

SWEENEY INCARNATIONS

BY ELIZABETH BRODERSEN

I WANTED TO MAKE A MELODRAMA BUT WITH A 20TH-CENTURY SENSIBILITY. . . . THE TRUE TERROR OF MELODRAMA COMES FROM ITS REVELATIONS ABOUT THE FRIGHTENING POWER OF WHAT IS INSIDE HUMAN BEINGS. AND IF YOU WRITE ABOUT KINGS AND QUEENS AND ARE A GREAT POET, YOU END UP WITH A FIRST-CLASS TRAGEDY; IF YOU WRITE ABOUT ORDINARY PEOPLE AND ARE AN ORDINARY WRITER, YOU END UP WITH A MELODRAMA. THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT THIS SHOW IS.

Stephen Sondheim on *Sweeney Todd*

SENSATIONAL ORIGINS

When London's murderous barber first made his appearance in an 1846 "penny dreadful" (a popular tabloid of Victorian England), Sweeney Todd began a century-and-a-half career of titillating audiences with tales of his bloody deeds. Todd's purported exploits were initially serialized in the story "The String of Pearls: A Romance," attributed to Thomas Peckett Prest; soon thereafter playwright George Dibdin Pitt created a theatrical adaptation for the stage. Advertised as "founded on fact," and set in the reign of George II, the play debuted March 1, 1847, at the Hoxton Theatre, a notorious London "bloodbath"—a theater specializing in sensational melodramas with generous amounts of sex and violence. The enormous success of Dibdin Pitt's play inspired dozens of imitations, which continued to be produced in and around London throughout the 19th and early 20th century.

Cut to 1973, when Christopher Bond's *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* opened in London at the Theatre Royal Stratford East. Among the show's fans was composer/lyricist Stephen Sondheim—already recognized for his daring, sophisticated musical explorations of the complexities of modern life—who appreciated the tale's richly melodramatic potential. Sondheim recruited writer Hugh Wheeler to collaborate with him on creating a musical treatment of Bond's play. Bond, like Sondheim and Wheeler after him, had found in Sweeney's gruesome tragedy a means of dramatizing the most potent aspects of human experience. "We care about the characters in *Sweeney* because they care about each other; and on a good night we plunge headlong to triumph and disaster with them," wrote Bond later in the introduction to the published text of Sondheim and Wheeler's

musical. “The people in *Sweeney* are fuelled by basic and simple human emotions: greed, lust, vengeance, and a desire to love and be loved in return. They inhabit a corrupt, unjust, and dangerous world, but this should tend to intensify their humanity rather than destroy it.”

Sondheim and Wheeler’s *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* opened at Broadway’s Uris Theatre in 1979 in a production directed by Harold Prince and starring Angela Lansbury and Len Cariou. The recipient of eight Tony Awards, *Sweeney Todd* was instantly recognized as a masterpiece and established Sondheim, in the words of *New Yorker* critic John Lahr, as “a kind of god of the musical theater.”

Sweeney went on to be produced dozens of times, most famously in Susan H. Schulman’s 1989 Broadway revival and Declan Donellan’s 1993 production for the Royal National Theatre.

. . . SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

And then along came John Doyle. A British theater director who has in his distinguished career run four theaters as artistic director and staged more than 200 productions, in 1992 Doyle found himself at Liverpool’s Everyman Theatre with the desire to direct Leonard Bernstein’s *Candide*—and almost no budget. No stranger to the financial strictures imposed on nonprofit regional theaters—especially in Thatcher’s Britain—he realized he had just enough money to pay either a cast or an orchestra, but not both. So he found a way to make 12 actor-musicians fill both job descriptions. In the process, he discovered a radical new way of making musical theater.

Several years later, while at the Watermill Theatre in the Berkshire countryside, he once again found himself working with minimal resources on a tiny stage. Asked to direct *Sweeney Todd* as a way of bringing much-needed cash to the theater, he decided to strip Sondheim’s legendary musical down to its essence and look at it completely afresh.

