



The best way-off-Broadway production of

Phantom of the Opera nobody ever saw.

Next Stop, Basement

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My grandfather took me to see *Phantom of the Opera* for my tenth birthday. As I sat in the front row, I was mesmerized by the strobe lights, the organ solos, and the haunting tale of a deformed, misunderstood man forced to live in the catacombs of the Paris Opera House. As a third-grader from the suburbs, the story spoke to my soul. Those entrancing songs! Those powerful actors! I knew my life would never be the same.

When I returned home from my grandparents' house, I held a meeting with my next-door neighbor, Callie, who had just turned 11. She had never expressed any interest in Broadway or musical theater, but I informed her that we would be performing a full-length version of *Phantom of the Opera* in my basement.

Callie looked unsure, but I managed to convince her that spending all our time in the basement was the best possible way to spend our summer. This was the early nineties, and Callie was wearing an oversized T-shirt with matching cotton leggings. I had a more sophisticated style and chose glittery spandex biker shorts paired with black cowboy boots. Plus, I already had pierced ears. Clearly, I knew what I was talking about, and Callie had to follow my lead.

"The show will be stunt-casted," I announced, not actually sure what I meant. "The role of the Phantom will be played by me."

"But you're a girl," Callie said.

"Yes, but the role of the Phantom is so passionate and tragic, and besides, we're not friends with any boys."

Next, I doled out the less-important roles, all of them, to Callie. As suspicious as Callie looked when she left my house after the meeting, she still returned to my basement the next afternoon for vocal rehearsal.

During vocal rehearsal, I would blast sections of the Original Broadway Cast Recording on my boom box, and make Callie write down the lyrics – at least, what we could hear.

“I think they said, ‘turn your bass away from the tarish light of hay,’” I told her. “Callie, are you listening?”

She was scribbling frantically, still trying to write all the lyrics from the last song, but I was too impatient.

“Callie, *Phantom of the Opera* is a very sophisticated piece of musical theater. If you aren’t ready for this commitment, just tell me.”

“No,” Callie panted. “I’m ready, I’m ready.”

Dance rehearsal was the following afternoon. I stood to one side of the basement and clapped out the rhythm to “Masquerade” as Callie tried to please me with steps she had learned in ballet class.

“No, no, no!” I threw a cassette tape at her feet. “That’s nothing like what I saw onstage last week! Take it again from the top. And concentrate this time!”

Callie’s face was dripping with sweat, but she persevered, even when I threatened to cut her from the number.

As rehearsal went on, Callie’s roles got smaller and smaller, and I started relying on the vocal stylings of stuffed animals to fill gaps in the show. But after three grueling months of rehearsal, we were finally ready to perform. I had spent hours dragging our props and costumes down to the basement and setting up folding chairs for our audience. On the day of the show, I knocked on Callie’s front door, and her mom answered. Apparently, Callie was tired and needed a rest from *Phantom of the Opera* for a while. Callie and I didn’t really talk much after that.

The basement performance was postponed indefinitely. To this day, I’m still ready to reprise my performance as the Phantom in any upcoming regional productions you may know of. Please keep me posted of any future opportunities.

