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Northern Ireland Opera & Lyric Theatre

Sweeney Todd
The Demon Barber of Fleet Street
A Musical Thriller

Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim • Book by Hugh Wheeler • Directed by Walter Sutcliffe
From an adaptation by Christopher Bond • Originally directed by Harold Prince Original orchestrations by Jonathan Tunick
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Synopsis

ACT I

Years after his transportation to Australia, Benjamin Barker returns to Victorian London under the name of Sweeney Todd, seeking revenge for the loss of his family at the hands of the “honourable” Judge Turpin. His companion is young sailor Anthony, who rescued Sweeney at sea. Upon their arrival, the men are greeted by a beggar woman. “Don’t I know you”, she asks Sweeney as he shoves her out of his way. Back on his old stomping ground on Fleet Street, he meets hardy pie shop owner Mrs Lovett. She recognises him as the barber Benjamin Barker who was convicted under wrong charges, his helpless wife Lucy lured to the Judge Turpin’s house by his assistant Beadle, and there, abused by the guardian of the law. To his inquiry about the whereabouts of Lucy and his daughter Johanna, Mrs Lovett professes that Lucy poisoned herself and Johanna has since been in the care of the Judge. Sweeney swears to seek justice and Mrs Lovett persuades him to take up his old trade. She has kept his knives. The pair make an ingenious plan: while waiting for the Judge, Sweeney will practice “on less honourable throats”. Mrs Lovett delights at the unexpected meat supply for her pie shop.”

ACT II

Business is flourishing at Mrs Lovett’s pie shop, and Sweeney is busy disposing of his customers. Anthony arrives with news: The Judge has admitted Johanna to Fogg’s asylum. Sweeney instructs Anthony to pose as a wigmaker and rescue her. As Anthony leaves, Sweeney notifies the Judge of Anthony’s plan by letter, hoping to lure him back to the shop. Toby, who now works for Mrs Lovett, has become suspicious of Sweeney. Mrs Lovett distracts him by explaining how to work the meat grinder, and leaves him locked in. Upstairs, she finds Beadle, who has come to investigate the strange smells emanating from the building. When Sweeney arrives a little later, Beadle is happy to take the barber up on his offer for a free shave. It’s the end of Beadle, who is dropped down the chute, landing right in front of terror-stricken Toby. Anthony and Johanna escape the asylum after Johanna has taken hold of her lover’s gun to shoot Mr Fogg, the institution’s owner. Back at the barber shop, Johanna hides as the beggar woman arrives, looking for Beadle. Sweeney returns, frantic with anticipation of welcoming his nemesis, and kills the intruder. Next is the Judge, who has returned to seize Johanna. Down below, Mrs Lovett struggles to keep up. When getting the beggar woman ready for the oven, Sweeney joins her, and recognises the lifeless face as his wife Lucy. Sweeney’s blind anger turns against his disingenuous partner in crime, whose lie proves fatal. Toby, who has roamed the streets in a state of madness finds Sweeney, picks up the razor and finishes him off.
Context: Victorian London

- At the end of the 19th century, London was the world’s most populated city.
- Many of London’s most famous buildings and landmarks were built during the 19th century, including Trafalgar Square, the Houses of Parliament, Tower Bridge and Victoria Station.
- For most of the 19th century, the British Empire was the world’s most significant colonial force.
- The industrial revolution changed Britain’s economy and landscape fundamentally. Cities expanded rapidly.
- Victorian morality embraced female purity, order, politeness. As historian Harold Pinter described it: “Between 1780 and 1850 the English ceased to be one of the most aggressive, brutal, rowdy, outspoken, riotous, cruel and bloodthirsty nations in the world and became one of the most inhibited, polite, orderly, tender-minded, prudish and hypocritical.”
- Social inequality resulted in high crime rates, as well as homelessness, poverty, disease and prostitution as major social issues.
- Many thousand citizens lives in slums.
- Especially the working classes, as well as unemployed, and illegally employed citizens suffered from insufficient health care and poor hygiene standards.
- London’s East End was particularly known for its social problems. Most of its inhabitants were people in working class occupations.
- In 1851, the population density in the capital was at 7.72 people in a house.
- The famous serial killer Jack the Ripper “operated” in the East End in the late 19th century.

