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Making the Invisible Visible: Tracing Maria Bjørnson's 1986 Costume Design for *The Phantom of the Opera*

Janne Helene Arnesen

Abstract

In 1986, Maria Bjørnson designed the sets and costumes for Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical *The Phantom of the Opera*. Her design quickly became iconic, from the Phantom's half-mask to the grandeur of the scenography. Bjørnson made the costume design for *The Phantom of the Opera* within a few weeks. This was not a straightforward process. One reason why is that the musical has never really closed, and the creative material has hence been closely guarded. Information about the costume design is also typically presented in a promotional context. Three decades later, Bjørnson's design is attracting increasing academic interest. This article maps out key aspects of her design process by looking closely at books and sources the designer used as inspiration.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to trace the costume design process and plausible sources Maria Bjørnson (1949–2002) turned to when designing *The Phantom of the Opera,* as well as how she adapted it to the task in hand: designing a musical consisting of five different eras, an underground lair and a fancy dress ball. A starting point was to get an overview of how and when the work started, and some of the chief sources to which the designer turned. The approach is similar to archival studies, using written sources and the original design to contextualize the design process. Bjørnson's books and sources have been suggested by various professionals working on the musical. Furthermore, interviews and press coverage where Bjørnson comments on the design have been used to contextualize the sources.

The following are the main hypothesis: the task Bjørnson faced was huge, and she finished the costume design in a fairly short time span. It points to having a variety of sources in hand and also a solid experience to draw upon. With this established, the finished costume design—as it first appeared on stage in 1986—will be discussed through two main costume features: The Phantom's white mask, which was worn throughout the show, and the masquerade ball at the beginning of Act Two. To begin, let us now take a closer look at Bjørnson and her career around the time she was approached to do the design for *The Phantom of the Opera*.

Designer Maria Bjørnson

Maria Elena Viviane Eva Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson came from a stage-influenced family. Her mother, Romanian Maria "Mia" Prodan de Kisbunn (1917–2004), was the granddaughter of Paul Prodan de Kisbunn,[1] director of the Romanian National Theatre. Bjørnson's estranged father, Norwegian Bjørn Albert Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1899–1986), was the grandson of Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832–1910), who was an author, playwright, and winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1903. Maria Bjørnson's father was also the nephew of Bjørn Bjørnson (1859–1942), the director of the Norwegian National Theatre.

[1] The birthyear and deathyear of Paul Prodan de Kisbunn are unknown.

Maria Bjørnson was born in Paris and grew up in London. She was educated at the Central School of Art and Design and was to become one of the most productive and celebrated stage designers of her era. She worked on operas and plays, with a handful of musicals in between, and was involved in approximately 125 productions in 30 years. She was in all ways productive, and also praised.

The Phantom's Designer

Bjørnson had mainly designed for opera and plays when she was approached to design *The Phantom of the Opera,* a new musical about a deformed genius. The producer Cameron Mackintosh (1946–) had seen Bjørnson's work several times before, but it was her take on the sinking ship in the Royal Shakespeare Company's 1982 production of *The Tempest* that appears to have piqued Mackintosh's interest. The ship (Figure 1) sank into the floor by simple means—some sails, a bit of rope, wooden remains of a boat—and yet these simple means created the production's own universe. Bjørnson said, "I later asked him what it was that made him approach me to do *Phantom.* He said it was the *Tempest* shipwreck—I had the boat sink into the floor of the stage, and the sail washed up into the sky. That became Prospero's island."[2] Mackintosh was to produce *The Phantom of the Opera,* and this was the sort of cinematic flow needed for the musical.

[2] Laurie Winer, "Stage Wizard: Maria Bjornson May Now Be the World's Top Theater Designer," *Connoisseur,* New York, New York, United States, September 1988, p. 147.

Figure 1:
Scene from *The Tempest,* 1982, London, England,
Joe Cocks Studio Collection, © Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.

Bjørnson was not, however, the only designer considered. When Hal Prince (1928–2019) was hired as the director for *The Phantom of the Opera,* Mackintosh recommended five designers to him. Prince said of the designers, "One stood out. Considering the assignment—a flamboyant Victorian melodrama—it must seem strange that I was especially impressed with a single-set design—almost minimalist—of an Ibsen play. A rectangle, wooden louvers, beautiful furniture, architecturally spare: an inviting space to tell a powerful story."[3] The Ibsen play was likely *Hedda Gabler,* which Bjørnson designed in 1977 and which was directed by Keith Hack[4] at Duke of York's Theatre, London. Having impressed both the director and the producer of *Phantom,* Bjørnson was hired as the designer in 1985.

[3] Paolo Felici, Editor, *The Scenographer: A Tribute to Maria Bjørnson,* Harman Publishing, London, England, October 2009, p. 44.
[4] The birthyear and deathyear of Keith Hack are unknown.

Bjørnson had worked on approximately 100 operas, plays, and ballets prior to *The Phantom of the Opera*. She usually designed both sets and costumes for the productions. Interestingly, her costumes often double as a set piece, with ornamental details and layers, creating a sculptural effect. This was also done for *The Phantom of the Opera,* where sets and costumes are co-dependent. An example of this is the set design bordering a black box where only part of a large stage piece is introduced—a corner of a staircase, half a dressing room, or a drape and two pieces of furniture suggesting a Victorian office.[5] The rest of the stage is dim. Against this "black box," the costumes are like exclamation points, "as much the scenery as the scenery itself."[6] For this reason, the set design must be considered when discussing Bjørnson costume design.

Prince had picked Bjørnson because of her ability to create "black box" moods, even in elaborate designs. His instructions for her *Phantom* design were simple: "I hear the thud of heavy drapes, and I see dark Turkish corners."[7] Bjørnson mentioned a Zeffirelli production of *Don Giovanni* in Vienna as inspiration: "The set seemed to exist beyond the frame of the stage. I understood then that a realistic set that is planted firmly in the boundary of what can be understood can have a deadening effect. If you make the audience feel as if there's something happening just offstage, they keep their eyes and ears open."[8] This was an approach both director and designer would implement in *The Phantom of the Opera*. Things are suggested, felt, indicated, just out of view.

Such a suggestive notion comes to view in the opulent golden proscenium, with satyrs and maidens twisting and turning in repressed erotic poses. The proscenium hints towards something both director Prince and designer Bjørnson felt was of importance for the tone of the musical: people with deformities and physical disabilities also have sexual desires.[9] More than a mere decoration, the proscenium thus sets the mood and underlines the erotic elements of the show.

