

'Sweeney Todd': Bloody good show

Steven Winn

Sunday, September 2, 2007



It was, in every way, a grand and grimly glorious thing. On a mighty set fashioned from old foundry parts and featuring a stage-spanning steel bridge, "Sweeney Todd" opened at the cavernous Uris Theatre on March 1, 1979, and sent critics scrambling for superlatives. "In sheer ambition and size," as one of them put it, "there's never been a bigger musical on Broadway."

The critics' struggle to match the scale of their praise to the show's reach and achievement was understandable. Based on a Christopher Bond adaptation of a gritty Victorian penny dreadful, the show told a Grand Guignol revenge tale bristling with murder, bloody mayhem and the jolliest sense of gallows humor that Broadway had ever seen. The score, by Stephen Sondheim, was a full-throttle fusion of ballads and choruses, arias and a spine-shivering use of the centuries-old "Dies Irae" theme - all in all the most overtly operatic work to date from the composer of "Company," "Follies" and "A Little Night Music." Five years after its Broadway opening, "Sweeney" was remounted by the New York City Opera, in the first of various opera-house forays the piece would enjoy over the years.

Sondheim's original collaborators went all out to serve the show's emotional and psychological dimensions. Director Harold Prince's production was a magnificent chiaroscuro creation, a dramatically bleak canvas of black shadow and glaring light. Jonathan Tunick's lavish and cunning orchestrations called for a 27-piece orchestra that included a four-manual organ. Piercing blasts from a factory steam whistle punctuated the action. Len Cariou, as the eponymous "demon barber of Fleet Street," and Angela Lansbury, as Mrs. Lovett, the accomplice who bakes Sweeney's victims into meat pies and sells them to the public, gave performances that were etched on opening night as instant Broadway legends.

The thing is, none of it was what Sondheim first imagined for his Victorian "musical thriller."

"I meant it to be done as a small piece because I just wanted to scare people," the composer remarked some years later, as quoted by his biographer, Meryle Secrest. But when Prince proposed an epic production, in the tradition of Vsevolod Meyerhold and Erwin Piscator, Sondheim assented. "It can always be done small," he reasoned, "but things can't always be done big, so let's try it."

The critical success of Prince's production - it won eight Tony awards, including best musical - cemented "Sweeney" in the popular imagination. Never mind that the 558-performance Broadway run failed to earn back the \$1 million investment. The show was decisively started and repeatedly restarted, in revivals all over the world, as a sense-stunning urban spectacle.

And then, in 2004, a little-known English director named John Doyle saw it another way. In a production first mounted at the picturesque Watermill Theatre in the West Berkshire hamlet of Bangor, Doyle stripped "Sweeney Todd" down to its bones and refashioned it as a Brechtian chamber piece for a company of 10. It was the director's audacious and inspired idea to have those same 10 actors play the score as well. Onstage and in full view of the audience throughout the evening, the performers accompany one another on accordion, piano, trumpet and violin.

Mrs. Lovett marches across the stage tooting on a tuba. Sweeney strums a guitar. A pair of doomed young lovers, Anthony and Johanna, pine for each other in both song and amorous cello lines. Four members of the company take turns at the upstage keyboard, a logistical puzzle that demands some exacting choreography of its own.

The set got a major makeover as well. In place of all that Broadway architecture, Doyle designed a bare wooden box and decorated it, like some ghoulish shopkeeper, with assorted wares and knickknacks. A coffin gets pride of place at center stage. The costumes, which include madhouse straitjackets and a slattern's torn stockings, aptly mark the figures in this potently barren scene.

Doyle's reconceived "Sweeney" transferred to London's West End in 2005, then to Broadway later that year, where, with Michael Cerveris in the title role and Patti LuPone as Mrs. Lovett, the show

made for a memorably haunting night of theater. Now, in a U.S. touring version that opens this week at the American Conservatory Theater, audiences here and around the country can experience this intimate musical nightmare for themselves. David Hess and Judy Kaye, both veterans of the Broadway company, are the stars.

