



A Comparative Study on the Phantom of the Opera: Narrative Inquiry Between Modern Film Narration and Musical Drama

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Abstract. The Phantom of the Opera is the longest-running Broadway show. With the development of musical drama, more and more people fall in love with it. This thesis is a comparative study on the Phantom of the Opera, comparing different techniques modern film and musical drama respectively use in practice while achieving the same intentions of the building of transition and a sense of presence. The subjects in this article include the 2004 film ‘The Phantom of the Opera’ and the 25th-anniversary celebration performance of the musical ‘The Phantom of the Opera’. It is concluded that the film has a greater advantage in its building of transition, while the musical drama has a greater advantage in its building of a sense of presence. However, when both art forms come across less convenient access to a certain field, they managed to fill in the gap and achieve their uniqueness in advantages.

Keywords: The Phantom of the Opera · Film Narration

1 Introduction

With the rise of aesthetic pluralism, musical drama is appreciated by more and more audiences worldwide [1, 2]. The Phantom of the Opera, often a favorite for someone who just became a musical lover, is the longest-running Broadway show [3]. Originally, it is a French novel, a mix of romance and eccentricity, by Gaston Leroux [3]. In the beginning, it was a failure in the market; however, it ran on the highway, since translated into English in 1911, and was adapted into numerous films and theater productions [4, 5]. The 1925 American silent horror film adaption is one of the most known. The Frankenstein-like ‘Phantom’ undoubtedly fits the author’s description of his ‘skeletal frame’.

Decades later, famous composer and impresario of musical theatre Andrew Lloyd Webber adapted the same story into his music. He drew inspiration from his real-life ‘Angel of Music’, Sarah Brightman, and composed a series of intriguing songs, including ‘Think of me’, and ‘All I ask of you’ [6]. They, soon, formed the catchy melody of the Phantom of the Opera, one of the major reasons for the musical’s success. Moreover, the leading female character, Christine Daae, was tailor-made for Sarah. The considerable cost of production at that time, 8 million dollars, would cost the producers 20 million

dollars if today. It premiered on January 26, 1988, at the Majestic Theater, and later, performed to over 145 million people in 41 countries and 183 cities in 17 languages.

In the year 2004, the film under the same title was released. Unlike the previous film depictions of the original novel, the 2004 'The Phantom of the Opera' is an adaption of Andrew's musical version. Despite criticism from fans about the limited vocal skills and sometimes awkward acting, the film made full use of film-production elements, such as shot change, color filter, and backstage recordings, which brought the story a different display in a different art form.

The two versions of the Phantom of the Opera lead to thoughts of specific comparisons between the two art forms, musical drama, and film. The musical drama, also known as musical or musical theater, has its roots in the 19th century of Operetta and comedy. Though its elements of art somehow overlapped with that of dance or opera, musical drama emphasizes music as equally necessary and significant as other elements, including dialogues and movements. Because of this, it is usually more attractive and arouses emotions more easily among the audience [7]. On the other hand, films, after the invention of sound films in 1923, can bring music to the scenes as well. Bringing a theater production to the film industry gives the characters a chance of being real-life men or women in front of a close camera, instead of presenting their part more dramatically in order to reach the further theater audience [8]. Moreover, the advanced screen technology has made it more feasible to 'fool' the audience and present vivid special effects that theaters are not able to achieve. However, the musical surely has its advantages to winning this overwhelming success. This thesis focuses on a comparative study of the Phantom of the Opera. Careful analysis between modern film narration (the 2004 film 'The Phantom of the Opera') and musical drama (the 25th-anniversary celebration performance of the musical 'The Phantom of the Opera') is discussed in detail.

2 The Build of Transition

While it is practical for films to move around the places to find the most suitable scene for shooting or using screen techniques, musical drama is required to use all kinds of stage transitional techniques to transform one single stage into different surroundings. The Phantom of the Opera requires a dozen of scene switching.

In the musical drama/theater version: At the beginning, there is the scene of an auction, many years after the main body of the story happens. It took place still in the same opera house, but with a shabby cloth as the background and dim light, which indicates the closure of the building. The main focus of light lies in the auction host. The costume of everyone in the scene is no more than black, white, and gray. The language is simple, with only the host with passion. Watching it for the first time may be driven into confusion; however, it is exactly what the director wants them to feel. It prepares for and acts as an overture of the following flashback to the main body. Here are several designs that should be noticed. Firstly, the monkey musical box, which is one of the clues, makes its first appearance and starts to build up the connection—between this symbol and its unique meaning. The musical box and the melody it plays-Masquerade-serves as a piece of innocence and sweetness in the dark world the Phantom lives in, and a rare chance for the Phantom with a mask to be within the common crowds (everyone is behind a

mask and the Phantom does not need to worry about his disfigured face). When Raoul orders to present it closer, he opens up and brings out the first vocal. He mentions in the lyrics ‘she’ several times, which points to his late wife Daae, leaving the audience a foreshadowing and leading them to figure out as the story unfolds. Secondly, when it comes to time shifting, the Chandelier acts as a major element or symbol that carries the whole play. When the curtain, written ‘LOT 666 CHANDELIER’, pulls up and flares with golden sparkles, the theme—the song ‘The Phantom of the Opera’ plays. An image of the Phantom playing the organ was shown above the orchestra. The transition was made and the play was pushed back in time.

