

matt jones

Interview – The Phantom of the Opera, Peter Karrie

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Karrie on Phantom

By **Matt Jones**

The Phantom is having a nightmare day. Peter Karrie, the Phantom of the Opera in London's West End, Toronto, Singapore and Hong Kong, has left his chequebook at home. Consequently, he can't pick up the costumes he has gone to collect for a nationwide tour of his own show of musical favourites, *Beyond the Mask*.

The 47-year-old musical star then found that his car – “this big American caravan-type thing” – was being clamped on a London street, a situation he managed to talk his way out of. Having sweet-talked the capital's beastly clampers, he sang at an audition for the role of the Beast in the stage musical version of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*. Exit stage right, and on to a recording studio by 5.30pm. With so much on, he has completely forgotten about his pre-arranged telephone interview with *What's On*.

“Ah Matt!” sings the tenor, twice voted the world's best Phantom by the Phantom Appreciation Society (yes, ahead of Michael Crawford), when I catch him on his mobile phone in a traffic jam somewhere between Ealing and Acton. “What am I doing?”

South Wales-born Karrie is actually doing what he has done since his big break as Judas in Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Jesus Christ Superstar*: combining starring roles in the West End runs of the world's greatest musicals (Che in *Evita*, the American in *Chess*, Jean Valjean in *Les Miserables* and, of course, the Phantom) with regional tours of small theatres such as Blackwood Miners' Institute, where his *Beyond the Mask* show arrives on Thursday.

Cutting through Acton, heading for the A3 and his Surrey home, Karrie explains the origins of the tour. “I'd opened up in the Far East playing the role of the Phantom. They aren't used to the mega shows and so we had a very high profile in Singapore, Hong Kong and the Far East in general. We ended up being very popular, so much so that we were number three in the album charts out there. Having done that, I was asked if I would go back and do some concerts. I said yes, readily.

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“At the same time, South African promoters asked us to go there. They’re catching up on musicals they’ve been missing [because of apartheid]. My own show, *Beyond the Masque*, in St David’s Hall, Cardiff, in 1991, went tremendously well, so I thought, ‘Let’s resurrect it.’ I had to try a different running order, so the promoters said: ‘Try that in Britain, experiment before bringing it out.’”

Renamed *Beyond the Mask*, the show played nine dates, including Blackwood Miners’ Institute, early this year and was very well received in the subsequent tour of Asia and South Africa. “We were immediately booked back and then some,” says Karrie, who will do another 25 dates in South Africa during a three-month tour starting next October.

In the meantime, British audiences will once again play their part in the evolution of the show, which includes eight new numbers, some of which are from shows Karrie has not been involved in, such as *Sweet Charity!* *Sunset Boulevard* and *Miss Saigon*. Those aside, *Beyond the Mask* is a retrospective of Bridgend-born Karrie’s career, with humorous stories thrown in.

“I like the intimacy of the show,” he says. “I can sing a few songs and share some anecdotes” – such as the witty asides that cast members whisper to one another on stage when their microphones are switched off, and Karrie’s garlic-eating sessions backstage during intervals so that he could reek revenge on fellow pranksters on stage after the break.

Of course, there will be songs from *Phantom*. “The Phantom is a very gallant, chivalrous and insane gentleman,” he says. “The music casts a very unique spell over the audience and it has now become one of the greatest stories ever told. The role is demanding because you are not allowed to express yourself with facial expressions – you can only use your body language. Essentially, the Phantom has done a lot of bad things, but to make audiences feel sympathy for him or even cry is what takes so much energy.”

After the tour, it’s back to the recording studio for two to three months for two new albums: *Romantically Yours*, the follow up to his previous album *Theatrically Yours*, and a concept album for his own musical about the mad Russian monk Rasputin.

Phantom, Les Mis and international tours... it’s a far cry from Karrie’s debut at the age of 10, when he sang *Daisy Daisy* at a friend’s birthday party.

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The 1960s saw him on the road to music stardom as vocalist for the Cardiff group Midnight Marauders and later Peter And The Wolves. “I was hell bent on becoming the Michael Bolton of the ’70s,” he laughs. But when he heard that he was about to become a father, he dutifully returned from London to South Wales. While friend and rival Tom Jones was leaving the green, green grass of home for international fame, Karrie took on various jobs to make ends meet: stoker in a South Wales steelworks, classified sales rep with the *South Wales Echo* and manager of a pub in Merthyr Tydfil. On top of all that, he played rugby for Cardiff and Newport.

As Karrie passes through Richmond Park (“What a magnificent stag!”), he recalls the *Echo* classified ladies who once presented him with bicycle clips and a battered bike to get around his motor trade contacts after he had lost his driving licence.

“Display advertising asked me to model for a picture,” he says. “I thought, ‘Yes, great’, only to find the picture was used in an advert for wigs. It was my own hair, but they made it look like a wig!”

As Karrie reminisces about his newspaper days the line goes dead. I re-dial, but can’t get through; re-dial again, still can’t get through. I have visions of the great singer and raconteur chatting on, oblivious to the fact that he no longer has an audience. The Phantom’s nightmare continues.

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