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I coulda bin a Nancy: taking the learning from the stalls

When John Owen Jones was booked to give his Phantom in Manchester *The Leisure Review* broke the mould and sent Joe Coach to see what could be learned.

With the Olympic flame expected in Cornwall, Test cricket at Lord's making a chilled start and the Champions League final imminent, what better place for Joe Coach to find something to talk about than the Palace Theatre on Manchester's Oxford Street? The theatre, built in 1891 and Grade II listed, was playing host to a Cameron Mackintosh production of *The Phantom of the Opera*, which is touring for the next year or so with the lead role being shared by Earl Carpenter and, for the first few venues, John Owen-Jones.

Owen-Jones has played the Phantom in the West End more times than any other actor and this, along with his success as Jean Valjean in *Les Miserables*, has made him box office gold. The turnstiles were certainly ticking at the Palace with the pavement outside the magnificent Victorian façade nearly as busy as when Manchester City paraded the FA Cup along the nearby Deansgate not a week before. Quieter, less luridly dressed and far less prone to swear, at least out loud, the followers of Phantom give nothing to their football confreres when it comes to passion, commitment and turning out come rain or shine; and a betting man would have laid good odds that most of the matronly majority were not Phantom virgins.

To the novice, and one more used to pitches and courts than circles and stalls, the first impression is one of gaudy, if slightly aged, magnificence – and that is just the women filling the foyer. Poor jokes aside, the interior is baroque, plush and vaulting. It is a wonderfully dramatic building and it warrants a production to match. The audience, too well-mannered to be deemed a crowd but filling every one of the 1,955 seats, also seem to be expecting fireworks, although the opening scene is dressed in cobwebs and the actors appear to be in mourning.

The themes and narrative of the piece need not detain us and indeed so convoluted does the plot become that a first-timer is faced with more questions than a hockey coach at a water polo game; you might get the drift but the tactics and technicalities are beyond you and it is better to enjoy the spectacle than waste intellectual energy on interpreting the thought processes behind the action. And the hand of an auteur can be seen throughout this Phantom with the darkness of the opening scene pervading the entire performance. It is as if Sam Allardyce had been put in charge of a circus and settled on gritty, northern drab as a season's strategic motif, as he generally does.

As any A level student of Hamlet will tell you, the play within a play is a common dramatic tactic and Andrew Lloyd Webber, or whoever he copied this set of ideas from, uses it as Italy use the driving maul: used once it is a good idea; used throughout it becomes tedious and predictable. Sitting in a theatre watching a show about a theatre company putting on a show in a theatre haunted by a living ghost is all well and good but surely a little light relief is required over a 150-minute experience? It is testament to the skill of the makers – correct arty usage – of this Phantom that a claustrophobic, backstage world being overpowered by menace and rising hysteria is rendered so consistently. The staging, costumes, lighting, acting, special effects and singing are magnificent.

From a coach's point of view the control exhibited by the team that is the cast in the very many ensemble scenes is remarkable. This is true not just of ordered set pieces such as a masked ball involving complex but highly stylised dancing but also of chaotic scenes as terrified dancers rush by gun-wielding policemen and monolithic shards of scenery – often carrying emoting actors – pirouette and interchange like dark matter icebergs in a slow but inexorable maelstrom.

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Whoever choreographed this production and then rehearsed the actors and production team must have the discipline and the vision of David Brailsford, not to mention his charismatic ability to persuade highly talented and demanding performers to “buy in to the process”.

If the technical and tactical aspects of the production are immediately apparent the physical capability of the performers hits home only on reflection. The performance lasts some two and a half hours and although not everyone is involved all the time whenever they are on stage they are called on to sing and often dance, in tune, to time and in concert with everyone else; actors, dancers, musicians and technicians. John Owen-Jones climbs statues, fights policemen, seduces a woman half his age and sings beautifully all the while. For her part Katie Hall, in the female lead role of Christine Daaé (she’s Swedish), seems to be on stage even longer than Owen-Jones and she does not have his pedigree. Her programme CV is short. She “was a boot-camp contestant for the BBC’s search for Nancy” but was never introduced by Graham Norton as “one of our Nancys”. It does not seem to have done her any harm. She performs consistently and as convincingly as the plot allows, assaying virginal innocence one minute, bawdy depravity the next, throwing in incestuous inklings, suicidal urges and a little sado-masochism en passant. If this is how the second team have turned out, the 12 women picked for the actual squad must have been remarkable.

As the clock ticks down to what the IOC claim as “the greatest show on earth”, Olympic commentators would do well to attend a West End show before they trot out the usual clichés on dedication, sacrifice and the challenge of producing peak performance to order. The men and women of Mr Mackintosh’s team not only have to produce gold-medal performances six days a week and twice on Thursdays; they have to do it in strict tempo and with not a note out of place while causing nearly 2,000 people to laugh, cry and consider the meaning of life.

Joe Coach is the nom de plume of a highly experienced, highly qualified and now highly emotional sports coach.

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