Working with collaborator Sarah Travis, Doyle set about the enormous challenge of interpreting Sondheim’s complex book and score—originally performed on Broadway by a 27-piece orchestra—for ten actors who would have to remain onstage during the entire performance, playing their own roles while accompanying their castmates on a variety of instruments. Travis simplified Sondheim’s scene change music, and Doyle reconceived the stage setting, placing the action in a mental institution where the story is played out in a stark environment inhabited by inmates/performers wearing bloody lab coats and wielding simple, evocative props, as well as their orchestral instruments. Gone was Prince’s epic mechanistic rendition of newly industrialized London, including Sweeney’s infamous

trapdoor barber chair. The result is a relentlessly focused chamber piece that lays bare the dark humanism of the original story and the extreme weirdness of the characters.

Doyle took a hands-on approach to creating his own Sweeney world. “I 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,” he described the process in a radio interview for American Theatre Wing in 2006. “The barbers of the East End were the people who went and did the amputations before anesthetic. That’s where the imagery comes from.

“For me, everything must earn its place on the stage,” he has said. “Everything has to be carefully selected and in perfect order and hopefully uncluttered. . . . My own taste . . . is about simplicity. I don’t like ‘stuff’ when I tell a story; never have done. I mustn’t sound pompous, but, to me, if any form of theater is going to survive, we have to ask the audience to do some imaginative work.”

The Watermill production generated such positive response that it soon moved to London’s West End, where critical reaction to the concentrated potency of Doyle and Travis’s interpretation was equally favorable. Lyn Gardner of the *Guardian* described *Sweeney* as “a dark dissection of the heart” in which “the lyrical and the horrific are perfectly matched,” while the *Times*’s Michael Billington observed, “You may not get the barber’s chair, but you get a strong sense of a man in the grip of slaughterous madness.”

BACK TO BROADWAY

Tipped off by friends that he should check out this unconventional new interpretation of his work, Sondheim saw the London production and very much liked what he saw. So much so that a Broadway production was soon in the works, with Sondheim an enthusiastic participant.

“When I first wrote this thing all I wanted to do was write a horror story,” Sondheim told the *New York Times*. “Of all the productions I’ve seen, this is the one that comes closest to Grand Guignol, closest to what I originally wanted to do. I characterize all the major productions I’ve seen in terms of a single adjective. Hal’s was epic. Declan Donnellan’s production was exactly the reverse, it was very intimate. John’s, for me, is the most intense.

“There are nuances lost because of the compression of the narrative required by this method of performing the piece,” he added. “But what you gain is a swiftness and intensity that draws the audience into this macabre world, and that is created by a unified ensemble working in one tone. Here it’s as if the audience is drawn into a tunnel.”

Sondheim made few changes to the production, asking that minimal cuts be restored and writing new scene change music to cover Doyle's staging. Overall, Sondheim was quite pleased with Travis's transformation of his score. "I think what she's done is absolutely brilliant. The variety of sounds she's gotten out of the instruments and also the practical way in which they allow John to work with the performers onstage is extraordinary. But what got me most about the orchestrations is what they did for the play's atmosphere. These are wonderfully weird textures. The sound of an accordion playing with a violin—it's very creepy."

A NEW WAY OF WORKING

The task of assembling this kind of production is something akin to solving a complex puzzle. The actors must not only learn their lines and songs, develop their roles, and figure out where and how to interact with each other most effectively in each scene in which they appear as individual characters, they must also learn their orchestral parts and choreograph the continuous, seamless moment-to-moment transformation from dramatic performer to musical accompanist—often on multiple instruments—and back again. And all this without the guidance of a conductor, who traditionally directs the entire process from an orchestra pit during performance.