A few references to Victorian London in Sondheim/Wheeler’s Sweeney Todd

- Poor women were often driven into prostitution. Their clients were drawn from the ranks of working, middle, and upper classes, while the suppliers were exclusively working class women and girls. Sweeney Todd comments on this in the character of the beggar woman (Lucy).
- Fleet Street in the West of London had been established as the centre of London’s journalism and print district since the 18th century. Several interpretations of the Sweeney Todd story locate his barber shop on Fleet Street.
- Music halls offered popular entertainment for the lower middle classes. Stephen Sondheim pays tribute to the genre in the song “By the Sea”, sung by Mrs Lovett.
- After 1815, Irish immigration has increased significantly. By 1851, 500.000 Irish had settled in England and Wales. The London Irish lived in some of the worst conditions of all London’s inhabitants. Sondheim and Wheeler create the character of Pirelli posing as an Italian tenor.
“I LIKE THE IDEA OF THEATRE LEVELLING US ALL OUT”

An interview with director Walter Sutcliffe

The gruesome tale of *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street* has frightened and fascinated generations since it first emerged in the mid-19th century. What has drawn you to this piece?

WS: I think that this version of *Sweeney Todd* will always be relevant, because it transcends the period it was written in. The Christopher Bond play (1973), which Sondheim and Wheeler used as their model, frames the narrative as a social critique. Bond uses the theatre to comment on the oppressive mechanisms of a capitalist society, in which Sweeney is the victim of his circumstances. I think there is more to it. Like other pieces that have entered the canon of classics, it asks us questions rather than providing answers, and it does so in thought-provoking, often opaque ways.

Right at the beginning of the show, the chorus warns us that Sweeney Todd will mercilessly kill “those who moralise”. What is the significance of this statement?

WS: The chorus are passing comment on the action but they also serve as a bridge between the audience and the action on stage. I have always found it strange when productions have presented them to exist on the narrative level only. I think their purpose is multi-layered. In my understanding, the comment about moralisers steers the focus in two different directions: not only inwardly on the piece, but also outwardly to the consumers of the show.

The narrative presents us with complex moral dilemmas. Do Sweeney’s motives justify his cruel actions, and who has the right to judge over others? Is Sondheim playing with our discomfort of having to decide between right and wrong?

WS: The writing in most of the ensemble numbers is quite playful, and funny. The macabre humour takes the chorus out of the play and engages us in a way that makes it tricky to form clear judgements because we can be simultaneously repelled and entertained. The chorus members arguably share that enjoyment with the audience. I think the social critique that results from this reading is much sharper than what the Christopher Bond version achieves. His play hopes to elevate
the audience by showing that capitalist mechanisms are destructive. He presents the theatre as a place of moral and spiritual betterment. I think Sondheim and Wheeler question that interpretation and place it in an ironic context. They rather seem to suggest that the audience, simply by being in the theatre, becomes a moral actor.

As the audience, are we guilty for laughing at the cannibalism and enjoying the gory pies from the safety of our seats?

WS: I think that’s the trick of the piece. It is a sophisticated exploration of the Grand Guignol tradition. The very first number, “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd”, is telling us that the action is going to reconstruct something that has already happened. We are in fact at the end of the play at this point. The implication is that we will be invited to pass judgement, only that this judgement is gradually replaced with comedy and entertainment. Ideally, as an audience we will at some stage catch ourselves laughing at the macabre spectacle. We are trying to make the audience feel conscious about the consumption of a product. The question about the complicity is important. I guess it was a bigger issue for the Romans when they went to the arena, but it applies here also: how do we process instincts that we have had for millennia? Sweeney is a piece that asks fundamental questions about what an audience is, and by extension about what it means to be human. I like the idea of theatre levelling us all out.
“IT IS GENIUS”

An interview with conductor Sinead Hayes

There has been much debate about the genre identity of Sweeney Todd. It has been described as a melodrama, even an opera. What makes it so difficult to classify this work?

SH: I think this dilemma has to do with the quality of how the score is put together. The score is very well constructed and demands a certain level of artistry, security with pitch and rhythm, and confidence in those moments when the music invites the singer to be flexible and spontaneous. These are characteristics that could be described as operatic. The challenge for us as performers is to use that flexibility to the greatest possible effect and make the piece sound fresh every night.

Perhaps the dramatic cohesion of the music would also point towards an identification as opera?

