

Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street @ The Muny

Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

Book by Hugh Wheeler

Based on the play by Christopher Bond

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I'm probably the first to admit this, but I didn't think *Sweeney Todd* was a musical the Muny had the balls to produce. They have produced dark, cynical musicals like *Chicago* in the past, but *Sweeney Todd* is a whole other form of grisly – you could even say it's operatic levels of grim. This is Stephen Sondheim's most operatic score next to *A Little Night Music*, and that scope really translates well to the Muny stage, but since they mostly stick to more crowd-pleasing affairs, I never thought that they could pull it off. However, since the pandemic, I feel as if the Muny has been on a huge kick to take more artistic risks – after all, the more you try to appeal to everyone, the more you'll appeal to no one. With *Chicago*, the small-cast *Camelot*, and now *Sweeney Todd*, these shows are not going to be everyone's cup of tea, but I really have to respect that even though they are risky experiments for an institution like the Muny, they still hire the best artists to make them as good as they can, and their *Sweeney Todd* is no exception.

Since his first appearance in the 19th-century British penny dreadful serial *The String of Pearls*, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street has become a horror icon, firmly establishing himself as an urban legend among the people of London. This bloody story of a murderous barber who disposes of his hapless victims by baking them into pies has been retold several times in various media for 175 years, the most famous being the Stephen Sondheim musical, which was in turn adapted from a non-musical play by Christopher Bond. Both of these versions attempted to make Sweeney Todd a much more sympathetic character, rather than just a madman, making the story a cautionary tale about the consequences of vengeance. Here, Sweeney Todd is actually the alias for Benjamin Barker, a British barber who was exiled to Australia on a trumped-up charge. Fifteen years later, he is rescued by a young sailor named Anthony Hope, who takes Todd back to his home in London. Under his new identity, Todd discovers that the man who falsely arrested him, Judge Turpin, only exiled him so he could put the moves on Todd's wife, Lucy. Just days after Todd was carted off, Turpin sexually assaults Lucy and drives her to commit suicide, which forces Turpin to adopt the Barker family's infant daughter, Johanna, intending to marry her as soon as she comes of age. They don't call Judge Turpin the vilest villain in musical theatre history for nothing.

All of this exposition is told to us by Mrs. Lovett, Todd's former landlady who, during his exile, turned his flat into a pie shop that is currently in dire straits. Mrs. Lovett allows Todd to reopen his barber shop on the flat's upper level and agrees to help Todd exact revenge on Judge Turpin. However, he is soon recognized by Daniel O'Higgins, Todd's past employee who has since become Adolfo Pirelli, a con artist barber-surgeon. In fear that he will blackmail him, Todd kills Pirelli by slicing his throat with a straight razor, which gives him the idea to make an attempt

on Turpin's life in the same manner. However, the attempt ends in utter failure, causing Todd to have a mental breakdown and decide to kill anyone and everyone who deserves to die. After the shock of his breakdown settles, Mrs. Lovett decides that she loves the idea and suggests that they dispose of the bodies by baking them into pies and selling them in her shop. You know, for the funny. They hire Pirelli's apprentice, Tobias Ragg, as the shop's new waiter, and they enlist the help of Anthony as their reconnaissance, updating Todd on Turpin's plans and Johanna's whereabouts.

I won't go any further into spoiler territory, but what follows is a very harrowing turn of events that the Muni surprisingly handled rather tastefully. Director Rob Ruggiero's trademark meticulousness is present in this production, giving every single second of the show real human emotion and insight without relying on melodrama (something that too many productions of *Sweeney Todd* are guilty of). Muni veteran Ben Davis turns in his best work as Sweeney Todd himself, delivering an incredible voice and an appropriately edgy stage presence while also acting with total conviction. Davis is matched with Broadway darling Carmen Cusack as Mrs. Lovett, possibly the most difficult role in the Sondheim canon. Mrs. Lovett is a scatterbrained character, and Sondheim wrote her vocal lines to constantly shift in key, pitch, and tempo for almost every measure; on paper, this seems difficult for even a competent singer to keep up with. Cusack does keep up, however, and her acting is just as energized and tenacious as her vocals. Robert Cuccioli delivers on the menace as Judge Turpin, but he never goes over the top; the audience already knows Judge Turpin is the vilest villain in the musical theatre canon, so Cuccioli lets the character speak for himself without utilizing a Snidely Whiplash-style characterization.

Jake Boyd as Anthony and Riley Noland as Johanna are the perfect ingenues: sympathetic without being saccharine. Stephen Wallem, known at the Muni for playing more amiable characters, is totally convincing as Beadle Bamford, the imposing and intimidating lackey to Judge Turpin. Hernando Umana seamlessly handles Pirelli's transition from hammy entertainer to salty blackmailer. Lincoln Clauss as Tobias beautifully walks the tightrope between being endearing and annoying. Julie Hanson has a wonderful soprano as a Beggar Woman who haunts the London streets and figures into the story in a way that makes for a heartwrenching twist ending. Also excellent are brief cameos from Price Waldman as Jonas Fogg, the head doctor of the local madhouse, and Brandon S. Chu as the Birdseller that brings Anthony and Johanna together. The entire ensemble performs Sondheim's epic score with complex vocal precision, supported by the incredible Muni orchestra conducted by musical director James Moore, and the cast ably performs the intelligent musical staging by Jessica Hartman and Ralph Perkins.

The production design is a fully realized visual marvel. Michael Schweikardt's multi-level unit set consists of scaffolding that rests on the Muni turntable to rotate between locations. The lighting by John Lasiter and video by Caite Hevner work together to create the dingiest atmosphere possible, complete with red lights and on-screen blood splatters to tastefully portray the death scenes. John Shivers and David Patridge's sound practically shakes the Muni grounds with

how resonant it is. Alejo Vietti's costumes and Ashley Rae Callahan's hair and makeup drench the cast in period-appropriate dreariness.

The Muny's production of *Sweeney Todd* reminds me very much of their *Chicago* in that nothing is ever in excess. Every aspect of this production is done just right: the acting, the directing, the music, the production values – all of it serves the material without sensationalizing it. This production has little to no spectacle to drag the show down, only intense emotions and a chilling atmosphere. I never thought that the Muny could produce *Sweeney Todd*, but the way their production respected the material gave me a whole new level of appreciation for an institution that I've already been a patron of for a whole decade. I look forward to whatever daring experiment the Muny takes on next.