Doyle describes his rehearsal process, in which, despite the technical and structural challenges, the development of character in pursuit of the story remains paramount: "I start with ten people in the room and work on a very personal level: How can we as a group connect with *Sweeney*? It's not like a therapy session, but I would be very honest with them and, I hope, nondictatorial. A lot of the British tradition is rooted in 'Let's make this piece of theater together,' so my job is to illuminate the story in the hope that the connection for you as an actor carries you to a connection between you and the audience. It's about the breaking down of the fourth wall and the absolute recognition that you the performer and you the audience member are in the same place at the same time sharing the same story."

Of course, one of the biggest challenges is finding actors who can also play musical instruments well enough to do justice to one of musical theater's most complex scores. The task has become somewhat easier over the years, as Doyle's approach has become increasingly popular. (There is now a school in Britain, Rose Bruford College, that offers a three-year training program for actor-musicians.)

The process of finding an American cast in New York to recreate the British production was less challenging than Doyle and Travis had feared. "We saw a lot of good people before we selected, so I'm assuming that there must be actors all over New York practicing their cello, or something, because certainly I see more and more people now," he has

said. “I think there is also something to be said for the fact that you do have a high school marching band tradition [in the United States], 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.”

More difficult is adjusting the show to account for the varying talents of new cast members in succeeding productions. “Because different instruments are now played by different characters, the staging has had to change quite a bit,” Doyle has said. “In a way that was good because it forced us to go back to square one and start again. People may wonder why a character performs a particular action. It’s because to lose the musical voicing provided by another actor who might perform it would be detrimental to the orchestration. It’s a jigsaw puzzle.”

The process began again in New York in July, as Doyle and Travis prepared a new cast for the A.C.T. production, which will continue on a national tour after it leaves San Francisco. While many of the original Broadway cast members are continuing on with the show, others had to be replaced, including those playing the key roles of Sweeney and Mrs. Lovett. According to recent rehearsal reports, the technical process of bringing the new performers into the staging and orchestration has been surprisingly easy, leaving time to concentrate on the deeper work of developing the characters.

THE POWER OF THE IMAGINATION

When Doyle’s incarnation of *Sweeney Todd* opened on Broadway in November 2005, musical theater purists may have been shocked by the austere simplicity of its Expressionist production values and lean orchestrations. Yet many were impressed by the eerie effect of stripping away the trappings of the conventional Broadway musical, which forces the audience to engage with the actors in a surprisingly intimate—and, in the case of Sweeney, somewhat terrifying—way.

“I think it works to our advantage that you have to listen hard to this production, not just let it wash over you,” said Sondheim. “I think it’s great that at previews people are leaning forward in their seats hanging on every word. I stand in the back of the theater and am delighted by the silence.”

“When an audience’s imagination is engaged they enjoy it even more. It’s what makes theater different from the movies. The theater is a poetical medium and the movies are a reportorial medium. That’s the fun of the theater.”

Although his approach was born out of economic necessity, it is the power of the storytelling that remains front and center for Doyle, as well. For Doyle—who has achieved success applying his approach to stripped-down versions of numerous classic works of

music theater, including *Pal Joey*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Mack and Mabel*, *Cabaret*, Gilbert & Sullivan's *The Gondoliers*, *Amadeus*, and, most recently, his Tony Award-winning version of Sondheim's *Company*—it is all about the story and the audience's connection to it, a conviction rooted in the *ceilidh* traditions of his Scottish homeland, which celebrate participation of the entire community in the telling, singing, dancing, and playing of song and fable.

Despite the impact his work has had on the American musical theater world, Doyle denies any intent to revolutionize Broadway with his minimalist approach. “It kind of asks the audience to take a journey that goes beyond their preconception of what real life is,” he has said. “I suppose you could say it takes you to a kind of abstraction of reality. That’s what I’m interested in, more than anything, really. What it does in terms of the relationship between the actor and the audience is what interests me.

“All I’ve done is look at these works differently to make people listen and have to use their imaginations . . . but that’s my job, isn’t it?”

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