SH: Yes, we could almost compare Sondheim’s use of Leitmotiv to composer Richard Wagner. Take for example the Beggar Woman. She has a split personality, and accordingly we have two very contrasting musical motifs. One is the elegiac “alms, alms”, which sounds immediately portentous, and then we have this brusque dance music, which is related to the scene which reveals her abuse by the judge. For Sweeney’s music, Sondheim was inspired by the Gregorian chant “Dies Irae”, an ancient hymn about judgement day. He takes the material, twists and turns it, with reminiscences of it even emerging in Anthony’s “Johanna”, which on the surface seems to be completely removed from Sweeney’s sound world. The ways in which the musical numbers are interrelated is genius!

While the music is unmistakably his own, Sondheim was frank about some of his inspirations. He wanted to create the classic Hollywood horror movie sound, thinking especially of Bernhard Herrmann.

SH: Yes, Sondheim has taken what is called the “Herrmann chord” and woven it into his score in all its inversions, not only as a chord that appears “vertically”, but also “horizontally”, meaning the notes of the chords are heard after one another. This technique achieves a haunting effect similar to Herrmann’s film music, without us consciously realising how this is being done.

Sweeney’s discovery of the Beggar Woman’s true identity as his long-lost wife is a dramatically crucial moment. How is this realised musically?

SH: It is done very cleverly. As soon as Sweeney realises who the Beggar Woman is, we hear a reminiscence of her “alms, alms” music. A light bulb moment for Sweeney, in the worst possible way, at the worst possible time. As he discovers Mrs Lovett’s lie, the light-hearted music they shared previously returns, now used as a cynical accusation. Their memories are now twisted, and so is the music.
“EMPHASISING THE DRAMA”

An interview with designer Dorota Karolczak

In your stage sets, we see a continuation of the Lyric auditorium aesthetic. The boundaries that clearly distinguish between “them” and “us” blur. Why did you choose this device?

DK: There are several ideas behind this. On the one hand we wanted to play with the relationship between the viewer and the protagonists. On the other hand we thought about Sondheim’s play with the nature of the theatre itself, and the audience’s role within it. Is the theatre a place of judgements or is it really a fun house or ghost train ride? This set plays with this idea and enables us to transit quickly between both worlds.

An interesting moment in your design concept is when the wooden wall panels open to reveal the makings of a horror story. We see hanging body parts, plastic covers from a forensic investigation etc. Does the theatre become reality, or are we all trapped in a huge theatrical display?

DK: That is a nice idea, and both ideas are true, because these stories also exist in our subconscious and we don’t leave them behind when we leave the theatre. We also already bring the desire for the grotesque and the grisly humour into the building with us - this is part of our human condition.

How do your costume choices reflect the characters’ internal development throughout the narrative?

DK: The clothes they wear show us a couple of things. They show us a character’s material circumstances which may change over time, but they also show us how a character feels about themselves, and what sort of image they try to project, just like clothes do in real life. But, by reducing the colour scheme we have tried to add a degree of artificiality and to emphasise the drama.

How important are the references to Victorian England in your vision of the story?

DK: It was important for us to maintain a link with the Victorian period since it is an important basis for the piece, with the idea of convict transportations being central to the narrative. Of course, it would be possible to make a totally contemporary show, but this would miss the point a little. The narrative is a fantasy. It is not a piece of ‘realism’. And maintaining this Victorian element is very helpful in creating the fantasy world of the main story.

Questions by Judith Wiemers, NI Opera
“YOU NEED STAMINA!”

Jessica Hackett on being a young opera singer, and performing as Johanna in *Sweeney Todd*

When did you start singing and why?

I started singing at the age of just three, when I joined my local choir. It was run by my mum and my auntie, and I remember singing my first solo on Christmas Day that year: “A Ray of Hope”. They had to put me on a stack of books so that people could actually see me.

We also know you as an opera singer. When did you develop an interest in this genre of music?

At the age of eight I started training in Classical music and soon realised that my voice suited that style very well. I have always been able to sing quite high, and in musical theatre I found it difficult to really “belt out” the notes.

How does singing opera differ from performing musical theatre?

I use the same vocal technique for both. An essential lesson I have learned over the years is that whatever you sing, you need solid “support” from your diaphragm, and good airflow. It’s all about breathing! With opera, you have to be careful not to strain your voice by singing something that is “too big” for your voice. When singing musical theatre, the delivery of lines is often more important than making your voice sound as beautiful as you can. You have to make that punch line work. In both styles, the intention of what you are singing is crucial. It requires a lot of intellectual effort too.