However one encounters it - including a memorable concert version performed at Davies Symphony Hall in 2001 and subsequently televised on PBS - "Sweeney Todd" captivates like nothing else. Monstrous, manically funny, tender and fearless, it is regarded by many as the defining masterpiece of Sondheim's double-barreled career as the finest composer and lyricist of his time.

Working with a lean Hugh Wheeler libretto, Sondheim fashioned a work that seems at once propulsively economical and perversely ravishing. The score serves forth a feast of musical treats, from the grim tread of the opening line ("Attend the tale of Sweeney Todd") and Mrs. Lovett's wheedling tribute to "The Worst Pies in London" to the achingly beautiful "Johanna" and the seductively ironic "Pretty Women."

The real genius of "Sweeney" doesn't inhere so much in its individual numbers, vivid as many of them are, as it does in the way the score inexorably drives the melodramatic action. The pacing is at once remorseless and meditative, with Sweeney musing on his madness even as it possesses him. Conversational recitative and tightly rhymed lyrics are brilliantly fused. The entire score, as critic Martin Gottfried puts it, showcases "Sondheim's mature technique for blending music, lyrics and dialogue in long dramatic scenes."

In his radical reduction of the show's means of production, Doyle unleashes new values in the piece. What was once a hideous spectacle becomes an intimate fever dream. The actors' perpetual presence onstage creates a creepy, almost lecherous taint of voyeurism. Looking on from the fringes of the stage, the performers remind us of our own prurient fixation on the darkest corners of depravity. The strange and eerie stylization of the action - a ritualized pouring of blood from one bucket to another, a lover's distracted sawing on a cello, the grotesquely cheery tinkling of a triangle - heightens the sense of "Sweeney's" psychic dislocations. We are all caught, actors and audience together, in the spiral.

Doyle has gained great recognition for his feat. "Sweeney Todd" earned him a 2006 Tony for best direction of a musical. Last season he returned to Broadway with a pared-down treatment of another Sondheim musical, "Company." That show won a Tony for best musical revival.

The attention he's getting may be relatively new, but Doyle has been boiling down musicals for years. His first production of the type, he said by telephone from New York, where "Sweeney" was rehearsing, was a "Candide" he did in the late 1980s at the Watermill. Working with a limited regional theater budget, and on a 14-foot stage with no fly space, mandates hard decisions.

"You are compelled to find a different way of doing things," he said.

But as Doyle promptly went on to say, his hand was never forced by limitations. Rather, they invited him to come at each piece freshly, as any director should.

"One of the problems with musical revivals," he said, "is that people get locked into thinking they should be doing copies of the original. But why should they? Storytelling is done in a different way in a different time. It's a way of breathing a different kind of life into a piece. That would be my emphasis, anyway."

Doyle likened his approach to that of a director staging "Hamlet" or any other classic work.

"My 'Hamlet' would be very different from someone else's," he said. "To be frank, I'm not madly interested in comparisons. But as long as we're on the subject, I rank 'Sweeney Todd' along with 'Hamlet' as a classic piece of theater."

Acting values come first when he's casting a show like this one, Doyle said. Learning to play the musical instruments follows. Kaye, whose Broadway credits run from "On the Twentieth Century" to "Ragtime" to "Mamma Mia," had never played the tuba when Doyle invited her to join the Broadway company of "Sweeney."

"It's a little different with each company," the director said, "but I'd say at least 40 percent of

rehearsal time is spent on anxieties about playing the score. Comfortable is not always the best thing for an actor to be."

Like any vital work of theater, this "Sweeney Todd" cannot be fully realized unless the audience invests in it.

"The crucial thing this production asks," Doyle said, "is that people be willing to use their imaginations."

As a line in the show's glowering final anthem goes, "Perhaps today you gave a nod/ To Sweeney Todd/ The demon barber of Fleet Street." That may be the understatement of the night.

Sweeney Todd previews today, opens Tuesday and runs through Sept. 30 at the American Conservatory Theater, 415 Geary St., San Francisco. \$20-\$80. (415) 749-2228, www.act-sf.org.

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This article appeared on page **N - 18** of the San Francisco Chronicle