

# PREVIEW

UK THEATRE GUIDE  
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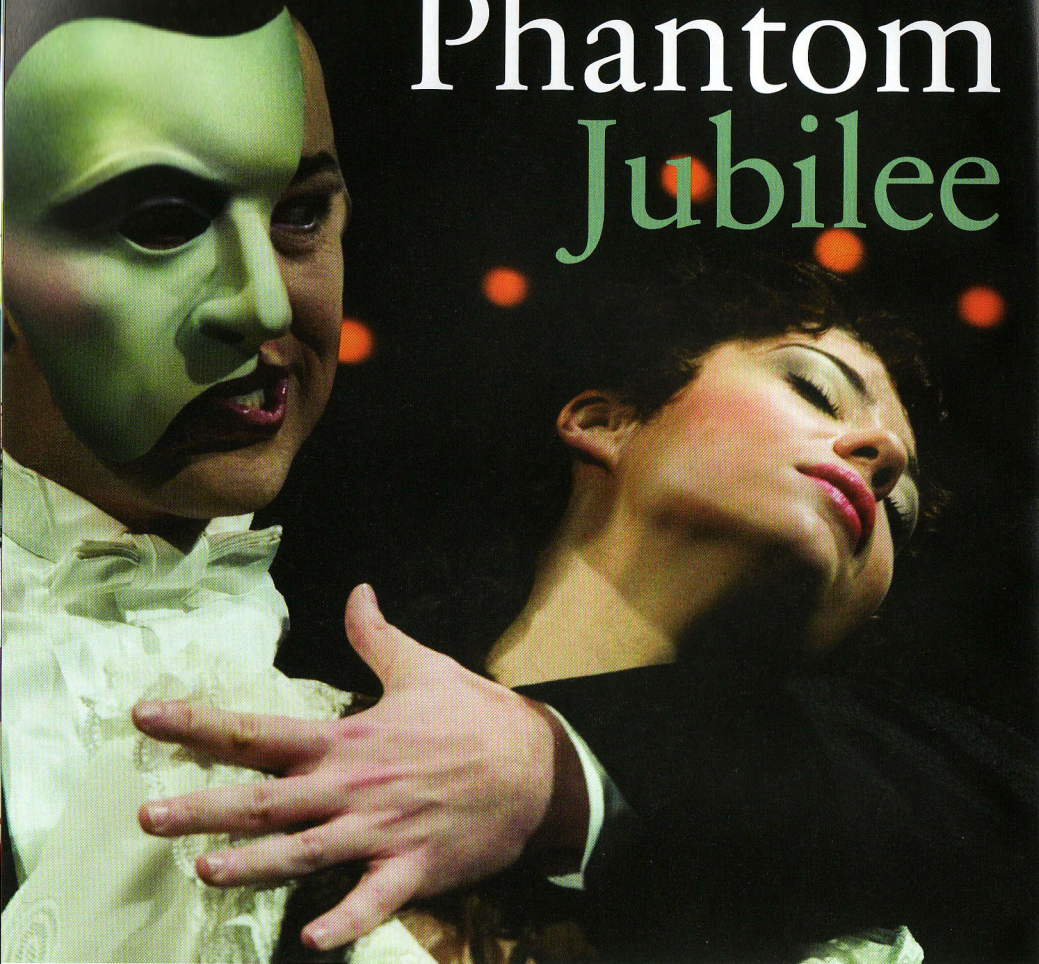
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# Phantom Jubilee



John Owen-Jones (left) and Sofia Escobar. Photo: Michael Le Poir Trench

In the mid-1980s, composer Andrew Lloyd Webber and producer Cameron Mackintosh began talking about a new musical based on a little-known

French romantic novel set in the glamorous surroundings of the Paris Opera. Now, a quarter of a century on, the show has amassed 50 theatre awards and the highest box office takings of any film or stage play.

**The Phantom of the Opera is turning 25, and there's a lot to celebrate! Jo Caird finds out where the show's success lies**

If you've seen *Phantom* (and chances are you have, given that the show has been viewed by over 100 million people in 27 countries worldwide), then you'll have some idea what to expect of the three performances at the

To mark the *Phantom's* anniversary, the show's producers are hosting an extravaganza worthy of one of musical theatre's most spectacular shows.