What does your practice routine look like?

I usually start with some physical exercise to wake up my body before I warm up my voice. I then practice scales for about thirty minutes. If I have a difficult run in any of my pieces, I implement that into my warm-up routine. Next I take a melody or piece that my voice is particularly comfortable with, and sing it gently. Only then will I start practising a new aria or song, break it into chunks and approach each individually.

How much time do you spend practising on a normal day?

On a good day, I will spend a solid four hours singing. Even when I am not practising, my music follows me around, and I might hum a tune while doing the hoovering. When I am in rehearsals for an opera, or indeed *Sweeney Todd*, I basically sing all day.

That sounds like hard work.
Yes it is. I think a lot of people underestimate how much hard labour goes into building your voice. At the end of the day, your vocal chords are a muscle that you have to train, just like a professional athlete would have to train their body. You need stamina!

When becoming a professional singer, what other skills do you have to master?

As a stage performer, I am not only required to sing, but also become a proficient actor. I watch a lot of live theatre, and films to learn from professional actors and observe how they “become one” with their characters. Occasionally, as a singer, you might even be asked to dance! In general, physical fitness is almost as important as vocal fitness. On stage you will always have to move while singing. A singer of a certain level will also be expected to know several languages. Apart from English and Irish, I have learned French and am currently studying German.

What are the challenges of being a professional singer?

When seeing a singer on stage, you might assume that this job is more glamorous than it actually is. Singing professionally also always means rejection. Every singer has been to multiple auditions where the answer was “Sorry, we are not interested”. My teacher has helped me to be strong in those situations. You have to grow a thick skin in this business!

In the NI Opera/Lyric Theatre production of Sweeney Todd, you sing and play the role of Johanna. Could you tell us something about her character?

Johanna is a young, naïve teenager, who has been locked away and shielded from society by her guardian, Judge Turpin. Every day she sits at her window and dreams of breaking free. When she meets young Anthony, her secret wish becomes an urgent ambition. I think Johanna has more strength of character than is often assumed. In her fledging relationship with Anthony, she eventually takes the upper hand and pursues her dream with a passion which equals that of her father Sweeney.

Age: 22
From County Meath
Education: Jessica studied Vocal Performance at Maynooth University and DIT College of Music
Future plans: Jessica has recently been accepted to the MA programme in Opera Performance at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, Cardiff
Costume Sketches

Sweeney Todd
Mrs Lovett
Johanna

Joanna
Pirelli
Judge Turpin
Beadle
Beggar Woman / Lucy
“I’LL POLISH HIM OFF”
A select Sweeney Todd chronology

1846 – 1847: The characters of the barber Sweeney Todd, and his pie-baking accomplice Mrs Lovett are introduced in *The String of Pearls: A Romance*, attributed to Edward P. Hignston, George MacFarren, and James Malcolm Rymer amongst others, and published in a series of fictitious short stories.

1847: The play *The String of Pearls*, written by George Dibdin Pitt, is performed at the Britannia Theatre, Hoxton. It was the first version to use the catchphrase now most associated with Sweeney: “I’ll polish him off”.

1848 - 1850: An updated version of *The String of Pearls: The Barber of Fleet Street* appears as a “penny dreadful” serial; cheap printed horror stories about notorious criminals.

1865: A new dramatic adaptation by Frederick Hazleton is performed under the title *Sweeney Todd, the Barber of Fleet Street, or, the String of Pearls* at The Old Bowler Saloon in Lambeth.

1928: The first surviving film version of Sweeney Todd stars Moore Marriott in the role of the murderous barber.

1936: The first sound film version sees British horror actor Tod Slaughter (!) in the title role of *Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*.

1956: Actor Stanley Holloway releases a recording of the popular music-hall song “Sweeney Todd the Barber” by R.P. Weston.

1959: A one-act ballet adaptation with music by Malcolm Arnold (op.68) and choreography by John Cranko celebrates its world premiere at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford.

1970: Andy Milligan’s *Bloodthirsty Butchers* is a violent film adaptation with graphic murder scenes. Its tagline was: “Their prime cuts were curiously erotic...but thoroughly brutal!”
1973: Christopher Bond’s play *Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* opens at the Theatre Royal in Stratford East (London). It served as the primary source for Sondheim’s musical.


