

Stripped-down 'Sweeney Todd' deftly mixes carnal with cannibal

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Mercury News
San Jose Mercury News

Article Launched:

"The history of the world, my sweet, is who gets eaten and who gets to eat."

John Doyle's gorgeously surreal deconstruction of "Sweeney Todd" cuts through the baroque trappings of the story to reveal the naked viscera of the legend. The story of the demon barber of Fleet Street is here reincarnated as a grim postmodern fairy tale with damning political overtones and gruesome insight into the human animal. Doyle paints the stage with the symbols and tableaux of nightmares laid bare. Welcome to a dark carnival of the soul, where horror becomes a bone-chilling metaphor for existence.

Seduced by the choral fugue of their strange collective fantasy, the actors in this universe double as members of the orchestra. Their faces ashen, their eyes hollow, they numbly succumb to their fate. That complicity in the action heightens the focus and intensity of this stark retelling of the infamous 19th-century folkloric tale.

Some have accused Doyle of butchering the Sondheim jewel, but instead the director probes the chamber opera until it bleeds. The chilly minimalism of his Tony-winning revival stands in eerie juxtaposition to the gilded American Conservatory Theater stage, where this West Coast premiere runs through Sept. 30.

While Hal Prince's storied 1979 production reveled in an epic sense of sweep, Doyle drills down into the details of social decay. He traps the entire 10-person cast onstage throughout the show. The sense of claustrophobia and the jostling and voyeurism of city life create a lurid atmosphere that's as psychologically acute as it is depraved. Cannibalism, corruption and greed are the landmarks in this jolly old London.

A few chairs, a coffin and a shelf filled with Victorian bric-a-brac set the scene, as the barber Sweeney (David Hess) returns to London to wreak revenge on those who exiled him to Australia on trumped-up charges to steal his wife. Hess exposes the tormented soul of the serial killer. A magnetic anti-hero in a black leather jacket, he caresses his straight-edge razor like a lover, cooing "you shall drip rubies." The heart-pounding propulsion of his "Epiphany" charges the impending acts of violence with a distinctly sexual edge.

Bits of scarlet gore decorate the production like diamonds set in velvet. Each time Sweeney dispatches someone, the bright red blood of his victim gets poured into a slop bucket. It's done with a ritual sense of precision but no fuss.

Indeed, practicality is the hallmark of the baker, Mrs. Lovett. Played by Judy Kaye, she emerges as a brassy predator with tattered fishnet stockings and a hunger for life that can't be sated by meat pies. Kaye's rapacious, tuba-wielding interpretation of the role stands a stark counterpoint to the caricatures of Lovetts past.

This Lovett is not a monster, just a middle-aged widow eager to taste what life, and Sweeney, have to offer. She lilts through a dreamy ditty of a little cottage "By the Sea" as she wipes blood and guts from her hammer and saw.

But Doyle's genius for reinvention may be most deeply manifest in the sexual undercurrents he detects between the butcher and the baker. Crime is not the only thing that binds them. The carnal impulse throbs at the heart of their duets, lacing their machinations with the erotic.

The chemistry of sex and death runs throughout the evening, even in the sappy exchanges between the hapless ward Johanna (Lauren Molina) and her suitor, Anthony Hope (Benjamin Magnuson). The young lovers, who can so often come off like silly nitwits, here seem as real and flawed as the couple who grind barbershop customers into baked goodies.

Nevertheless, all emotions run to bile in this world. The tender moments between Lovett and the waif Tobias (Edmund Bagnell) whom she truly, if briefly, pledges to shield from harm ("Not While I'm Around"), are as touching as Sweeney's final death rattle is fiendish.

`Sweeney Todd: The Demon

Barber of Fleet Street'

Music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim,

book by Hugh Wheeler, based on

the 1973 play by Christopher Bond,

staged by American Conservatory Theater

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The upshot: Freely flows the blood of those who moralize in this gorgeously surreal deconstruction of the Sondheim jewel.

Where: Geary Theatre, 415 Geary St., San Francisco

When: 8 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m Saturdays and Sundays

Through: Sept. 30

Running time: 2 hours and 30 minutes, with intermission

Tickets: \$17.50-\$81.50; (415) 749-2228 or www.act-sf.org