[5] Felici, op cit.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Winer, op cit.
[8] Ibid.
[9] A lengthier passage about the proscenium and Hal Prince's perspectives on its meaning can be found here:
George Perry, *The Complete Phantom of the Opera,* Pavilion Books, London, England, 1987, p. 74.

The creative team did not want their new musical to depend on existing interpretations of the Phantom in popular culture, where the story often differed substantially from the original. Instead, they went back to the very roots. "We have gone back to the book which, paradoxically, has provided a lot of freshness," lyricist Charles Hart (1961–) said just before the 1986 premiere in London.[10] It provided the creative team with a starting point.

Director Prince flew back and forth between London and New York, with many in-process talks with Bjørnson. Prince said, "We'd be in her studio, and then a lot of evolving, a lot of talk until the design happening. A lot."[11] As it were, the talks were a part of Bjørnson's design process. To her it was all about "...finding out what the problems are by asking the right questions."[12] She did not start with the visuals, but sought to find answers to the questions, the challenges. From there the visuals became the response. Still, her deadline was fast approaching. The sets were done, but the costumes had to be designed and sewn.

A few weeks later, the costume design was ready. Bjørnson had worked non-stop, designing not just a handful, but 10, 20, maybe 25 new costumes a day.[13] Around 230 intricate costumes, complete with a wide range of accessories and suggestions for materials, were created in a few weeks. Thirty-five costume makers were ready to begin the process of transforming sketches into fabric.[14] To get an idea of this design process, it may be helpful to look at some of the sources Bjørnson used, as well as those she excluded.

Printed Sources

The task Bjørnson faced was to design sets and costumes for a musical covering five different eras, a masked ball, and a dark underground fantasy world. In a discussion on the musical's official website in the 1990s,[15] the designer was asked how she started on this task. Bjørnson replied, "First there are in-depth discussions with the director about the text/music and our response to that. In this case the

[10] Brian Bell, "Mask Hysteria: Return of the Phantom," *The Observer,* London, England, 5 October 1986, p. 18.
[11] Tony Davis, *Stage Design,* RotoVision, Brighton, England, 2001, p. 92.
[12] Felici, op cit.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Sue Willmington interviewed in the BBC documentary *Behind the Mask* (2005).
[15] This Q&A is no longer on the official *Phantom of the Opera* website but was retrieved through user despiteyourdestination on the blog platform Tumblr in 2012.

Paris Opera House was a major player as it is here that the original Phantom named Erik lived....When we visited the Opera House for two days, we took 350 photos of the building, there was so much to see."[16] This was her way of asking the right questions and pinpointing the challenges of the musical.

To another person asking what kind of research she did beforehand, Bjørnson replied, "I did have extensive research on drapes from the Victoria and Albert Museum. The tassels and fringes I made up myself. As I had done a bit of designing for opera, I was very familiar with the period and already had a lot of costume references. The Degas drawings of girls at the Paris Opera House and etchings of the famous opera balls were also of huge inspiration."[17] Bjørnson thus started out with a solid portfolio and extensive reference material already in her collection. She also researched the Palais Garnier first hand, to become familiar with the building where the story takes place, as well as the original novel. No less important were her discussions with director Prince on what he envisioned for the musical.

When the composer Andrew Lloyd Webber (1948–) first explored the possibilities of making *The Phantom of the Opera* into a musical, he did look into existing versions. Of particular interest were the 1925 film with Lon Chaney (1883–1930) and the original 1984 stage version of *Phantom of the Opera* by Ken Hill (1937–1995). It was not until early 1985, when Lloyd Webber came across an English translation of the novel at a secondhand store in New York that his interest in the original story was sparked.[18] Of special interest was the more pronounced romantic thread of the novel. In July 1985, an early draft of the first act of Lloyd Webber's version was presented at the annual festival on his Sydmonton estate, complete with a love triangle and a falling chandelier.[19]

[16] According to assistant Jonathan Allen, interviewed in the BBC documentary *Behind the Mask* (2005), the visit to the Palais Garnier in Paris took place in November 1985.

[17] This Q&A is no longer on the official *Phantom of the Opera* website but was retrieved through user despiteyourdestination on the blog platform Tumblr in 2012.
Many of the patterns and ornaments Bjørnson designed for the musical can definitely be matched to this book:
C.B. Griesbach, *Historic Ornament: A Pictorical Archive,* Dover Publications, New York, New York, United States, 1975.

[18] Perry, op cit., p. 67.

[19] Ibid., p. 68.

Bjørnson's set design is firmly based in the Palais Garnier in Paris. In the novel the Palais Garnier almost becomes a character in its own right, and architectural elements like the grand staircase, the rooftop's dome, the underground lake, and specific doors made it into Bjørnson's design. The 2006 Las Vegas version helmed by Hal Prince also introduced the royal boxes and the opera facade.

Interestingly, neither Bjørnson's Sydmonton design nor the finished costume design picks up many clues from the original 1909 novel by Gaston Leroux (1868–1927). A much-cited example is that Leroux's Christine is blonde, while Bjørnson designed Christine as a brunette with large curls. That may be a homage to the Christine in the 1925 film, played by Mary Philbin (1902–1993), considered by many the original Christine.[20] It could also have been in reference to the appearance of soprano Sarah Brightman (1960–) at the time she assumed the role of Christine in 1986.

The novel's Raoul is a young aristocrat in the navy, eagerly awaiting a trip to the Arctic. But the only military presentation he gets in the stage version is when appearing in a Hussar uniform—the uniform of a light cavalry—at the masked ball. Meanwhile, the Phantom is described in the novel as more skeleton than man, with waxy yellow skin. He wears different masks, hereunder horizontal half-masks with and without a *barbe,* a fabric drape in front of the mouth. But for reasons later explained, the stage mask is a vertical half-mask. The Phantom himself, albeit still deformed, was made more human, even with a touch of the sleek look of the silent film star Rudolph Valentino (1895–1926).

Thus, the inspiration for Bjørnson's costumes did not come from Leroux's novel. Michael Lee of the Maria Bjørnson Archive describes how she instead "...started with intense research, spending weeks in Paris...and in libraries hunting out the costumes and decor of the Belle Époque."[21] This corroborates Bjørnson's own words on the process. These different sources were then filtered and absorbed into her own design, following her own vision.

