

AN INTERVIEW WITH *SWEENEY TODD* DIRECTOR JOHN DOYLE

Excerpts from a *Downstage Center* Radio Broadcast

ORIGINAL AIR DATE: NOVEMBER 24, 2006

JVS: I'M JOHN VON SOOSTEN, PROGRAM DIRECTOR OF XM28 ON BROADWAY.

HS: AND I'M HOWARD SHERMAN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE AMERICAN THEATRE WING.

JVS: TODAY WE WELCOME JOHN DOYLE, WHO IS A NEW NAME ON BROADWAY WITHIN THE LAST YEAR, BUT CERTAINLY NOT A NEW NAME WHEN IT COMES TO THEATER. JOHN, YOU'VE BEEN INVOLVED IN THEATER IN YOUR NATIVE GREAT BRITAIN FOR A LONG, LONG TIME. YOU HAVE DONE SCORES OF SHOWS IN THE UK AND ELSEWHERE, BUT TWO SHOWS ON BROADWAY: *SWEENEY TODD*, FOR WHICH YOU WON THE TONY LAST YEAR AS BEST DIRECTOR, AND, CURRENTLY RUNNING ON BROADWAY, *COMPANY*, THE REVIVAL. TO USE THE WORD CONTROVERSIAL IS MAYBE NOT COMPLETELY ACCURATE, BUT THERE WAS SOME DEGREE OF DISCUSSION, SOME DEGREE OF ANGST BEFORE PEOPLE SAW *SWEENEY TODD*, THAT THIS DOYLE FELLOW FROM GREAT BRITAIN HAS COME OVER, HAS ELIMINATED THE ORCHESTRA, HAS GIVEN INSTRUMENTS TO THE TEN ACTORS ONSTAGE, HAD THEM PLAY INSTRUMENTS AND SING AND DANCE AND ALL THAT, AND YOU WON A TONY FOR IT. AND YOU WON A DRAMA DESK AWARD, AN OUTER CRITICS' CIRCLE AWARD, SO SOMETHING MUST HAVE WORKED RIGHT. THIS IS A TECHNIQUE YOU'VE BEEN USING FOR SOME TIME IN GREAT BRITAIN, ISN'T IT?

JOHN DOYLE: It is indeed. It came out of financial necessity, really. I was artistic director of the Everyman Theatre in Liverpool, which is quite a cutting-edge theater, a very political theater, where they've done a lot of new work, and I decided to do a piece of musical theater there, the [Leonard] Bernstein *Candide*, and I frankly couldn't afford the orchestra and the cast at the same time. So we put them together, and it was a pretty successful exercise. But in those days, the [performers] sat and played the music at a music stand, and then they got up and acted. But it would be unfair to say that I was the first director in my country to think of such a thing. A guy called Bob Carlton did a show called *Return to the Forbidden Planet*, and there was also *Buddy* in the West End, which was very successful, the Buddy Holly story, both using actors who played instruments. I knew some of those actors and some of those directors, and I thought, well there must be a way



Director John Doyle
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that those same techniques could be taken into the more classic musical theater form. So that's where the journey started, almost 15 years ago now. And it's gone on through theaters that I've run as artistic director, and then at the Watermill Theatre in Newbury, where I was associate director, using and developing the same stuff, to the point that *Sweeney Todd* went into the West End to a tiny, small theater, Stephen Sondheim came and saw it, and the rest is fairly recent history.

JVS: WELL, TO TAKE A LEONARD BERNSTEIN WORK LIKE *CANDIDE* AND ELIMINATE THE ORCHESTRA, WHAT HAPPENED THEN? DID PEOPLE START TO SCREAM, "HOW CAN YOU DO THIS?!"

Well, of course, there's audacity wrapped up in it all. I'm quite prepared to admit that. but I don't set out to be audacious with it, and don't set out to be in

any way revolutionary with it, or anything like that. The choices have been pragmatic, in terms of cost. What has happened is that some kind of—I find the term "art form" rather pretentious, but some sort of art form has grown out of it. And it's not, obviously, aiming to eliminate the orchestral sound, it's aiming to use the instrument in a more dramatic form. That means that you have to carry those instruments around all night as performers. It requires a *very* flexible kind of actor to be able to do that.

JVS: BUT NOW WITH BOTH *SWEENEY TODD* AND *COMPANY* ON BROADWAY, I DON'T IMAGINE THE COST WAS THE DRIVING FACTOR IN THIS CASE, WAS IT?

