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The man behind the mask NYNY

THERESA AGOVINO



Hugh Panaro is back for his third go-round as the title character in *Phantom*.

It takes one hour, two wigs, three facial prosthetics and a mudslide of makeup to transform Hugh Panaro from handsome to hideous as the title character in *The Phantom of the Opera*. The facial deformity that makes the Phantom a pariah resonates with Mr. Panaro, who was teased as a kid for being chubby and artistic.

"I feel really qualified to play this role," said Mr. Panaro, who is starring in the production for the third time. "I know what it is like to be an outcast."

Mr. Panaro, 48, is not the only one who empathizes with the Phantom. The musical has long been an international phenomenon. In January, it reached a milestone no other play has achieved: running for 25 years on Broadway. (*Cats*, which ran for 18 years, is the second-longest.)

Mr. Panaro's rich voice and experience are clearly assets in his performance. And he adds that the score and love triangle at the center of *Phantom* are also audience draws. "Who doesn't love a good love triangle?" he asked.

Mr. Panaro was inspired to take voice lessons after seeing fellow Philadelphia native Andrea McArdle sing the title role in *Annie* on Broadway when he was 12. His parents kept gushing about her talents. Once home, he sat at the piano and belted out a song from the show.

In his first pro gig, Mr. Panaro played Friedrich von Trapp in a local production of *The Sound of Music*, and he made his Broadway debut at 25 as Marius in *Les Misérables*. A photo of him with Barbra Streisand adorns his dressing room along with fan-made Phantom dolls and pictures.

Mr. Panaro is one of 12 men to play the Phantom on Broadway, and he was expecting a few for the Jan. 26 performance commemorating the show's milestone run. "I'm not nervous," he said. "I'm blessed to have this opportunity."

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