[20] The first to portray Christine was Norwegian actress, Aud Egede-Nissen (1893–1974), in a German 1916 silent movie. The movie is considered lost, and no visuals known. Thus, Mary Philbin's portrayal is the first available version.

[21] Souvenir Brochure, *The Phantom of the Opera at Royal Albert Hall: In Celebration of 25 Years,* London, England, 2011.

For the main characters, the designer used croquis—main sketches of a character where the costumes are altered for the different scenes (Figure 2). Bjørnson made some 12 sketches of costumes worn by leading character Christine Daaé, spread out over five main croquis. The repeated croquis are present in the second act. If she designed the costumes chronologically this would suggest that time was of essence towards the end of the design period.

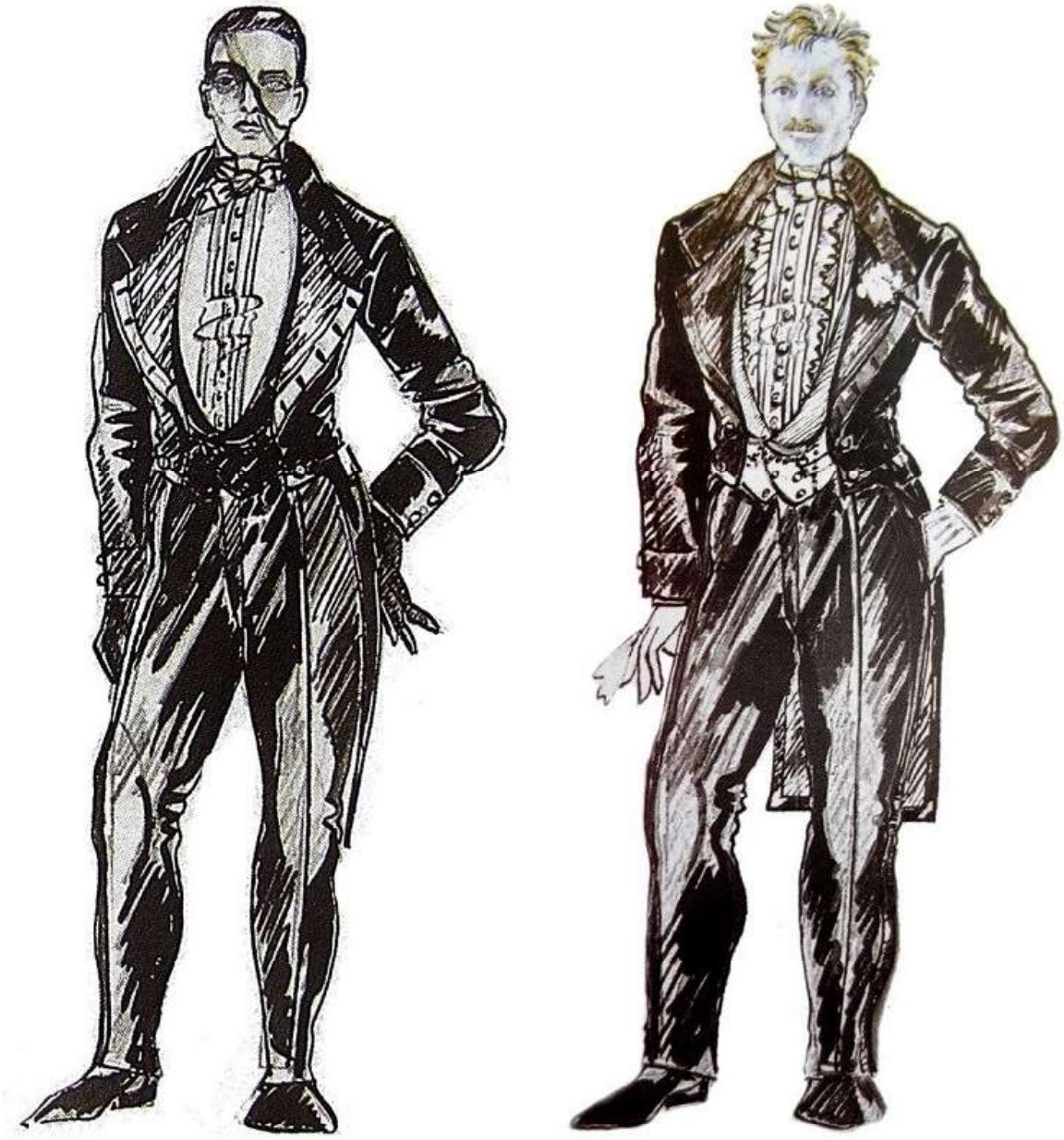

Figure 2:
Bjørnson's 1986 Design for
the Phantom (left) and Raoul de Chagny (right),
Using the Same Croquis for Both,
Images Used by Kind Permission of The Maria Bjørnson Archive.

Bjørnson used the same croquis for the Phantom and for Raoul de Chagny, the two male leads in the show. It gives a sense of her wanting to underline their similarities as much as their differences. This process was kept for all costumes except the Phantom's impressive Red Death attire. For this, the designer went back to the 1925 Lon Chaney film, as will be addressed later.

For minor roles and ensemble costumes, Bjørnson used historical fashion plates, photos of historical opera and film stars, and etchings from the Garnier balls. Her designs were to be firmly based in history. If Bjørnson found depictions she wanted to incorporate, the overall look might be kept, but with small or large details redesigned to make the attires unique to the musical. Bjørnson also spent time choosing the appropriate materials and colours. The original silhouette was however often kept, which makes it easier to identify sources when illustrations are compared with her designs.

One such example can be found in *The Complete Phantom of the Opera* by George Perry. This includes an engraving of a late nineteenth century Bal Masqué in the Opéra Garnier, likely one of the engravings the designer referred to in the Q&A.[22] The motif shows a masked ball in the auditorium of the Palais Garnier. At least three of the figures seen in the foreground made it into Bjørnson's design for the Masquerade scene.

Another example is Bjørnson's design for the "Butterfly" in masquerade (Figure 3). This one is a definitive match to a costume from scenic designer Wilhelm's[23] 1915 sketch for the ballet *A Dream of Butterflies and Roses*.[24] Other singular costume and dress renderings used for the musical lead to works found in The Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), London, archives. It is unclear whether this stems from books Bjørnson had at her disposal, or visits she made to the museum.

[22] Perry, op cit.
Neither artist nor year is mentioned in the book, but the opera house opened to the public in 1875.
[23] The birthyear and deathyear of Wilhelm (William John Charles Pitcher) are unknown.
[24] The Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England, S.714–1987.
This match was discovered by user comtessedechagny on the blog platform, Tumblr.