No. Although it was when I did it first of all at the Watermill Theatre in Newbury, where the stage is, like, 14 feet by 14 feet, and there's no place for an orchestra. Then Steve Sondheim saw it, enjoyed what he'd seen, and encouraged it to come here to Broadway. Of course, they could have said, "Well, *now* you can put an orchestra in the pit," but that would have denied the very reason for doing it in the first place. Not to say that it wasn't pretty scary when they first suggested that it would come to Broadway, on two points: One, I never thought it would happen, because it's the sort of dream that you don't believe will come true. And, I thought, Oh my goodness, what are people going to make of this? For years in Britain I have been quoted as saying, jokingly, that my aim was to take the

Broadway out of the Broadway musical, because I was working in environments and in theaters where the show was in what you would consider to be not-for-profit houses, for four- or six-week runs, and that was it. There was no intention of *Sweeney Todd* ever living beyond the six-week run. I certainly didn't think anybody of any import would see it—well, any audience is important, but you know what I'm saying.

JVS: WELL, YOU DIDN'T EXPECT SONDHEIM TO COME SEE IT.

That's really what I meant, yes. And that was pretty scary, because of what I do in terms of the contractual way in which these pieces of musical theater are protected throughout the world. What I do breaks those laws, in a sense. It was never meant to be about, We want to get rid of an orchestra. It grew out of not being able to afford to have one. Then it came into, How can you use that theatrical style to extend the audience's disbelief? I mean, you don't often sit with a drink in one hand and a double bass between your legs. It doesn't happen very much in real life. [Laughter] So it kind of asks the audience to take a journey that goes beyond their preconception of what real life is. I suppose you could say it takes you to an abstraction of reality. That's what I'm interested in, more than anything, really, and what it does in terms of the relationship between the actor and the audience is what interests me.

HS: WELL, ON A PRACTICAL LEVEL, SINCE YOU MENTION THE ACTORS, AS A DIRECTOR, SINCE YOU ARE NOW NOT ONLY LOOKING FOR PEOPLE WHO CAN ACT AND SING, BUT THEY HAVE TO PLAY INSTRUMENTS, DOES THIS NARROW THE FIELD, LET'S TALK FIRST WORKING IN ENGLAND, OF THE PERFORMERS WHO ARE AVAILABLE TO YOU, IN TERMS OF DOING THIS WORK? DOES IT RESTRICT YOUR OPTIONS?

Yes. It did, I think it's fair to say. Inevitably, "restrict" is often looked upon as a negative. I think it can be quite a positive thing, you know, the fact that you are looking for a particular set of skills to storytell with. It would not really be any different if you were doing a dance piece, that you were looking for a particular set of talents. Now, when I first did *Candide* all that time ago, I could truly only find ten or twelve people who could *even* approach being able to play that score. We did that famous overture with a reduction of 12. But since I started developing the technique, there is now a theater school, Rose Bruford College, which has a three-year training program to teach people how to do it. They've made me a fellow of the school, so it's now becoming a recognized, legitimate way of making theater happen in Britain. Certainly now if I put out a casting call to do a musical in my own country, I can get anywhere between 500 and 1,000 applications, most of whom may not be appropriate for the roles, but they're certainly appropriate within the skills base that's required.

HS: AND WAS THERE A DIFFERENT EXPERIENCE WHEN YOU CAME OVER HERE, FIRST TO CAST *SWEENEY*, AND THEN TO CAST *COMPANY*?

Well, I said to the producers when we came here to cast *Sweeney*, “Look, for goodness sake, don’t announce that you’re doing this show until we know whether we can find a cast,” because I didn’t know for a moment if the skills would not so much be around, but whether actors could see themselves as doing that kind of work. But you can sense very quickly whether somebody is musical enough on the instrument to be able to fulfill the requirements. Actually, with *Sweeney Todd*, it wasn’t such a difficult journey to find them all. We saw very good people, and I’m assuming there must be actors all over New York practicing their cellos, because certainly I see more and more people now. I think there is also something to be said for the fact that you do have a high school marching band tradition, which we don’t have in the UK. So it is probable that more people—of a certain age, anyway—at least went through the business of learning an instrument at school.