3 The Film Version

In the film version, the beginning scene is identical to what the theater version expresses. However, the use of a black and white filter, shoot change and subtle expressions and body language make the film version somehow more meticulous. There are proofs about its being delicate, including detailed photography and its breaking one major transition down into multiple subtle ones. A candle lights up with the title of the film appearing in golden and gives a rose the first appearance, another clue symbolizing the love of Phantom for Christine. Then, the words go vague and the candle lights up an overall picture of the run-down opera house in the style of old-fashion and stamp-looking, with ‘Paris 1919’ on the upper left, indicating the time and place to start with. This is the first subtle transition. A moment later, the camera is pushed into details of the ‘stamp’, especially focusing on the opera house, and gradually, even the golden color fades, leaving the audience only black and white. This is the second subtle transition. The third one takes place with the arrival of a car. Several detailed shots are made, instead of a bird’s-eye view, depicting the old man in the car and a wheelchair. The fourth depicts Raoul and his assistant entering the building through a high-position camera. Voices of the auction raise and creates another transition. The fifth occurs when Raoul and a lady have eye contact, the background music occurs gently in a single phrase, recalling back to the time they met. The sixth is the same as the musical version, except the vocal melody is sung as Raoul’s thoughts because his mouth is not moving. The fifth transition is the major transition the film and the musical both want to achieve at the beginning of the story. As the chandelier lifts from the ground, dust rise and the candlelight on it starts to color the whole scene which is previously black and white. The transformation of the color filter brings the audience shock and a feeling of being there and exactly going back in time.

The detailed shots of the old man Raoul coming out of the car and entering the building are successful. First, a focus on the emblem of the car door is brief but informed of the owner’s noble identity as viscount. Second, the shoot changes to a lower angle and frames his driver’s and assistant’s boots and the lower part of the wheelchair. Then, a pair of leather shoes exist in the car and the audience knows it is the owner. Third, the camera goes to the middle part of the wheelchair and the gentleman is lifted onto it with his feet kept on a pedal. It informs of his old age and disability; on the contrary, it keeps his face concealed. Fourth, the camera lies on a wrinkled but graceful face of a lady Meg (who is now called Madame Giry after her mother) and quickly shoots change

according to the shift of her focus to Raoul, the old man who first showed his face. They have long eye contact, softly introducing that they have known each other since a young age. Raoul's subtle expressions are well captured by the film's camera. He is first tired and calm, but after the contact, an element of surprise and uncertainty is delivered.

Meanwhile, the film uses several designs of 'blocking'. First, along with the third subtle transition mentioned previously, while the audience is paying attention to the closer and closer photography of the old building, the car suddenly rushed in and 'blocked' the eyesight. Through the 'blocking', their attention is forced to transfer from the building to an old man in a wheelchair. Second, the unknown flicker in the air, seeming to be pieces of leaflets or natural leaves, 'blocks' the eyesight of seeing through otherwise clean air. This subtle design fits the setting of the just-ended World War I. What's more, when inside the building, occasional flying by of birds builds up the 'blocking' effect in the same way. Third, when entering the old building, the film shoots their entrance through the 'blocking' of spider webs, shabby cloth, and broken stairs, forming a frame of dilapidation. Fourth, during the eye contact between Madame Girya and Raoul, several fuzzy figures pass through her, constantly 'blocking' the audience's attention and causing lighting on her face to subtle shifts. This may seem to bother, however, it managed to prolong the time of their eye contact, giving an impression of its lasting years and decades.

4 The Musical Drama: A Comparison

Back to the musical drama version: sets of props, together with the front outer curtain, raises in front of the audience to form the rehearsal stage of Act One, tracing back to the opera house in Paris, 1881. The film version, with the same melody and transformation through the chandelier, can add more information. The scene of the two new owners of the opera house, the shots of the theater backstage, props preparation, and the arrival of Raoul the investor are added to the film.