Figure 3:
Left, Wilhelm's 1915 Costume Design for *Of Butterflies and Roses,*[25]
Right, Bjørnson's 1986 Design for a Butterfly Figure in the Scene Masquerade,
Image Used by Kind Permission of The Maria Bjørnson Archive.

A book Bjørnson did have in her collection is one featuring *Harper's Bazaar* fashion plates, possibly from the 1974 book edition.[26] The book features a purplish-blue seaside dress at the cover. The dress, in this very shade, appears on the character Wardrobe Mistress, designed by Bjørnson, but with some details added. Other fashion plates from this book also made it into the design for ensemble costumes, including a Victorian travel dress in the Sitzprobe scene and Victorian day dresses for the musical's dress rehearsal of the mock opera *Hannibal*.

[25] The Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 1915, S.714-1987.
[26] Stella Blum, *Victorian Fashions & Costumes from Harper's Bazaar: 1867-1908,* Dover Publications, New York, New York, United States, 1974.

Another book of interest is *The Great Opera Stars in Historic Photographs.*[27] The book was mentioned by associate designer Sam Fleming in a costume meet-and-greet in Las Vegas in 2009. Few of the costumes in this book were copied directly, but elements of poses and overall lines made it into Bjørnson's design. Of particular interest is the photograph of Albert Niemann (1831–1917) as Tristan. Niemann's image was translated into both the soldiers and the slave-master in the musical's scene, Hannibal, with Niemann's face even appearing in Bjørnson's design (Figure 4). Browsing through the book reveals that several of the photos were filtered and used. Historical opera costumes played a vital part in establishing a believable Victorian opera world in the musical.

Figure 4:
Left, Closeup of Opera Singer Albert Niemann as Tristan, circa 1895,
Right, Bjørnson's 1986 Design for a Soldier in the Scene Hannibal,
Image Used by Kind Permission of The Maria Bjørnson Archive.

[27] James Camner, *The Great Opera Stars in Historic Photographs,* Dover Publications, New York, New York, United States, 1978.

A final printed source to mention is one not directly related to the costume design but that still reflects on Bjørnson's work with textiles; namely, the *Historic Ornament: A Pictorial Archive*.[28] Some of the historic patterns sketched in this book reappear in Bjørnson's rich drapes and curtains throughout the show. These printed sources give an idea of the richness and diversity of the material used in the design process, which has so far been traced through the expressed intentions of the original creative team, and through various printed sources. These are sources the designer and her team has mentioned, or sources to which specific Bjørnson designs can be visually matched. They offer a context to the design process, and points towards some of Bjørnson's aims when designing. With that established, there is another source that needs to be examined: the silver screen.

Echoes from the Silver Screen

Early Bjørnson sketches for *Phantom of the Opera* are conceptual and expressionistic, but her later costume and set designs for the musical are historical in flair and highly sketched out. Michael Lee, archivist of The Maria Bjørnson Archive, describes the costume design as "...lovely things in their own right, as well as excellent working drawings."[29] There is a high level of detail even in the jewellery, trimming and fabric samples. Along with written instructions, it leaves little doubt as to the designer's intentions. As touched upon earlier, some poses and outlines from her inspirational pieces have been kept. Earlier, these have been matched to printed sources. Others took a cue from films.

A vital source is the 1925 Lon Chaney film, *Phantom of the Opera,* which appears to have been studied carefully. Overall moments and specific costumes were translated into the 1986 musical. The ballet opening of the film is a close match to the *Il Muto* ballet of the stage version. The main visuals of a cloaked Phantom and a curly brunette Christine may have originally occurred in the Chaney film, but were cemented through Bjørnson's design and are frequently copied today. The most striking example, however, is how Bjørnson thoroughly adapted Lon Chaney's Red Death costume (Figure 5).

[28] Griesbach, op cit.
[29] Souvenir Brochure, *The Phantom of the Opera at Royal Albert Hall: In Celebration of 25 Years,* London, England, 2011.

Figure 5:
Left, Photograph from the 1925 Film *The Phantom of the Opera,*
with Lon Chaney Wearing the Red Death Costume,
Right, Bjørnson's 1986 Design for the Red Death,
Image Used by Kind Permission of The Maria Bjørnson Archive.

In the 1909 novel, the Phantom makes a shocking appearance at a fancy dress ball. He is dressed as a death figure clad in crimson and carrying a skull staff. First interpreted in the 1925 Lon Chaney film, this figure is adapted in Bjørnson's 1986 design to become larger than life: a chevalier dressed figure in red and gold, with a death skull instead of a face, a matching death skull cane, and a long red train. Bjørnson made two designs for this costume. The first is a definite match to stills from the Lon Chaney film. This indicates Bjørnson wanted to draw on an established image for this specific moment.

More fragmented inspiration can be seen in the use of past and present film stars. Archivist Michael Lee revealed in 2011 that: "Faces in the costume designs are often photographs collaged in. Maria enjoyed the tease of using famous faces, like Errol Flynn in her designs for Raoul, for instance, or Kenneth Williams' face on a

female costume design."[30] The example of Errol Flynn (1909–1959) is a striking one, as the Australian actor's face is recognisable in Bjørnson's design (Figure 6). Furthermore, Errol Flynn wore a Hussar costume in the 1941 film *They Died With Their Boots On,* as the character George Armstrong Custer. Comparing a still of Flynn from that film corresponds well with the costume design of Raoul de Chagny in Hussar uniform for the Masquerade scene. It might very well be that the designer went further than just adding Flynn's *face* to the design.

