

## Review: ACT's trimmed 'Sweeney Todd' holds its own

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**Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street:** Musical. Music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. Book by Hugh Wheeler. Directed by John Doyle. (*Through Sept. 30. American Conservatory Theater, 415 Geary St., San Francisco. Two hours, 20 minutes. Tickets: \$30-\$82. Call (415) 749-2228 or visit [www.act-sf.org](http://www.act-sf.org).)*)

The startling industrial shriek of a factory whistle doesn't blast the audience into attention at the opening, as it does in Harold Prince's original 1979 production. Director John Doyle's much-heralded stripped-down version of Stephen Sondheim's "Sweeney Todd" opens quietly, seductively, with eerily compelling complicity. Missing is the demon barber's famed chair - the one that tips his victims through a trap door to Mrs. Lovett's meat pie ovens below, which are also left to the audience's imagination.

No matter. There will be shrieks aplenty before "Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street" at American Conservatory Theater reaches its triumphantly dreadful climax. As the vengeful Sweeney slashes his way through his clientele, the imagination more than fills in for the missing props and gory spouts of blood of Prince's operatic-scale production. It isn't that Doyle and orchestrator Sarah Travis' reimagined "Sweeney" is superior to Prince's long-standard vision. But the "Sweeney" that opened ACT's 41st season Tuesday holds its own as an equally thrilling musical melodrama of the first order and contains some exhilarating revelations as well.

That's particularly true for Travis' radically reduced orchestrations, stripped down from Jonathan Tunick's lushly complex originals for a 27-piece orchestra. Here they're played by a mere 10 musicians, who also make up the entire acting ensemble. Doyle, who's had a long career directing

in English regional theaters, has used this approach often before, born, he's said, of economic necessity. But it became an international smash success with the "Sweeney" he staged at England's Watermill Theatre in '04 and moved to the West End and, with the help of Sondheim (who rescored some sections for the occasion), to Broadway in '05.

With Doyle having moved on to a similar Broadway staging, greeted by similar acclaim, of Sondheim's "Company" last season, his "Sweeney" is heading out on tour. The ACT production, featuring a number of veterans of the Broadway cast, officially transforms into the national touring company at the end of this run.

It's an insidiously seductive, demonically compelling story-theater version, in a grittily Brechtian mode. It's also slightly abridged. Doyle has pruned some of Hugh Wheeler's book, adapted from Christopher Bond's 1973 drama (a more sophisticated version of the popular melodramas that held sway in London's "bloodbath" theaters throughout the 19th century). The central personalities and the interactions between Bond's characters remain intact, made oddly even more vivid by watching the actors interpret them on musical instruments - as the young lovers Lauren Molina and Benjamin Magnuson frenetically saw and pluck their thwarted passion on cellos or Diana DiMarzio's crazed Beggar Woman tootles a deranged clarinet.

Doyle, who also designed the set and costumes, places the action in a theatrical box, a kind of proto-insane asylum for a tale told by the inmates (a la "Marat/Sade"). A crude black coffin provides the central focus, beneath a towering bare-plank wall and a mad miscellany of objects. Richard G. Jones' stark white and sanguinary red lights blaze through the wall and floor planks at climactic moments.

The hauntingly sweet voice of Edmund Bagnell's Tobias - the innocent apprentice who will prove Sweeney and Mrs. Lovett's undoing - opens the show with an irresistibly tormented "Attend the tale of Sweeney Todd." A powerful, square-jawed, hollow-eyed David Hess is mesmerizing in the title role of the former master barber (Michael Cerveris, opposite Patti LuPone, on Broadway) who's returned to London to take vengeance on the corrupt judge who had him transported to a penal colony in order to ravish Sweeney's defenseless wife.

Hess' broad, full voice can't always reach Sweeney's lower notes, particularly on the monumental "Epiphany," when the thwarted Sweeney turns his slashing vengeance on London in general. It scarcely matters, so intensely felt is Hess' performance, and his embittered "The Barber and His Wife" and unsettlingly sweet "Pretty Women" are as pitch-perfect as they are entrancing.

A magnetic, joyfully trashy, sympathetic and opportunistic Judy Kaye lights up the stage as an eminently practical, tuba-puffing Mrs. Lovett. She's gloriously mock-plaintive on the hilarious "The Worst Pies in London" and deliciously, cluelessly romantic on "By the Sea." When Mrs. Lovett realizes how the barber's murder spree can save her meat pie business, Kaye brings down the house with a buoyantly macabre rendition of her new menu ("A Little Priest").

Every character emerges with striking clarity in often offbeat interpretations, from Molina's beguilingly innocent Johanna, with enough of a crazed edge to show she's very much Sweeney's daughter, and Magnuson's quirkily anti-heroic Anthony to Benjamin Eakeley's smooth, thuggish Beadle and Katrina Yaukey's preening rival barber (and eerie accordion). Keith Buterbaugh is outstanding as the evil Judge Turpin in a fundamentalist televangelist interpretation that adds extra creepiness to his lusting "Johanna."

Far from simplifying the score, Travis' minimalist arrangements enhance the complex interactions in Sondheim's masterpiece with the jarring interplay of a violin and accordion or those yearning cellos. As the stage fills with buckets of blood, Doyle's terrific company makes it more than worthwhile, once again, to "attend the tale of Sweeney Todd."

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