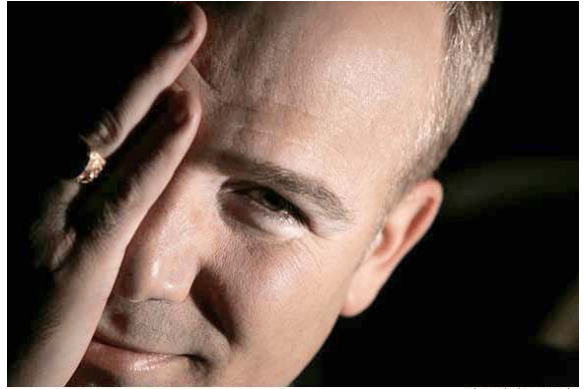


Phantom' D'Ambrosio In Knockout Solo Show

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The Phantom has been unmasked and is revealed to be a terrifically gifted singer with a range far beyond what he exhibited on stage at the Curran Theatre for four years.



Franc D'Ambrosio, the second guy to play the title role during the five-year run of "Phantom of the Opera," says he actually got the part by auditioning for "Miss Saigon" years ago. He tells the story between numbers in "Franc D'Ambrosio's Broadway," his knockout solo show that opened its three-week run Sunday at the New Conservatory Theatre Center.

Those who heard D'Ambrosio during his "Phantom" run know he's a great singer, as do those who have heard his CD, which forms the core of his show. But the reality is that being good on stage doesn't always translate well to more intimate settings -- especially when your song list includes such fortissimo stage hits as "If My Friends Could See Me Now," "The Impossible Dream," "Hello, Dolly!" "Razzle Dazzle" and "Almost Like Being in Love."

D'Ambrosio not only has a voice as comfortable in lower octaves as it is in high, sweetly spun tenor notes, it's also a big voice. Although the Decker Theatre at New Conservatory is considerably more intimate than the Curran, D'Ambrosio doesn't pull any vocal punches. At the same time, at a preview performance last week, he was able to weave delicate nuance throughout the music.

Accompanied by Chuck Larkin on piano, D'Ambrosio spent nearly two hours celebrating Broadway and telling the audience about his own life and his early love for music. A handsome galoot with a chiseled jaw, close-cropped blond hair and mischievous blue eyes, D'Ambrosio tells the audience that he was born to a very traditional Italian family in the Bronx. He later studied with Pavarotti in Italy, made his Broadway debut in "Sweeney Todd" and played the role of Anthony Vito Corleone in "The Godfather: Part III," where his charming Tony Curtis-like Bronx accent served him well.

Although he's been doing his show for more than two years, D'Ambrosio manages to make it seem entirely fresh. Each song is delivered with infectious energy and the between-number patter, while scripted, feels like a conversation with an old friend. D'Ambrosio wisely keeps the emphasis on the songs and the chat to a minimum. From very old classics such as "A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody" from "The Ziegfeld Follies of 1919," to "Bring Him Home" from "Les Miserables," D'Ambrosio makes his audience believe he's just discovered each song and can't wait to sing them for you. He even manages to convince us, with "This Is the Moment," that perhaps "Jekyll and Hyde" shouldn't be entirely damned to showbiz hell for all eternity.

Inevitably, the show's climax is the medley from "The Phantom," and despite the fact that he won the title of the world's longest-running Phantom by donning that mask and cape more than 2,600 times, D'Ambrosio sends chills with "Music of the Night," proving that he could probably go on playing the Phantom forever. But isn't it nice that he's got so much more he can do?