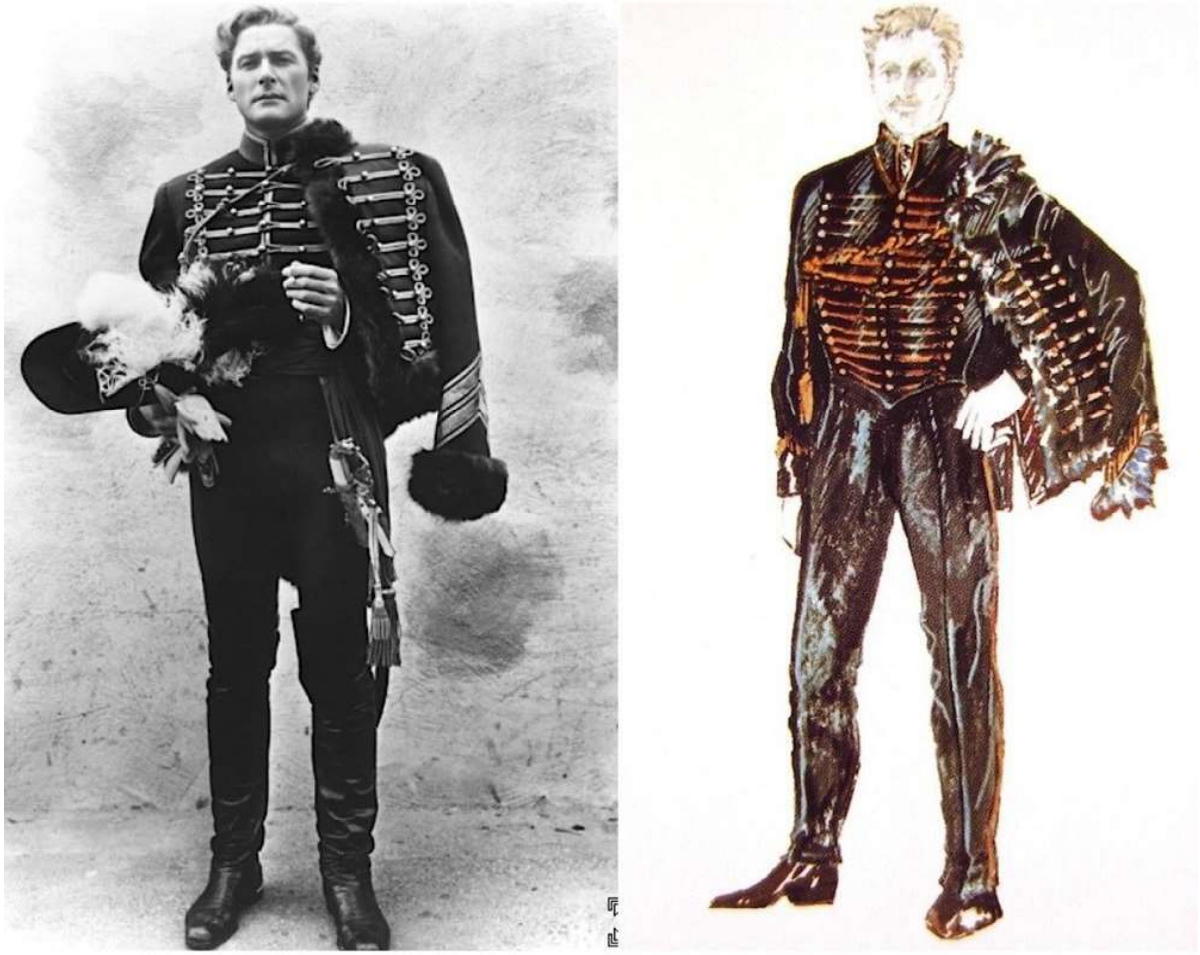

Figure 6:
Left, Photograph from the 1941 Film *They Died With Their Boots On,*
Featuring Errol Flynn in a Hussar Uniform,
Right, Bjørnson's 1986 Design for Raoul de Chagny in Hussar Uniform,
Image Used by Kind Permission of The Maria Bjørnson Archive.

[30] Ibid.

The character of Madame Giry is another that probably owes her look to a film: The character, Mrs. Danvers, in the 1940 version of *Rebecca,* directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1899–1980). Madame Giry's black dress and black braided hair seem like a visual nod to Mrs. Danvers. In the *The Phantom of the Opera* novel, Madame Giry is described as a slightly distressed opera worker, who no one takes seriously but who has been in the service of the Phantom whenever he appears in his opera box. In the musical, she is the respected ballet mistress, and a key figure to the mystery of the Phantom. Rather than recreating Leroux's Madame Giry, the stage equivalent seems like an amalgamation of different characters from the novel. Giving her some of the attributes of the secretive Mrs. Danvers, an established mysterious woman of the silver screen, could in this context underline the role Madame Giry was meant to have in the new stage musical.

Individual costumes can thus be traced to specific sources. Sometimes the exact outlines and details have been kept, other times there is just the essence of a style. This should not lessen the interpretation of the design. Each garment has been extensively worked on, where choice of materials, accessories, and colours has been given great care. Rather, it is interesting to see how Bjørnson absorbed the amount of available material and made it her own.

The Costumes

Bjørnson's costumes in *The Phantom of the Opera* have often been described in terms of their opulence: "costing as much as a medium sportscar" (Broadway, 1988), "takes 18 metres of silk" (Hong Kong, 1995) and "over 200 yards of trim" (U.S. Tour, 2007).[31] Texts in costume displays may also present the role and scene. Costume exhibitions have primarily been to promote the show, and the opulence of the costumes is a selling point, a promise of a grand spectacle and a fun night out. Discussing Bjørnson's designs in an academic context may add some insights to the questions she set out to answer through her set and costume design. A key piece in this aspect is the Phantom's mask.

[31] These quotations are from text accompanying costumes on display.

"A Mask, My First Unfeeling Scrap of Clothing"

Perhaps the most iconic costume piece in the musical is the Phantom's white half-mask. Prior to the 1986 musical, the traditional Phantom masks divided the face horizontally. The original Leroux novel describes horizontal masks, sometimes with the addition of the veiled front, the *barbe*. This is also what appears in the early film versions of the story. The original creative team of the musical was concerned that a horizontal half-mask would hinder the acting of the original Phantom, Michael Crawford (1942–), as the mask concealed many of his facial expressions.[32] The solution was as simple as it was ground-breaking. The mask was turned to split the face vertically instead. This has since become the one piece most associated with the figure of the Phantom, copied in other musicals, parodies, school productions, book covers, and in popular culture in general. That makes the question of its origin all the more interesting.

The director, Hal Prince, discussed the mask early on. He had this idea of the Phantom being "Janus faced." When you saw him from one angle you would see his good side and from another angle you saw his bad side. This was further underlined by Michael Crawford wearing contact lenses: a dark brown one for his "good" eye and a white and a pale blue one for the "bad" eye, making this eye look blinded. Thus, the character could switch personality just by moving his head. In this he would also retain his expressiveness.

