

Unmasking The Phantom: Michael Crawford Takes The Stage For A Long Beach Concert

By Thyda Duong

Michael Crawford on stage in "Phantom of the Opera" (Photo courtesy of The Michael Crawford International Fan Club (www.mcifa.com))



If you happen to see a man snapping a photograph next to a poster promoting Michael Crawford's upcoming concert at the Terrace Theater, don't be too quick to pass him off as just another fan – it might just be Crawford himself.

"I'm looking forward to it very much," the original Phantom said of his upcoming show. "And I hear I'm on a lot of posters on the street. . . . I want to get a photograph with one of those."

Crawford will join the Long Beach Symphony Orchestra for "An Evening With Michael Crawford" on March 10, during which time he will also perform with "Phantom of the Opera" co-star Dale Kristien. Songs will include "Think of Me," "Phantom of the Opera," "All I Ask of You" and "Music of the Night."

"I'm hoping it'll be a pleasurable evening for everyone concerned," he said. "I'm certainly looking forward to singing in that beautiful theater."

Though the avid sailor has been a part-time Long Beach resident for the past six years – he spends the rest of his time in London and New Zealand – it was only recently that he stepped inside the Terrace Theater, sparking an interest in performing at the venue.

"I said 'I would love to come and sing here,' and so things got underway almost immediately," he explained. "We worked out that it would be a good idea to do a benefit night for the symphony. And so here we go."

Born in England, Crawford began his musical career at age 12 as a boy soprano in Benjamin Britten's "Let's Make An Opera," but his first introduction to musical theater was "West Side Story" in London, which triggered his interest in the genre.

"At that time, there were things like 'West Side Story,' 'My Fair Lady,' 'Bye Bye Birdie,' – all these original productions," Crawford explained. "There were just great pieces, great productions going on that were very inspirational. And so that led me towards it."

Crawford also points to working on the

film version of "Hello, Dolly!" with Gene Kelly, Barbara Streisand and Walter Matthau as having a considerable impact on his career, as well as "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum" with Zero Mostel, Buster Keaton and Director Richard Lester.

But it was masking himself as the original Phantom in the long-running Broadway show "Phantom of the Opera" in 1986 that actually unveiled new opportunities and opened "all sorts of magical doors" for Crawford.

"It was certainly amazing," he said. "I mainly did musical comedy, but I was completely unknown in America so . . . it opened all sorts of doors over here, and for the last

o'clock in the morning," he explained of his decision to not revisit the role. "Having originated it, I had to go through all the basic suffering of the time it took to put the makeup on and be part of the creation of the makeup. I'm sure nowadays it's on much quicker, but I think I've done my apprenticeship."

Crawford's performances as the Phantom earned him critical acclaim, honored with such awards as the Tony, Drama Desk and Outer Critics Circle Awards. Moreover, his 1987 recording of "The Phantom of the Opera (The Complete Original London Cast Recording)" sold more than 12 million copies worldwide.



Michael Crawford on stage (Photo courtesy of The Michael Crawford International Fan Club)

20 years, or nearly 20 years, I've been able to sing in concert in America and make albums for Atlantic Records."

Crawford was cast as the Phantom after Andrew Lloyd Webber heard him sing an Italian aria during a vocal lesson. "He apparently said, 'I think we've found our Phantom' from the kitchen below the studio," Crawford said. "And so that's how I got the chance."

And although Crawford notes the pride he associates with being recognized as the original, the Phantom is a role that will most likely remain just that – a ghost of the past.

"I did it for four-and-a-half years, so I think you pay your dues by going in at 11

Looking forward, Crawford is creating a PBS special to be broadcast at the end of the year.

And although he has varied experiences in film, theater, television and albums, Crawford admits there is one genre that prevails over the others.

"I love films, but I love live theater," Crawford said. "If you talk to any artist, they will say there really is no comparison as long as you don't die of fright out there. There's no comparison to live theater."

For more information about the concert, contact the Long Beach Symphony Orchestra at 562/436-3203 or visit www.lbso.org.