‘Phantom’ is here, in a $40M haunt

Broadway phenomenon is latest to be worthy of a Vegas spectacle

By Steve Freiss
Special for USA TODAY

LAS VEGAS

It’s The Phantom of the Opera, so you know what to expect. Young Christine will sing with melancholy about her romantic interest in both a handsome aristo and a masked opera house squatter. And, of course, a large light fixture will crash.

The real star of the 55-minute version that opens here Saturday may turn out to be the theater itself: a $40 million edifice that adds an only-in-Vegas thrill-ride element. Most notably, the 1-ton chandelier made of hand-strung crystal hurls down amid pyrotechnics from above only to stop a mere 10 feet above the heads of some in the audience.

Perhaps even more astonishing: Phantom’s home at the Venetian Hotel-Casino is merely the latest elaborate entry in the Vegas side business of theater building.

“The reason one does this in Vegas is because one can,” says David Rockwell, Phantom Theatre’s New York-based designer. “There are the resources to do it; physically you can do it. You get to start over with something familiar.”

Indeed, freed of the space constraints of Manhattan and London, and armed with money from Caesars Entertainment, show producers can dream bolder than on Broadway or in the West End. A single Vegas showroom can cost more than the combined budgets for all new Broadway productions for a given year.

Attracting some of the 40 million tourists who pass through Vegas each year makes it worthwhile for Caesars Palace to plunge $55 million into a showroom tailored for Celine Dion or for the MGM Grand to build a $155 million space for Cirque du Soleil’s Zumanity.

In the case of Phantom, the version at the Venetian is actually one imagined by composer Andrew Lloyd Webber and director Hal Prince when they first staged the tale in the 1980s.

“It’s a dream come true,” Webber says. “We can do things (here) that we could never have done in any other context.”

To wit, this edition — rebranded Phantom: The Las Vegas Spectacular — will occur in an 1,800-seat playhouse designed throughout to look like the 19th-century Opera Garnier in Paris. Because the narrative starts in a ruined opera house, the audience first sees the chandelier and huge canvas draping the walls. When the tale flashes back, the canvas flies off, and the chandelier pieces assemble and light up in an 80-foot-wide dome.

The trend of customizing Vegas theaters started in the early 1990s, when Steve Wynn recruited Cirque to create Mystere in a $32 million building at his Treasure Island resort. That showroom, where Mystere continues to run, led to more elaborate theaters, including the $80 million O Theater in 1998 at the Bellagio and $100 million Aqua Theater in 2005 at the Wynn Las Vegas resort for Le Rêve, a Cirque-style production by O show creator Franco Dragone.

Says Dale Hurt, Aqua Theater operations technical director: “It’s not necessary of a matter of one-upping the others, but more ‘Let’s do something different.’

Customized theaters have drawbacks, Dragone admits. Le Rêve was widely panned, and Dragone says he couldn’t make some changes because the showroom is so specific. Dragone was recently removed from the show, in fact, as part of an effort by Wynn to overhaul it.

Another risk: that the technology could overshadow human performers.

Prince, who won a Tony for the original Broadway version, is unconcerned. “Phantom is the last show in the world that needs defending. The reason it has run so well for all these years is because it is an intensely romantic story that people love, not because of the chandelier.”

The Phantom Theatre

Show: Phantom: The Las Vegas Spectacular

Details: Opens Saturday (in premiere through Friday) in the $40 million theater at the Venetian Hotel-Casino; has 1,815 seats.

Tickets: Start at $75; 888-661-7469 or phantomlasvegas.com

See more photos and listen to interviews with Webber, Prince and Dragone at life.usatoday.com

Stunt chandelier adds thrills to musical

The chandelier in Phantom of the Opera comes to life at the beginning of the musical — and crashes at the end. Make those dramatic moments even more so for the Las Vegas Phantom was the challenge for Scott Fisher of Fisher Technical Services. He shares what went into the combination of technology and artistry:

At the opening

The chandelier is in four pieces covered in cloth, one on the stage and the others scattered about, as the opera house’s contents are being auctioned off.

At the climax

1. The chandelier appears to be in a free fall as it travels 45 feet in three seconds.
2. The chandelier appears to crash into the audience (side view).
3. After the crash, it "disappears" as it is pulled up into the ceiling, hidden from view.

By the numbers

100,000 pounds of scenery stored hanging above the stage

267 candles that rise up from the floor to form the Phantom’s hair

250 automated effects

$4.5-$5 million cost of the chandelier

16 feet in diameter

29,444 individual crystals in the chandelier

45 engineers, programmers and technicians created this chandelier

Other Vegas megatheaters

The Colosseum

Show: A New Day with Celine Dion


Tickets: Start at $57.50; 877-232-5463 or www.caesarspalace.com

Bells and whistles: Stage is backed by the world’s largest high-definition screen (44 by 110 feet). It costs $5 million to build a door to the tentlike protect system that covers the screen so Dion could appear to be stepping out of the video world.

Challenges: Dion’s voice, fearful the singer’s voice would be lost by the desert climate, told her the showroom needed to be 2,000 humidifying, so engineers built steam-pumping ducts into the stage.

Aqua Theater

Show: Le Rêve by Franco Dragone

Details: Opens at Wynn Las Vegas in 2005 at a cost of $100 million. Has 2,067 seats. The farthest stage-to-seat distance: 42 feet.

Tickets: Start at $99; 888-532-7469 or www.wynnlasvegas.com

Bells and whistles: The theater-in-the-round has a 1.4 million gallon, 20-foot-deep pool kept at 89 degrees. Five lifts in the stage move the water up and down for various scenes. Six 32-by-24-foot rear-projection screens line the lower part of the dome.

Challenges: To put scenery atop the watery stage, a 68-foot-wide, 48-segment electric system with 1,000 motors to carry set pieces up and down 10 steel cables.

Ka Theater

Show: Ka by Cirque du Soleil

Details: Opens at MGM Grand in 2001 at a cost of $165 million. Has 1,951 seats. The farthest stage-to-seat distance: 110 feet.

Tickets: Start at $69.50; 877-264-1844 or www.ka.com

Bells and whistles: The main performance stage, a 25-by-50-by-6-foot platform, is able to rotate and flip over at different parts of the show as a boat, the side of a mountain, a sandstorm and a battlefield.

Challenges: The four 75-foot hydraulic cylinders that hold and power the stage didn’t fit inside the theater. To keep them from being exposed to the elements outside the roof, special chimneys were built to sheath them.

O Theater

Show: O by Cirque du Soleil

Details: Opens at the Bellagio Hotel-Casino in 1998 at a cost of $100 million. Has 1,800 seats. Farthest stage-to-seat distance: 110 feet.

Tickets: Start at $93.50; 888-488-7111 or www.bellagio.com

Bells and whistles: The 1.5 million gallon performance pool is at times covered and at times open so divers can plummet from nine stories above. The water is kept at 86 degrees and disinfected with bromide, which is gentler on costumes than chlorine.

Challenges: Audience complained that the room felt warm and stuffy, so engineers designed an air-conditioning system that cools viewers from beneath the seats.