Bjørnson's assistant Jonathan Allen has elaborated on Prince's story. When they were pondering how to let Michael Crawford keep at least a minimum of facial expressions when wearing a mask, Allen made a suggestion: "I reminded her of a hat she had once worn to a fancy dress ball at the Lloyd Webber's house. It covered one half of her face and only one eye and crescendoed on top of her head with a long feather. This became the basis for the mask she eventually designed. When she showed it to Hal, she remembered to say that I had reminded her of the hat."[33]

[32] In the book, *The Complete Phantom of the Opera,* Perry discussed how a horizontal half-mask similar to that in the logo was briefly tried out. Perry stated the following, with the reaction of Michael Crawford, who was the original Phantom in 1986:
"A Lon Chaney approach, with cheek padding on the inside, would have made singing impossible. 'We tried it, but I sounded like Marlon Brando in *The Godfather,* and I can't have anything in my ears because I must hear the music.'"
Perry, op cit., p. 78.

[33] Winer, op cit.

Bjørnson confirmed this story in a Q&A from the musical's official website: "When we discussed the Phantom's costume, I was concerned that he would be stuck behind a mask all evening. My assistant reminded me of a half mask I wore to a fancy dress costume ball given by Sarah Brightman and Andrew Lloyd Webber. This enabled the actor to have a facial contact with his audience. I also looked at World War I victims who had parts of their faces remodelled in China and then painted with glass eyes to blend in with their own faces"[34] (Figure 7).

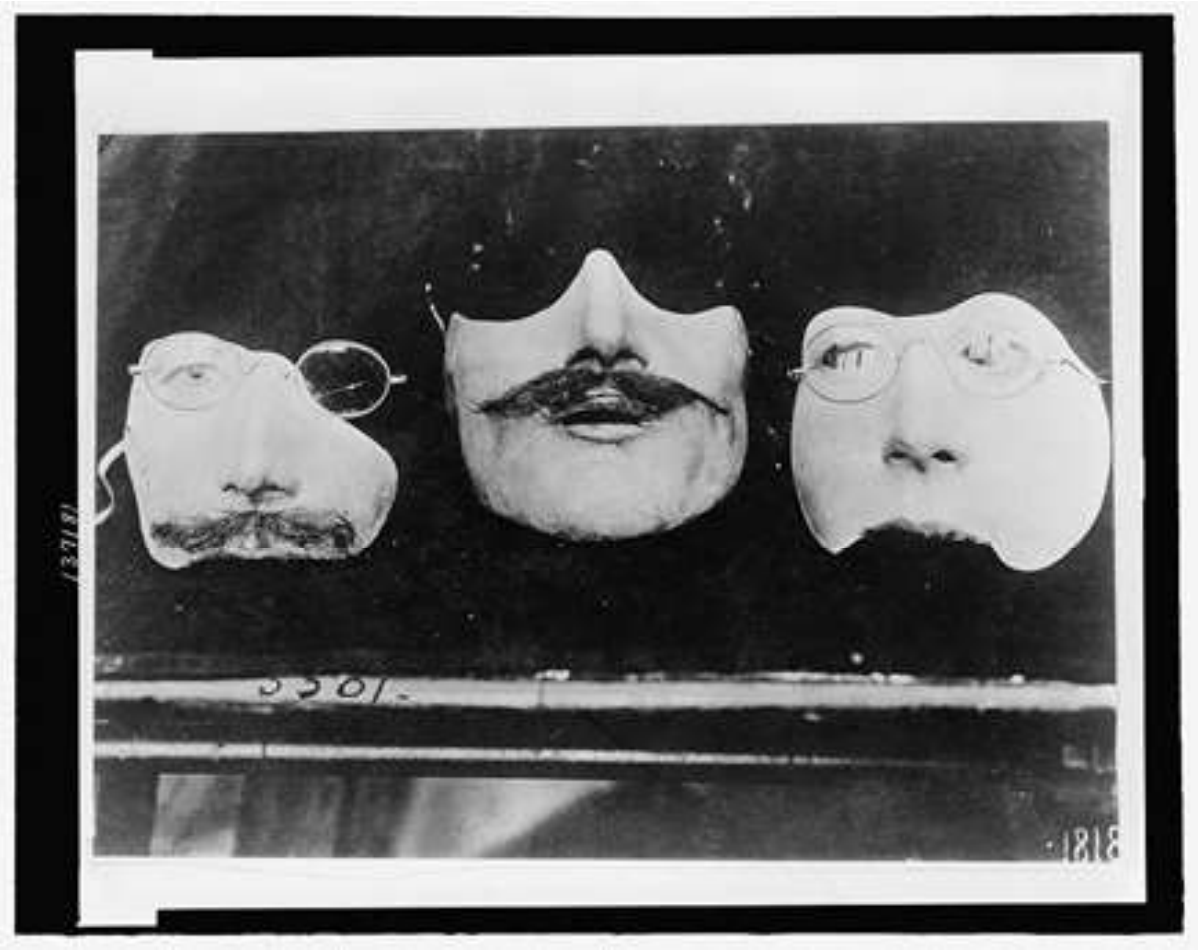

Figure 7:
Three Masks Made by American Sculptor Anna Coleman Ladd (1878–1939) for First World War Soldiers Who Suffered Face Injuries, 1918.[35]

[34] This Q&A is no longer on the official *Phantom of the Opera* website but was retrieved through user despiteyourdestination on the blog platform Tumblr in 2012.
[35] Three Masks by Sculptor, Anna Coleman Ladd, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, American National Red Cross Collection, Washington, D.C., United States, No. 5501.

The parallel between the Phantom's mask and First World War soldiers who had their face mutilated is particularly interesting. Some soldiers had their faces reconstructed through ground-breaking surgery in London, performed by surgeon Harold Gilles (1882–1960).[36] Those who did not obtain surgery often suffered the stigma of society. The market for masks grew immensely, with masks painted to mimic their faces, often with highly elaborate eye details (Figure 8). Such masks can still be found in museums around the world.[37]

Figure 8:
Detail, Bjørnson's Original 1986 Design for the Phantom, with a Note:
"Mask to look like porcelain with a 'false' glass eye,"
Image Used by Kind Permission of The Maria Bjørnson Archive.

[36] Artist Paddy Hartley has done fascinating work on the subject, examining the surgeon's archive.
[37] Of special interest is the "tin-faces" of sculptor Anna Coleman Ladd (1878–1939).