HS: CLEARLY, THERE HAS TO BE SOME RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE INSTRUMENT THAT THE CHARACTER PLAYS AND THEIR CHARACTER ITSELF. HOW DO YOU DEVELOP THE IDEA OF WHAT THE INSTRUMENTATION MIGHT BE FOR A PARTICULAR CHARACTER, OR IS IT YOU FIND PEOPLE WHO ARE MULTIFACETED?

It’s a little of everything. I mean, you do start off by saying to your orchestrator, “Okay, what do we need?” It’s obvious that you’re going to need probably two piano players to get you through the evening, to start off with. And maybe it’s quite nice if those two piano players play husband and wife in the play, so that at some point they could both sit at the same piano and play together, as they do in “Side by Side” in *Company*. You’d need a double bass, usually, because you need the bass root to the orchestra, and if you haven’t got the ability to have a double bass, then you have to have a cello, which can take the double bass line. And if you can’t have that, you have an instrument like a tuba, which can take the same bass notes. So you start to look around the possibilities of all of that. And then, inevitably, you think, Okay, which character makes you think most like a violin? Which character would you associate with the flute? But some of it is done on the rehearsal room floor, where you think: Ah, okay, they’re playing those two instruments; that’s how that couple happened to be. Let’s make a language with those two instruments out of the orchestration. That’s certainly more the case in *Company* than was the case in *Sweeney Todd*. In *Sweeney*, because they were all locked in the same, whatever that place was, lunatic asylum or hospital or whatever—

HS: YOU TELL US! YOU SHOULD KNOW.

Well, I don't know if I do know, really—but because they were all locked in and had to make music for each other, the music is slightly less character driven than it is in *Company*. The choices in *Company* have been more rooted around the specific characters.

JVS: WELL, PARTICULARLY WITH *SWEENEY*, BECAUSE THAT WAS YOUR FIRST BROADWAY EFFORT, BUT ALSO WITH *COMPANY*, A LOT OF ATTENTION WAS PAID IN THE PRESS TO THE FACT THAT THE ACTORS WERE PLAYING THE INSTRUMENTS AND THAT THERE WAS NO ORCHESTRA. LET'S MOVE BEYOND THAT, BECAUSE IN THE SHOW ITSELF YOU HAVE TO MOVE BEYOND THAT. THE AUDIENCE IN THE FIRST FIVE OR TEN MINUTES GETS IT OR THEY DON'T. WHAT ELSE DID YOU LOOK FOR IN TERMS OF CASTING THE ACTORS, AND IN TERMS OF THE STAGING, OTHER THAN THEM PLAYING THE INSTRUMENTS?

You have to create a world, first of all, where nobody leaves the stage. That's the first thing you have to do, because, of course, they all need to be onstage all the time, because they have to accompany each other. So I wanted a world, whatever that world would be in either case, where they could all be trapped in the story. It's a little bit like *Into the Woods* in that sense: we're all trapped in the same story. In the case of *Sweeney*, I wanted them to be trapped in Tobias's head. That is why he started the story tied up—the boy who's driven mad by the story, and almost looking at the story retrospectively, and then retied up to tell it again tomorrow. It's the perpetual angst or entrapment of that. In *Company*, I wanted them all to be clearly the demons in Bobby's head. So, I wanted people who were able first of all to embrace the idea that they would be generous enough to take the front moment, if you like, but also having the generosity to be able to sit in the corner in the dark and play the orchestra bells or the triangle. Then, I wanted people who—now this is to do with my own taste in what acting is—would approach the musical, not in the way that a musical theater performer would normally approach a musical, but would explore it almost like a play with songs, which I think is a slightly different context. It's a more naturalistic way of approaching dialogue, if you like.

JVS: DID THAT NECESSITATE MANY CHANGES TO THE BOOK AND THE STAGING AND THE WHOLE STRUCTURE OF THE SHOW?

In the case of *Sweeney Todd*, there were changes that Sondheim helped to make, particularly in the second act. There was almost nothing changed in the first act, other than a couple of cuts, which were traditional cuts. In the second act, he actually wanted to rework some of the material himself, and we did that reworking together to try to make a very complicated story more clear in what was already a more complex theatrical conceit.

HS: AS YOU'VE BEEN PURSUING THIS PARTICULAR STYLE OF EXPLORING MUSICAL THEATER, HAVE YOU LOOKED AT SHOWS THAT YOU DON'T THINK LEND THEMSELVES TO THIS STYLE, OR INDEED HAVE YOU EVER DONE A SHOW THAT ULTIMATELY, ONCE INTO IT, YOU FOUND DIDN'T WORK?