1980: Sondheim and Wheeler’s “musical thriller” is staged at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane in London, where the reception is initially less enthusiastic as on Broadway.

2008: Tim Burton’s film adaptation of the Sondheim/Wheeler musical is released as *Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. The film stars Johnny Depp as Sweeney Todd, Helen Bonham Carter as Mrs Lovett, Alan Rickman as Judge Turpin and Northern Irish actress Jayne Wisener as Johanna. The production wins an Oscar for Best Art Direction and two Golden Globes.

2019: A new co-production of the Lyric Theatre and Northern Ireland Opera premieres in Belfast.

Set design drafts

Hugh Wheeler was a novelist, playwright and screenwriter. He wrote more than thirty mystery novels under the pseudonyms Q. Patrick and Patrick Quentin, and four of his novels were transformed into films: “Black Widow”, “Man in the Net”, “The Green-Eyed Monster” and “The Man with Two Wives”. For films he wrote the screenplays for “Travels with My Aunt”, “Something for Everyone”, “A Little Night Music” and “Nijinsky”. His plays include Big Fish, Little Fish (1961), Look: We’ve Come Through (1961) and We Have Always Lived in the Castle (1966, adapted from the Shirley Jackson novel), he co-authored with Joseph Stein the book for a new production of the 1919 musical Irene (1973), wrote the books for A Little Night Music (1973), a new production of Candide (1973), Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street (1979, based on a version of the play by Christopher Bond), and Meet Me in St. Louis (adapted from the 1949 MGM musical), contributed additional material for the musical Pacific Overtures (1976), and wrote a new adaptation of the Kurt Weill opera Silverlake, which was directed by Harold Prince at the New York Opera. He received Tony and Drama Desk Awards for A Little Night Music, Candide and Sweeney Todd. Prior to his death in 1987 Mr. Wheeler was working on two new musicals, Bodo and Fu Manchu, and a new adaptation of The Merry Widow.
Rehearsal exercises

WALK YOUR STATUS

A person’s “status” denotes their relative social or professional position. In a social network, status is related to authority, power and reputation and often determines a person’s rights and responsibilities. Status is flexible and depends on the social and political environment as well as changing material circumstances. A person can inhabit various types of status, depending on the social context: at his workplace an employee might have little influence, while being the manager of his local football club. In this rehearsal exercise, you can explore nuances of high and low social statuses using the Sweeney Todd characters.

A character with extreme high status

- Is calm and focused
- Claims a lot of space
- Walks upright, with confidence
- Moves slowly and with a sense of purpose
- Makes direct eye contact
- Breathes calmly and regularly
- Speaks in a lower register
- Takes time to speak
- Does not respect personal boundaries of others
- Interrupts others
- Gives orders
- Acts with great confidence and self-composure

A character with extreme low status

- Is nervous and fidgety
- Fumbles with clothes and hands
- Tries to attract as little attention as possible
- Claims very little space
- Has a stooped posture and walk
- Lowers his/her eyes
- Moves insecurely, with nervous, irregular movements
- Moves out of the way of others
- Avoids direct eye contact
- Speaks in a high register, speaks quickly and quietly
- Apologises a lot

In this exercise, divide your class into two groups, with one group performing and one watching. The members of one group will silently walk in character, staying true to his/her status when interacting with the other characters in the room. The members of the other group have to find out who is who by observing and discussing their impressions.
Preparation:

Group 1: Assign characters from Sweeney Todd (without Group 2 being able to overhear). Each performer makes decisions about the way to depict their character’s status.

Group 2: Collect expectations about the characterisation.

Action:

Group 1: Silently walking in character, with as much detail included on status as possible.

Group 2: Take individual notes, then discuss in the group who might be whom.

Reflection:

Group 2: Present the outcome of their analysis. Present evidence that has led to their conclusions.

Group 1: Explain the choices they made AFTER Group 2 has presented.

In a second step, switch groups.

Sweeney Todd characters:

Sweeney Todd
Mrs. Lovett
Anthony Hope
Johanna
Tobias Ragg
Judge Turpin
The Beadle
Beggar Woman
Adolfo Pirelli
Jonas Fogg
Bird seller
Production shots