In this context, it is interesting to notice a detail in Bjørnson's design: the blue, "blinded" eye in the design is described as "a 'false' glass eye." As mentioned earlier, this damaged eye was created by using multiple contact lenses—a tradition discontinued in 1988, but occasionally picked up by individual actors. Nonetheless, in the early days of the musical it was an important part of the good side/bad side philosophy and contributed to the blocking[38] on stage that Phantom actors still follow today.

Foreshadowing and Mirroring in Masquerade

The Masquerade scene that opens Act Two is one of the highlights of the show. At first glance it appears a jolly scene with glittering costumes, roaring dancing, and grandeur. Yet something lurks beneath the surface. The director Hal Prince had a vision of making the audience uneasy. His instructions to the original West End cast were clear: "This whole play is designed to keep the audience always, always on the alert, and you must contribute to that."[39] Bjørnson confirmed that one of her goals was to give the audience a feeling of something happening beyond the frame of the stage. In both staging and design there is an intended dissonance.

In the Masquerade scene, each costume has its own story, in the shape of allegories or embodying an animal or character. Some of these costumes are also used to mirror the main story. The monkey girl playing cymbals is a visual quotation of the monkey music box, which has a top ornament of a monkey figure playing the cymbals. The music box can be seen in the opening scene, sparking old Raoul's memories, and it is omnipresent in the Phantom's lair—always while playing the main tune from the Masquerade (Figure 9).

[38] Blocking is a term used to describe the precise staging or movement of stage actors.
[39] Hal Prince interviewed by Adam Hetrick/Playbill (2011).

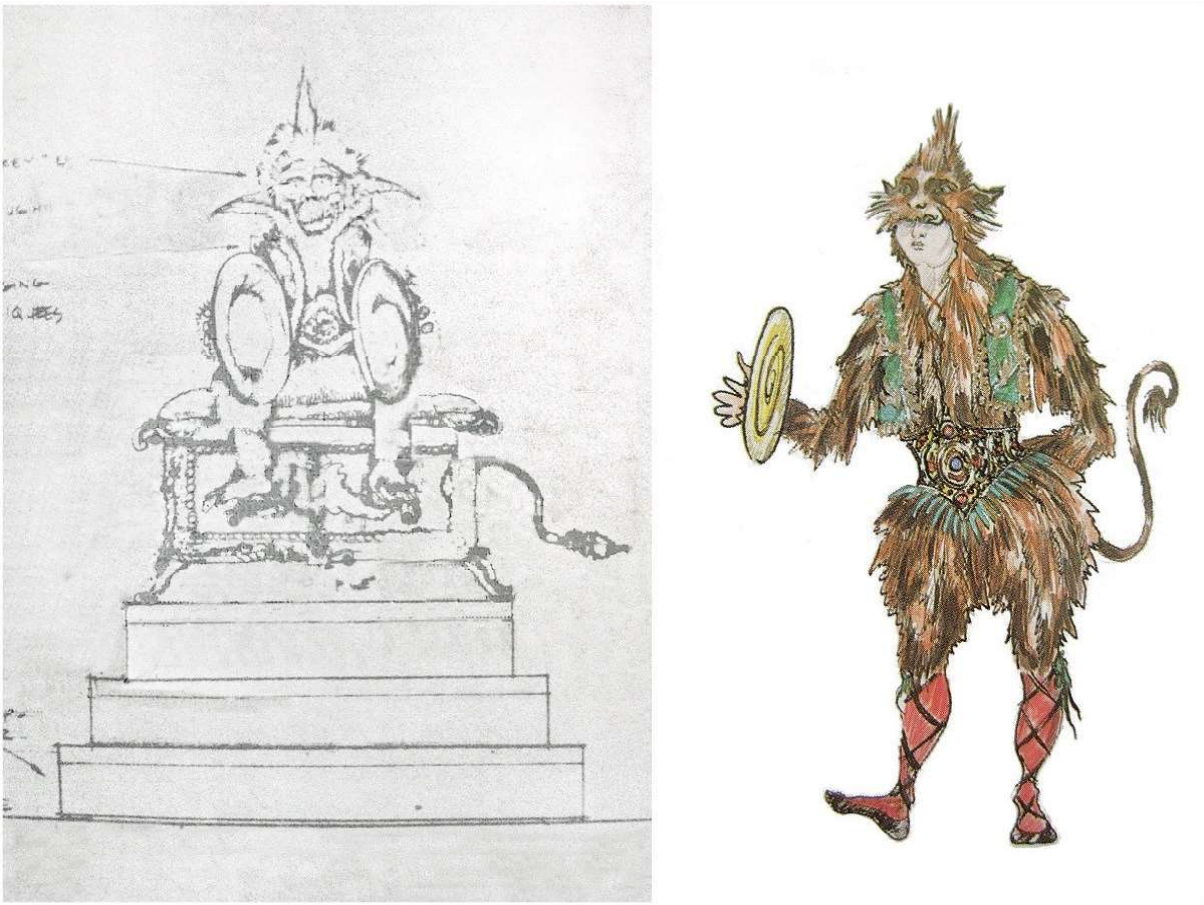

Figure 9:
Left, Bjørnson's 1986 Design for the Monkey Music Box,
Right, the Monkey Figure Appearing in the Masquerade Scene,
Image Used by Kind Permission of The Maria Bjørnson Archive.

Another costume connecting the Masquerade scene and the Phantom's lair is the Mandarin robe. The Phantom is seen composing in a Mandarin robe, or a dragon robe, in his lair. It is made of rich Chinese brocades, often with antique embroideries and fringes. The colours are typically black, indigo, and gold. A corresponding costume appears in Masquerade, on the Mandarin Man. He is wearing a fitted Mandarin suit with exaggerated lines, but the silks and the hat are similar to what the Phantom wears in his lair.

The Masquerade scene also features a grand staircase, just a corner of it, but closely modelled after the grand staircase in the Palais Garnier. Partly to make the scene appear more crowded, and partly to create a safety rail where the staircase abruptly ends, some 20 dummies in ornate costumes adorn the edge of the stairs. They are attached to the steps in a way that makes them move slightly when actors walk on the staircase, thus making it appear as if the dummies move.

Some of the dummy costumes reflect costumes worn by the cast members, both in Masquerade and other parts of the musical. For example, a clown dummy in the staircase is similar to that of the whiteface clown worn by an actor. A skeleton dummy in the upper staircase echoes the skeleton costume worn by the opera manager André. A dummy wearing a golden mask and a feathered hoop skirt is a nod to the Fan Lady ensemble costume. This blurs the boundaries of fantasy and reality.

