

## THEATRE REVIEW: SWEENEY TODD - THE DEMON BARBER OF FLEET STREET (LEEDS)

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First performed on Broadway in 1979, this West Yorkshire Playhouse and Royal Exchange Theatre revamp of Stephen Sondheim's classic Sweeney Todd - The Demon Barber of Fleet Street is a red-bloodied success.

The story tells of Mr Todd, who returns to London after 15 years in exile expecting to find his wife and young daughter waiting. When he discovers the unsavoury truth, he becomes consumed with vengeance. A skilled barber, Todd opens a shop in Fleet Street above Mrs Lovett, who sells 'the worst pies in London', and starts plotting his revenge. It's not giving too much away to say Mrs Lovett finds an ingenious and 'thrifty' way to help him carry out his plan.

The performances are uniformly magnificent. David Birrell is a wonderfully charismatic Sweeney Todd, effortlessly switching between loving husband and father and vengeful murderer. If anything, he is slightly overshadowed by the terrific Gillian Bevan as Mrs Lovett; at once a mother figure and devious schemer determined to secure Todd's affections. Also worth singling out is Sebastien Torkia. His short but sweet turn as elixir-selling huckster Pirelli is truly hilarious. There is also strong support from Ben Stott, the most powerless of all the characters, who becomes ever more drawn into Todd and Lovett's twisted world.

In many ways, the music is the true star of the show and much credit goes to musical supervisor and orchestrator, David Shrubsole, and musical director, George Dyer. The chorus provides excellent support throughout; assisted by some fine choreography by Nick Winston. One of the strengths of the Playhouse is the adaptability of the cavernous space and it's certainly used to great effect here. This is an epic show that needs a suitably epic setting and the Quarry theatre stage provides just that, with great sound quality throughout.

In fact, the only false note here is the fact that the story has been moved from the nineteenth century to the late 1970s/1980s. While it's true that many of the themes, such as corruption and the disparity between rich and poor, are timeless, if the creative team wanted to update the tale, it needed to be done a whole lot more comprehensively than this.

The problem is that Sondheim's lyrics were written for story set 167 years ago, meaning many references and plot developments are rendered obsolete. The practice of sending ne'er-do-wells off to the Australian penal colonies ended in 1868, and it's hard to believe Pirelli and his cure-all elixir would have gone down well on the streets of Thatcherite London. While it's a commendable ambition to make the story more relatable to modern audiences, it's hard not to feel that with its grim subject matter and dark themes, this is a story that belongs in the dark and forgotten alleyways of Victorian London; an era where people were truly powerless and anyone could simply disappear into a lunatic asylum never to be seen again.

Overall, however, with vivid characterisation, imaginative staging and Sondheim's genius, it's hard to imagine a more enjoyable or satisfying musical theatre experience. More an opera than a true musical, the strength of the piece is that the beautifully intricate songs are woven seamlessly into the narrative. This is not a musical filled with plot-stalling ballads; it is a true musical tale.

As well as directing the production, Sweeney Todd marks James Brining's first show as artistic director of the Playhouse. If this is the standard of work audiences can expect, the Leeds theatre, which already enjoys a deserved reputation for quality productions, may well be moving into its most exciting era yet.

- Hannah Giles