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Entertainment

Stephen Sondheim classic works scaled down



(Courtesy photo)

David Hess plays the title role and Judy Kaye is Mrs. Lovett in ACT's production of Stephen Sondheim's "Sweeney Todd."

Janos Gereben, The Examiner

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SAN FRANCISCO -

Stephen Sondheim's 1979 "Sweeney Todd" is a big musical — large in passion, large in production values. It originally opened in one of Broadway's biggest theaters, in Harold Prince's hugely operatic

production, and went on to be performed by opera companies as well. Come Christmas, it will be a big, expensive movie, directed by Tim Burton and starring Johnny Depp.

And yet, the American Conservatory Theater opened its 41st season Tuesday with an interactive, chamber-music version of "Sweeney Todd" — 10 musicians taking on the work of a 27-piece orchestra while singing multiple roles. Scaling down the musical, trimming it slightly, and presenting it in a Brechtian fashion of providing a virtual backstage view, gives the work added intensity and immediacy.

Scottish director John Doyle's production comes from London through Broadway (where it picked up a couple of Tony Awards) and to San Francisco, the West Coast premiere before a 17-city U.S. and Canadian tour.

Originally from the Victorian gossip magazine "Penny Dreadful," the story of the Demon Barber of Fleet Street has taken on many forms, but its essence remained the same: a wronged man's all-consuming, wholly destructive search for revenge. Here, David Hess' portrayal of the title role assures authenticity and success. He is "scary-good" in his presence and singing. Even without a big voice, Hess does well with what is the most important aspect of musical performance: he communicates.

The work's other major character, Mrs. Lovett, is a counterpoint to him, with her cheerful,

romantic nature (even while grinding up body parts for “The Best Pies in London”). Broadway star Judy Kaye is wonderful in the role, not to mention her tuba solos.

The lead soprano, Lauren Molina, has two major tasks — being and singing like an angel — but she does not deliver on the same level as the other cast members. Johanna, Todd’s daughter, represents a glimmer of good in the work’s hellish view of London. Yet Molina is not communicative enough to illuminate the complexity of the show’s central aria, “Green Finch and Linner Bird.” As in two Richard Strauss works about ugly and destructive passions, “Salome” and “Electra,” the piece is supposed to contrast sweet with bitter, or reveal beauty in the midst of bestiality.

Meanwhile, the show’s humor comes across very well, thanks mostly to Kaye’s singing and acting.

Yet in the end, Sondheim’s horrifying juxtaposition (in a musical!) of hoped-for-salvation from vengeance, wiping out the wicked so that “for the rest of us death will be a relief. ... We all deserve to die” still stuns, even while it “entertains.”

It’s a tough, complex show, and this production is well done.

Sweeney Todd ***

Where: American Conservatory Theater, 415 Geary St., San Francisco

When: 8 p.m. most Tuesdays through Saturdays; 2 p.m. most Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays; closes Sept. 30

Tickets: \$30 to \$82

Contact: (415) 749-2228 or www.act-sf.org

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