An interesting foreshadowing is the Phantom's appearance at the end of the Masquerade. He makes his entrance as the Red Death, in a seventeenth century chevalier style, with doublet and breeches, a large plumed hat, and high-heeled shoes. As discussed previously, this is a visual nod to the 1925 Lon Chaney film. Bjørnson adapted this design. The Red Death figure that she designed presents his masterpiece, the mock opera *Don Juan Triumphant*. He instructs the opera company to perform it, and the opera appears later in Act Two. He sings his command to a tune later heard in the mock opera.

To visually underline the ties between the Red Death figure and the mock opera, the same style of costume is used. The tenor Piangi sings the lead role Don Juan, wearing a red chevalier costume with doublet, breeches, a plumed hat and high heeled shoes—in every way similar to the Red Death. Later in the scene Piangi is found dead. The Red Death's appearance can thus be read as a foreshadowing of the mock opera itself, as well as the death of Piangi. Thus, the Masquerade costumes are utilized to give messages on a subconscious level. The design binds the story together, giving the audience elements of things already seen, and elements of scenes to come. Parts of the design are deliberately suggestive, which allows the audience to fill in the rest.

The Aftermath

Bjørnson's work with *The Phantom of the Opera* costumes did not end when the show premiered in October 1986. With the West End premiere in London, Bjørnson had taken notes of necessary changes. Both leading ladies were given a new costume during this period, and a handful of costumes were redesigned prior to the January 1988 Broadway premiere in New York. It is likely that the movement of the dancers and actors was also taken into account.

The original Raoul de Chagny, Steve Barton (1954–2001), wanted easier movements for the Masquerade scene, where he did a lot of dancing. He complained that the fur-trimmed Hussar pelisse pulled and tugged when dancing.[40] In response to this, the overall costume was simplified. The grand cloak seen in one of the designs for his Hussar costume never came to be, his black half mask did not survive many performances, and neither did the gloves. The uniform's pelisse was fitted with a fur trim rather than a full fur lining, to make it lighter. It is an example of gentle revision, where the overall visuals remained the same.

By contrast, some costumes were made grander in later years. Comparing the original stage costumes to later incarnations shows larger skirts, more drapes, more gold, bigger feathers, bolder colours—in large, a more theatrical flair. Yet, Bjørnson was usually present at each cast change in West End up until her death in 2002. This was to ensure her design was maintained, and that costumes were fitted according to her visions.

The Legacy

Even if changes can be pinpointed, the designs used today are still unmistakably Bjørnson's. Even some of her chosen fabric is still in use. The stripy blue silk she chose for Christine Daaé's blue second-act dress (Figure 10) was created by the Hopkins,[41] who are popular in the business for their range of antique and specially designed materials. Although the silk has later appeared in other films and shows, it was once unique to *The Phantom of the Opera* and has become something of a trademark. Similarly, the black diamond-patterned silk featured for the Phantom's tailcoat in 1986 remains in use around the world.[42]

[40] "The jacket was rather heavy to say the least and would pull terribly at his neck when dancing. He used to refuse putting it on until the very last moment. Raouls since have had their costume made from far lighter material."
Marcus Tylor, *Phantom of the Opera: The First Year Backstage,* Marcus Tylor, London, England, 2007, p. 67.

[41] The Hopkins are a husband-and-wife team, Vanessa Hopkins and Alan Hopkins, based in England. The Hopkins made the blue silk that all productions later used for the specific costume, but they did not make the costume itself.

[42] Sue Willmington, interviewed in the BBC documentary, Behind the Mask (2005), visiting Dege & Skinner in Savile Row, London.

Figure 10:
Bjørnson's Design for Christine Daaé's Blue Second-Act Dress,
next to the Blue Silk Used in All Productions Worldwide,
Photographed by Janne Helene Arnesen, 2020.

The Phantom of the Opera was a success from the moment it opened in London in October 1986. A New York production followed in January 1988. Prior to its opening, a year's worth of tickets had been sold. Worldwide productions followed swiftly, and the musical has been performed on all continents except Antarctica. Most productions have replicated Bjørnson's original design.

Hal Prince's opulent *Phantom: The Las Vegas Spectacular* production also used Bjørnson's original design but expanded on it. The production opened in June 2006, in a purpose-built theatre with an 80-foot diameter dome, and a $75 million budget. Some of the special effects were updated, most noticeably the chandelier, the mirrors, and stunt tricks. The main design remained Bjørnson's: her design but grander. Her assistant Jonathan Allen and costume supervisor Sue Wilmington[43] were involved to maintain the design's original spirit.

The first non-replica production of *The Phantom of the Opera* to be approved by the rights holders was staged in Hungary in 2003, using a different design and staging. Other non-replica productions were to follow. The London and New York productions appear unstoppable, only kneeling for the Covid-19 pandemic during 2020. Yet, *The Phantom of the Opera* remained the only musical with a continuous run through 2020 and 2021, in a world tour visiting South Korea and Taiwan, as well as a new Japanese production. Some 35 years after the original was designed, Bjørnson's version is still staged across the globe, still featuring Hal Prince's direction, Gillian Lynne's choreography and Andrew Lloyd Webber's music. Christine Rowland has supervised the costumes to maintain the integrity of the designs.[44]

[43] The role of the Costume Supervisor is very important as they are the person who does all the buying of fabric, the ordering of braids, tassels, and trims, the liaison with the milliners, jewellers, dressmakers, tailors, haberdashery, cobblers, et al.

[44] Christine Rowland worked to ensure that the designs stayed true to Maria Bjørnson's vision after the designer met an untimely death in 2002.

Conclusion

Looking at Bjørnson's designs in the context of the suggested printed and visual sources has allowed a glimpse into the hectic weeks of designing the Phantom. It offers a timeline and contextualises some of the design choices. It might also have contributed some nuance to the view of *The Phantom of the Opera* as a glittering spectacle. The musical relies just as much on what is not there, what is not seen, through the black box approach of the scenography and the foreshadowing and small visual hints added to the costume design. This shows the design went well beyond merely copying sources at hand. Each costume that made it into the musical serves a purpose and is a part of a bigger dialogue between the audience and the stage, and between the costumes and the sets. Thirty-five years after the musical premiered, audiences still respond to a design aimed at the subconscious; a design that only gives audiences elements and allows their brain to fill in the blanks; a design whose costumes draw upon familiar imagery and yet create a magical universe. Thus, the design itself lives up to the etymology of the word, phantom: making the invisible visible.

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