

NODA Review

VIVA!

SWEENEY TODD - THE DEMON BARBER OF FLEET STREET

Music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

Book by Hugh Wheeler

Staged at The Brook

Reviewed 17 June 2016

“The horror! The horror!” is an oft-quoted line from Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness* but no phrase more succinctly sums up the blood, guts, evil and tragedy flowing through musical thriller *Sweeney Todd – The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. Arguably the Mount Everest of modern musical theatre, *Sweeney Todd* has challenging music, complex pacing demands and creative technical staging requirements. As with the buckets of gore produced by the title character alone, it’s not for the faint-hearted -- or for only a mildly competent creative team.

Fortunately in the case of Soham, Cambridgeshire’s Viva, this production was placed in the hands of director Gail Baker, musical directors Richard Hayward and Graham Brown, choreographer Jessica Clifford, along with technical & production management by Nigel Thompson at Blushed Studios who successfully brought this blood-soaked epic to vivid life – well, considering the subject matter, so to speak.

As London folklore tells us, revenge becomes a dish served piping hot as barber Sweeney Todd joins forces with pie shop proprietor Mrs Lovett to avenge his false imprisonment, exile to Australia and the destruction of his family by the evil Judge Turpin. Only Todd’s daughter Johanna and her sailor suitor Anthony get out of this bloody mess relatively unscathed.

From the opening vocals of “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd”, it was evident that this production had the right singers on board – rarely do so many fine male soloists pop up in one cast, for example. Also unmistakable from the beginning was evidence of a well-disciplined and well-rehearsed cast/collective.

Richard Dodd was a stunning Sweeney Todd, a bit mad, relentless, wild-eyed and visually powerful, a hell-bent force of nature. His deep, rich voice gave his performance a foundation you could build a house on.

Sadly, in spite of Dodd’s incendiary performance, the unholy coupling of Todd and Mrs Lovett in this production lacked chemistry, connection and camaraderie. Samantha Gallop, who sang with gusto, opted to portray the pie-maker as a shrewish, cold businesswoman on the make instead of revealing layers of manipulative coquettishness, blithe amorality and grasping passion for Todd. For this reviewer, her interpretation did not sufficiently fuel the story’s momentum or ultimate tragedy. However, her imitation of a seagull delivered one of the evening’s big laughs.

As the judge, David Tickner served up a disturbingly smiling face of evil, in a performance rich with complexity. He was well matched with Andy Ward in a finely-tuned and well-sung performance as his partner in evil, the Beadle.

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As the young lovers Johanna and Anthony, songbird-voiced Zara Minns and Daniel Lane offered beacons of light on a dark dramatic landscape, harmonising beautifully in their duets. Still in his teens, Lane is rapidly emerging as a highly appealing musical theatre performer, and it is exciting to see him develop into leading man material. Another teen actor, Jordan Thorpe, in the pivotal role of the apprentice Tobias impressively navigated the twists and turns of an unusually demanding acting role for a juvenile in a musical.

In a haunting portrayal of the alternately repellent and pathetic Beggar Woman, Angela Bocking provided many of *Sweeney Todd's* both most shocking and heartbreaking moments, delivering a skilfully nuanced, affecting and beautifully sung performance. A rousing "Bravo!" is also due to Charlie Gilett for his zesty and bold characterisation of an Italian/Irish barber, offering delicious comic relief as well as superb singing.

A beautiful bit of technical and staging co-ordination that must be noted was seen each time Todd executed a victim. The choreography given to Todd to carry out executions was dramatic, tight, swift and elegant, highlighted by a burst of red lighting. Very effective!

An inspired touch to the evening was the sale of homemade pies during the interval, prepared by the actor playing the Beadle (the venue's chef in his 'real' life). The vintage-looking candelabras on each table contributed to the Grand Guignol atmosphere.

In the midst of a wonderful production, house management unfortunately fell short. While friendly, the stewards on hand did not seem to know precise location of tables or in which seats at the table people were supposed to be sat, if any in particular. Our seats turned out to be behind a bank of speakers, and my partner and I had to peer around them to see action on far stage right. Fortunately, the quality of this production overcame this irritation.

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