Royal Albert Hall in October, which will feature a cast and orchestra of over 200 performers, in addition to the lavish sets and costumes loved by so many. Ramin Karimloo, the West End star and *Phantom* veteran who will be donning the famous mask for the anniversary performances, is not exaggerating when he says, 'it's going to be phenomenal!'

Karimloo first went into the show in 2003 as Raoul, the Phantom's rival for the affections of the beautiful Christine. Then, following stints in *Les Misérables* and *Miss Saigon*, the actor returned to *Phantom* in 2007, this time taking on what he describes as 'the absolute dream role': that of the 'angel of music' himself. When, during this period, work began on a sequel to the original show, eventually titled *Love Never Dies*, Karimloo was the natural choice to play the Phantom, his performance in the role winning him the Best Actor in a Musical Award at the Whatsonstage.com Awards 2011. His experiences with the two shows, Karimloo says, 'have changed my life in every way you could think of.'

But the Canadian actor was familiar with the show long before his first appearance as Raoul, having seen it – and loved it – as a child: 'It was the first show I saw that really made me feel emotions as a kid that I'd never felt before. I was a wannabe tough-guy hockey player and I went to see this show and was really moved.' It was this experience that made Karimloo want to become an actor: 'the seed, he said, 'was planted.'

Given how much the show meant to him as a young man, playing the Phantom was initially an almost overwhelming experience for Karimloo. He describes how, during the pre-show preparations for his first performance in the title role, he 'kept laughing, thinking, "this is so surreal" ... it was just epic.'

Performing in the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary event will be just as thrilling. 'For me personally, it's full circle for the journey ... To leave after doing the sequel, then just touching base with the original again for such a celebration, I think it's quite poignant and exciting ... I'm honoured to be able to do it.'

*Phantom* has been phenomenally successful over the years, having played over 10,000 performances at Her Majesty's Theatre in the West End, as well as being translated into 13 different languages. Karimloo believes that this is down to the fact that 'everybody loves the underdog ... there's something about the passion of this one character that I think a lot of people can relate to.'

Since Michael Crawford created the role of the Phantom for the musical's London premiere in 1986 (for which he won an Olivier Award for Best Actor in a Musical), dozens of fine performers have taken on the part. Has this legacy proved intimidating? Karimloo says that although he found Crawford's performance 'inspired', he has always been aware of the danger of following too closely in anyone else's footsteps.

**'For me personally it's full circle for the journey ... I'm honoured to be able to do it.'**

'You've got to just stick to your guns and do what you set out to do, otherwise you're just going to set yourself up for failure. I think it's good for everyone to get inspired in their own way.'

This would be good advice for an actor taking on any well known role, but on a show as long-running as *Phantom* it's even more important, as it's up to the cast to ensure that audiences seeing the show today get the same thrilling theatrical experience as those at the first performances of

the production 25 years ago. Karimloo responds to this challenge by 'never trying to repeat myself. I never try to change myself either ... You keep it fresh by just not trying to be right. Just go on and see what happens.'

This is very much the philosophy that will inform the actor's performance in *The Phantom of the Opera* at the Royal Albert Hall. Karimloo, of course, has experience of such events, having played the role of Enjolras at the *Les Misérables* 25th anniversary concert at the O2 Arena last year. It was an 'extraordinary' occasion to be involved with, he says. 'I remember coming out into the O2 Arena thinking, "I should be nervous", but I wasn't. It's good to be self-critical, because it makes you keep pushing to be better, but there is no way of being right. I had fun with it,

and I had a great response from it and I just think I should have fun more often. Because what we do is hard, you know. You have to put in the work behind the scenes but once you're out there, I don't think you should be so serious. If the work is done, it'll come through.'

Karimloo has certainly put in the work, as have all the different performers, crew members and creatives that have made *The Phantom of the Opera* such a success over the last quarter of a century. Let the party begin – happy birthday *Phantom!*

#### RELATED LISTINGS

*THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA*

Her Majesty's Theatre, London, see p. 21

Royal Albert Hall, 1-2 October, see p. 22



Masquerade; *The Phantom of the Opera* cast