot-wise still somehow managed to fail as an adaptation by ignoring crucial details and attempting to further romanticize a character that is meant to be flawed.

Works Cited

“The Phantom of the Opera.” *Imdb.com*, 2023,

https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0293508/?ref_=nv_sr_srg_0_tt_8_nm_0_q_phantom%2520of%2520the Accessed April 14, 2023.