I think there are definitely shows that would not work for it. It would be rather foolhardy to try *West Side Story*, because *West Side Story* is a show that is about people who communicate through dance, and I think that would be the wrong thing to try to do. You could argue that there were great dance moments in *Company*, when Michael Bennett did the original staging, but not all the way through the show. It's not a show where the expression is a dance expression. In terms of shows that I think haven't worked, I did *Pal Joey* this way and I felt that didn't work, but then I have a feeling that's because the book of the second act of that show is tricky to work, anyway. The shows that work best for me—I think, *Fiddler on the Roof*, which I did with ten people—that worked because music was indigenous to the language of the story and to the culture. So that type of piece works very well. I've done two Gilbert and Sullivan adaptations, taking one into a jazz world and one into a big band world, and they both really worked because of the musical rhythms of the piece. They're already stylized enough to work. *Into the Woods* definitely worked because it's already a slightly mad world that it's happening in. There have been some [shows] in which I've struggled more than others to make sure that the conceit—I use the word conceit rather than concept, because I think that “concept” is something else—but I don't think there was ever one of the 20 shows probably I've done, that stands out as absolutely not working. It is obvious that things like *Cabaret* are going to work very well because it's in a club, and people are playing instruments in a club, so that's going to work better than some that may be even more naturalistic in terms of the world that they live in.

JVS: WITH THE SUCCESS THAT'S GREETED YOU HERE IN THE U.S., AND CERTAINLY THE INTRODUCTION OF *SWEENEY* AND NOW *COMPANY*, ARE YOU CONCERNED AT ALL THAT PEOPLE ARE ONLY GOING TO LOOK TO YOU AS THIS DIRECTOR WHO DOES THIS STYLE?

I read those things online that say that I'm a “one-trick pony.” I could care less. I am who I am, and there is nothing I can do about that, and this is how I express myself. I come from the highlands of Scotland, where I'm used to a *ceilidh* tradition. I'm used to people sitting in the front room making music. I was brought up with a piano in the room. It's what I do. Why deny yourself? I'd already had success. I never stopped working. That to me is success. To get a Tony Award is a treat. It's the cherry on the sundae. But I was already doing what I do, and now, just because it's been maybe more successful on the commercial

platform than I ever thought it would be, I'm not going to stop doing it for that reason. I will do stories that I want to tell and I will tell them in the appropriate way at the time. What I won't do is, I won't use this technique only to make cheap theater. I will go into under-resourced situations, which is where I love to create. I really enjoy regional theater and I really enjoy the business of being told, "This is all you have." Then I can use my imagination. And I will continue to search for those opportunities—always, always, always. If they then bring the opportunity to take that work onto Broadway or into the West End, isn't that great? Of course, that's lovely for me, it's lovely for the cast. It's lovely for everything. Or, if I could find Broadway opportunities where I could say, "Look, don't expect it to have an enormous visual feast or don't give me such a lot of money that I don't know what to do with it. Give me people to storytell with." And maybe there is something in that, in the human relationship between that and an audience that is precious, is special. I think one of the reasons that *Sweeney* worked—forget the instruments, forget the glorious Patti [Lupone] and Michael [Cerveris] and their fantastic performances and Steve's incredible music—one of the reasons I think it worked was the connection between the audience and the action itself, and the direct, honest approach of saying, "We know you're there, and you know we're here."

HS: WHAT STRUCK ME MOST WHEN I SAW YOUR PRODUCTION OF *SWEENEY* IN THE WEST END WAS THAT IT WAS THE FIRST TIME I HAD SEEN *SWEENEY TODD* IN THE MORE THAN 20 YEARS IT'S BEEN AROUND THAT I WASN'T LOOKING AT SOME VERSION OF HAL PRINCE'S PRODUCTION. AND I WONDERED, HAD YOU SEEN THAT PRODUCTION AT ANY TIME AND HOW YOU WENT ABOUT BANISHING THOSE GHOSTS.