The following transition offers the audience sufficient satisfaction of curiosity [9]. When the leading role Christine started to sing the song 'Think of Me', she quickly caught the new theater owners' attention. The transition is from the rehearsal and first try-out of Christine to her official performance, in which she is the leading soprano instead of the initial one, Carlotta. In the musical version, the audience can view the whole transformation of Christine naturally and beautifully presented on stage. As her voice sounds increasing confidence, lights go dim but not to a large degree for the audience to see, preparing for a brighter spotlight that focuses on Christine. She then, in the dim light, talks to the crew member seeming to discuss the details of her play, while being dressed up in a larger gown. A few seconds later, she turns to Madame Girya (not her daughter Meg mentioned earlier, but her mother) and thanks her for the offered opportunity. The shift is so fast but it is smooth enough to squeeze the whole process of preparation to a mere 18 s of the prelude. Christine not only thanks and communicates with the real theater audience, but also the live broadcast of the same audience on the screen behind, which is revealed when the back curtain is pulled up on stage, creating the scene of a renowned soprano surrounded by the applause from all around. On the other hand, the film version ignores the preparation details for the reason that the transition can be simply achieved by a shot change.

5 Sense of Presence

No matter the film or the musical drama, they both wanted to achieve a sense of presence [10]. In contrast to the advantage of the convenience of the film's shoot change in its build of transition, musical drama has its advantage in creating a sense of presence, since the audience is there in front of the play.

In the musical drama, the chandelier has a much more important role. It creates natural lighting to bring the audience inside the scene by believing themselves as the true audience in the opera house where the story takes place. It is even surprising to find that it not only symbolizes the appearance of the Phantom and a sense of chaos but also strikingly shifts to the transmission. Instead of turning the lights back on in most other plays or musicals, and instead of pausing whenever the viewers want in the film, the musical drama version of the Phantom of the Opera makes full use of the chandelier and gives the audience a sense of presence and heartbeat.

In the famous clip of 'Masquerade', the actors involved in this scene are many for both art forms. Before the scene, the transmission is just over, and it offers the audience a chance to relax for the next-half journey of being part of the play. They greet the reappearance of the orchestra conductor with full applause. Then the lights turn purely mysterious blue and enter the two owners in a much more comedy way than the normal entrance of the same characters in the film. The reason is that the film is not intended to use their entrance as bedding for the later and grand masquerade. In the musical, afterward, actors and actresses dressed up in colorful and dramatic costumes enter the stage from all directions, including half of them coming from the audience's seats. This naturally brings the audience a sense of presence while viewing real-life characters rushing past them. The melody is played compactly and instrumentally, serving as another bedding. The lights gradually fade; when the music pushes to its climax and the actors are already on stage, the lights burst into shining pink, casting over the choral first mention of the main idea of the song. It was all about this moment. The large number of performers involved is especially necessary when it comes to the musical because the audience can always view the whole picture of the stage. To create this sense of magnificence and complexity, even simple dance has to be performed with a large number. The film, though also requires many people, is actually because of its same intention of giving the scene overall photography. Moreover, in the film, the costume is of simpler colors, emphasizing only the ornate degree of clothing.

Meanwhile, it is also interesting to notice when the couple, Daae and Raoul, seems to be about to argue about whether to keep their engagement a secret. On the stage, it is most typical to notice its unique technique of using strong lighting, usually a spotlight, to stress a set of characters. Here, the stress is on the couple. Other performers act as part of the stage background, keeping the audience in the scene as one of them while providing them a three-perspective view, also known as God's Perspective, to catch up with the flow of the plot. It is interesting when thinking about it because it gives the audience a chance of eavesdropping on gossip. In the film version, this part is normal for a single shoot change, as the camera shifts and moves with the couple entering the dance floor.

What's more, subtle comedy occurs in the musical drama version, which is probably too subtle to experience when watching it in action. However, there is still a possibility

and when it is shot into official clips, it is visible and more in detail. By contrast, it does not matter if the audience did not notice; when they do, it just adds to the sufficient sense of presence that the musical has offered. After the part of the song Christine and Raoul sing, the dance moves on and there is a man in the crowd who is intended to drive Christine away from Raoul. Guesses are made that it is the Phantom. Things turn into a little chaos of jokes, presenting the audience with a little relaxation and entertainment before the true chaos of the entering of the Phantom. The film does not have this subtle design. Instead, Daae and Raoul dance together the whole time after their little quarrel.

When it comes to the entrance of the Phantom, the theater version leaves Christine in the front role. And when they have a dance movement of bending over, she stood still and from her expression, she notices that the phantom is there. This design makes the audience focus on Christine and is informed clearly about the Phantom's entrance. Then, the theme melody rises, together with an enlarged image of the Phantom behind the joyful masquerade. Everyone slowly and carefully put down their up-raising hands and turn around to face the horrible creature. The tension it creates is far more than in the film. It is somehow having a bet with the audience. Because they can see the whole situation, whether they are nervous with the characters remains questioned. However, the bedding of drawing them inside the scene and the sense of presence have been built up. The bet is a success.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, the film has a greater advantage in its building of transition, while the musical drama has a greater advantage in its building of a sense of presence. However, when both art forms come across less convenient access to a certain field, they managed to fill in the gap and achieve their uniqueness in advantages.

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