

Sweeney Todd

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Anyone who's seen only Tim Burton's film adaptation of Stephen Sondheim's Sweeney Todd or the "high-concept" production at the Ahmanson last year is hereby advised to head down (or up or over) to Torrance and catch the absolutely phenomenal revival being staged at El Camino College.

Don't let the word "college" fool you. This is an entirely professional production with an Equity leading man and a supporting cast of some of our finest Los Angeles talent. With its pitch-perfect performances, 19-piece orchestra, and could-hardly-be-better production design, this is a Sweeney Todd that could easily fool you into thinking you're watching a Broadway show.

Unlike Burton's movie, which eliminated a number of songs including the mood-setting opening number, "The Ballad Of Sweeney Todd," or John Doyle's revival, which had a reduced cast of actors playing all the roles (and doubling as orchestra), this Sweeney Todd features a cast of 22 performing every one of Sondheim's complex melodies, a 19th Century London setting and costumes, and a barber's chair which sends Sweeney's victims straight down a chute to the oven below.

The real Sweeney Todd, aka the Demon Barber of Fleet Street, is reputed to have murdered 160 individuals before being executed by hanging in 1801, putting contemporary serial killers to shame.

Sondheim's musical adaptation, with book by Hugh Wheeler from an adaptation by Christopher Bond, introduces us to the former Benjamin Barker as the falsely convicted barber returns to London following 15 years of servitude in Australia, bent on getting revenge on the judge who trumped up charges against him, the better to have Barker's wife for himself. A chance meeting with Mrs. Nellie Lovett, the maker of "the worst pies in London" leads to a devilishly

inspired idea—to stuff said pies with human meat. In no time at all, Mrs. Lovett is running the most popular pie shop in London, with the renamed Sweeney Todd using her upstairs room as his tonsorial parlor, where the necks of his hapless customers get sliced open by Sweeney's deadly straight-edge razor. Meanwhile, Sweeney and a young sailor he met on his ocean journey back from Australia attempt to free the barber's now grown daughter Johanna from the evil judge's clutches—and matrimonial plans.

El Camino's production may not have all the gore of Burton's film, but make-up/hair designer Byron Batista and prop designer Dawn Huntoon have concocted razors which cause blood to spurt from necks like water from a sprinkler, at one point earning a spontaneous burst of audience applause.

Sweeney Todd is about much more than blood, however, and this production could not have found a better pair of leads than Michael Stone Forrest as Sweeney and Shirley Anne Hatton as Mrs. Lovett.

Forrest, freshly arrived in L.A. from a lengthy Washington D.C. career, gives Sweeney the fierce and frightening look of a serial killer and sings Sondheim's melodies with an opera-ready bass-baritone. Hatton quickly erases memories of other Mrs. Lovetts before her with her deft and daffy performance and splendid pipes. Each shines vocally, and when duetting they are magic, whether bringing down the house with the Act 1 closer "A Little Priest" or Act 2's fanciful "By The Sea."



As Sweeney's sailor friend Anthony, handsome young Tyler Milliron gets his biggest and best role yet since his L.A. debut in Cabaret last year, revealing a perfect, opera-ready tenor-baritone in "Johanna." His love interest, the aforementioned Johanna (daughter of Sweeney Todd and ward of evil Judge Turpin), is played by lovely Kimberly Youngblood, whose glorious soprano duets with Milliron in "Kiss Me." Jonas Sils is a winning Tobias, the orphan taken in by Mrs. Lovett to help in the pie shop. "Not While I'm Around," his duet with Mrs. Lovett/Hatton, is a superbly performed Act 2 highlight.

Also featured prominently are Jack Messenger as the corrupt, lascivious Judge Turpin, Ernest Alvarez as Beadle Bamford, Turpin's right hand man, Marcy Brooks as the Beggar Woman with more than alms on her mind, and Duke Rausavljevich as Adolfo Pirelli, whose Miracle Elixir is said to be a cure for every ailment under the sun. All four capture the look and sound of their Dickensian characters, with Rausavljevich possessing a particularly high and powerful tenor (and a comic flair to boot). The ensemble is completed in stellar fashion by Zan Alda, Jeannine Barba, Lois Bourgon, Jeff Cason, C. Leonard Coduti, Douglas Crockett, Jacqueline Crist-Franzen, Veronica Harwell, Maura Lefevre, Roy T. Okida, Maya Veronique Perez, Matthew Roberts, and Brittney S. Wheeler. When singing as a group, whether "The Ballad Of Sweeney Todd" or "God That's Good" or "City On Fire," this is an ensemble in particularly fine voice under the vocal direction of Henri Venanzi. The 19-member orchestra hits nary a false note under the superb musical direction of Hector Salazar. Choreography (though perhaps the term musical staging is more appropriate here) is the creation of the always reliable Brian-Paul Mendoza.

Director Ron Scarlata's striking vision is evident from the opening scene, which features ensemble members staring down the audience while issuing a musical warning to "attend the tale of Sweeney Todd."

As integral a part of the production as the performers and musicians are the contributions of the design team, beginning with Chuck Turner's darkly-hued set, which features a backdrop of 19th Century London, balconies on either side of the proscenium, and an imposing center unit which revolves to become Mrs. Lovett's parlor, kitchen, and basement, with Sweeney's lethal barber chair looming ever-present above it. Bill Georges' lighting is dramatic as befits the piece, with footlights often sending up sinister shadows onto the faces of the townspeople. Kim DeShazo Wilkinson's costumes evoke the look and feel of the era, Mrs. Lovett's dresses being a particularly fine blend of period and quirky.

Kenny Lefort's sound design not only mixes orchestra and voices to perfection, but includes the signature Sweeney Todd screech of a whistle, blown stridently at unexpected moments.

All of these elements come together in perfect synergy to make for as memorable a production of Sweeney Todd as you're likely to see. Only two weekends remain in the show's limited 8-performance run, so make plans now to catch this absolutely superb production. Other Sweeneys may be on the horizon here or there, but this is the one not to miss.

March 14

SWEENEY TODD

Campus Theatre, El Camino College, 16007 Crenshaw Blvd., Torrance. Through March 29. Fridays and Saturdays at 8:00. Sundays at 3:00. Reservations: 310 329-5345 or 800 832-ARTS www.centerforthearts.org

--Steven Stanley

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Photos: Alysa Brennan

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