I had seen that production in the West End, at Drury Lane. I had done my own watered down production in a regional repertory theater with a cast of, I don't know, 18, and a band of 8 or 10. I'd done one years ago. And I was asked by Jill Fraser, who was the artistic director of the Watermill, where I have originated quite a number of these pieces of work, to do a piece of work for her at a time of year that I really didn't want to go there. It was January, it was cold, and I didn't want to do the job. It's a theater where you get paid almost no money and you all have to stay in this accommodation together and it's glorious and terrible all at the same time and there is never any budget. I had been working a lot and I needed the time off. The theater needed to make some money; they were going through hard times. She sat me down and said, "John, I need you to come and do something." I said, "I don't want to do anything." And she said, "I want you to come and do *Sweeney Todd*," and I said, "Oh my goodness, it's the last thing in the world I want to do, I've done

it before.” She said, “Please think about it.” And I thought, Well, she needs it. That was really important to me. The theater needed it, and I had loyalty to the audience, and I thought, The way I can survive this is by designing it myself, as well—actually going away and thinking about a total concept, a total re-look. I don’t usually do my own design work. I knew that the budget was about 5 or 8 thousand pounds—about 10 to 15 thousand dollars. I knew it was a tiny amount of money. I went out myself and found the costumes in clothing warehouses. I went out myself and found all the props for that back wall—which I continued to do on Broadway. I repeated exactly the same journey on Broadway, because I was insistent that it had to be a very hands-on experience from my viewpoint. I then went and found the original operating theater, Guys Hospital in London, where they have got buckets at the four corners and a black table in the middle of the room, white enamel buckets where they collected the blood when the amputations were being done. And the barbers of the East End were the people who went and did the amputations before anesthetic. That really interested me, and that’s where the imagery came from. I went into the rehearsal room not knowing how I was going to solve the problems of the piece, other than I had no money and I had very little to do it with.

You know, of all the wonderful, wonderful things that happened in the last two years about *Sweeney*, there have been great gifts and marvelous opportunities. One of the very special things was a letter that I received from Hal Prince, which said that this was probably the first time he’d ever seen it and it not be a copy of his production, and he was so pleased about that. I thought that was the most generous action, and it made me feel free. And that links to the whole thing about what we think revival is. Is revival a copy of an original, or is it something that you do for the audience that you’re doing it for now, for the artists who are making the story happen? I happen to think it should be the second, in the same way that you would revive Shakespeare differently all the time, and you would revive Ibsen differently all the time. I would want to put certainly Mr. Sondheim’s work in the category of those other names. And I think the same with anybody, if you want to tell a story anew, you have to tell it for the time that you live in. That doesn’t mean to say it has to be dressed in the time that we live in. That doesn’t mean to say that it has to say to us, Look! Get it, this is you. But to have a connection that gives it a relevance.

JVS: WHAT SONG FROM SWEENEY DO YOU THINK IS MOST REPRESENTATIVE OF YOUR STYLE AND OF YOUR WORK?

There are so many of them and they are all so great, but my “Desert Island” song would be the “Johanna” in Act II of *Sweeney Todd*. I think it represents it not only musically, but visually, the much-talked-about white little baby’s coffin, the whole image of a man

grieving for his child while singing some of the most beautiful music ever written for the American musical theater.

JVS: WHEN YOU SELECT SOMETHING TO DO, WHAT DO YOU LOOK FOR? PUTTING ASIDE HOW YOU'RE GOING TO EXECUTE IT, WHETHER YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE THE ACTORS PLAY THE INSTRUMENTS OR NOT, HOW YOU'RE GOING TO STAGE IT. PUTTING THAT ASIDE, WHAT DO YOU REALLY LOOK FOR WHEN YOU'RE SELECTING WHAT TO DO?

I think I look for something that has the potential for a darker side. The potential for a true expression of what humanity is. Something that gives me the opportunity to look at all our madness and sadness and badness at the same time as being potentially very funny or ironic or whatever it is, but that has inside it a depth or a connection with our humanity. Something like, for example, *Company*. Why did it interest me? Because I could be that man. I *have* been that man. I'm old enough to have been Bobby. Maybe will be Bobby again. That's the sort of story I like. Something that I think, Ah, okay, I can put something of myself into this. If I can't address myself in it, how can I ever help an artist, an actor, address themselves in it? I feel it's important that I tell stories that I don't stand in the way of. I'm not interested in my own ego becoming more important than the story. The story is the important thing to me. Even if I don't tell it well, I will try to tell it well. So it has to be something that I feel strongly enough about to think that there is something there that I want to say, rather than it become a glossy cover up.

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