

MichaelCNH
Moderator

moderator



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Posts: 4495
Location: New
Hampshire

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StageCoach Productions

Quote



A CUT ABOVE

Once in a while, the right show is produced by the right company, at the right time, for all the right reasons, and what ends up being brought to the stage is an event for which one can't find either the right superlatives, or the right amount of them, to describe the experience.

SWEENEY TODD, produced by StageCoach Productions, is that event.

This morality tale of an unfairly convicted barber who returns to London to exact his revenge on those who wronged him sweeps into the Janice B Streeter Theatre, seizes its audience by the throat, and proceeds to transport them into a dark land of deprivation, despair and passion.

That Sweeney, by and large, gets his revenge, is well known by most; this crackling tale of murder, sexual perversion, and culinary cannibalism, with its enduring Sondheim score, is the stuff of storied stage legend. StageCoach shows why, from beginning to end.

Director Caitlin Lowans proves herself a master at the telling of a story, but also in illuminating all of the disparate elements that have to come together to make the story work in the first place. These elements she gives to the cast as motivational increments, giving them the ability to build the story not simply through character, but through what the characters need, or want, thus, what drives these characters also becomes the story.

Lowans pays particular attention to the theme of retribution; revenge is foremost in the mind of this play's namesake character, however, Lowans allows it only so much rein, and doesn't let revenge wholly dominate as the production's raison d'être. Instead, Lowans relegates the essence of revenge to a lesser place in the plot, allowing it to darken the scenes where it makes the most sense to do so. As a result, the play's lighter subplots get to have their place in the overall picture, adding bright sunny moments that act as a counterpoint to this play's dank, bleak premise, and when revenge must needs finally be exacted, it rises like an unpleasant spectre from its shadowed corner, consuming terribly, and utterly.

Lowans has chosen from the ranks a small, yet excellent, ensemble cast; only sixteen actors power this show- actors who are, to a one, at the top of their game at what they bring to SWEENEY TODD.

Dan Desmarais gives a reliably creepy performance as venal asylum keeper Jonas Fogg. Bryan Miner is a delight as Sweeney's nemesis, the chirpy, ersatz Italian "king of barbers, barber to kings" Pirelli. Shawna O'Brien compels as the demented Beggar Woman whose addled, arsenic-poisoned brain holds the secret that promises to deliver Sweeney from his torment.

As the Beadle, Allan Hunter delivers an elegant, if not grating, portrait of a toadying lickspittle, at turns sly and calculating, menacing and obsequious, and always consistent as Judge Turpin's wheedling dogsbody. Jeff Bowden, as the Judge himself, is scarily accurate as a man whose base desires dominate his waking life; his self-confessed lust for his young ward Joanna is repugnant, yet Bowden's brings to the surface Turpin's constant struggle to purge himself of his impure thoughts, imbuing him with just a touch of humanity. In this, Turpin proves himself worthy of sympathy, even as his actions repel; we applaud his eventual comeuppance, but it is not without conflict.

John-Michael Breen proves himself the equal of his more seasoned peers as Tobias, castoff child of the streets who looks for refuge and affection, and is ultimately undone by that which he seeks. Breen's scene with Mrs. Lovett in the tender "Not While I'm Around" is sweet, and yet, for all its sweetness, disturbing; while Breen seems to be manifesting the pure love of a son for his mother, he skates right up to the edge of wanting to seduce the older woman. Breen brings great focus and energy to all of his scenes, and is a delight to watch.

Popular local actor Josh Dennis doesn't fall back on his laurels as Anthony, the sailor who falls for Turpin's ward Joanna as she sings from her window. Dennis can't help but be boyishly handsome (because he is) and fresh-faced in his enthusiastic declarations of love for Joanna, yet Dennis manages to rise above the conventional and take on the weight of manhood, as he steps up to the responsibility and consequences of freeing his beloved from the depraved Judge's clutches. Overall, Dennis shows impressive range as Anthony, as he makes the transition from carefree sailor to Joanna's liberator, protector and savior.

Katie Weiss as Joanna brings just the right amount of sweetness and purity to her role, without going overboard into treacly emotionalism; difficult to do, since most of her onstage time is devoted to fending off the lustful machinations of her guardian, Judge Turpin. Weiss brings us a more complex Joanna- one who is largely ignorant of the larger world, yet aware that there is one, and yearning to be a part of it.

Mary Ellen Stafford, another reliable staple of the theatre community, is totally on as the brassy, manipulating pie maker Mrs. Lovett. Stafford brings her coloratura sensibilities and exquisite comic timing to every scene, whether she's plotting to bed Sweeney or processing the hapless victims of Sweeney's straight razor. Stafford's antics provoke laughter throughout, but this actress is also smart enough to pull back and show us a more reflective woman in Lovett, so that we get a fully-realized character, rather than the caricature. Stafford's Lovett is a woman fully cognizant of her place in the world, and the sadness she manifests is a poignant antithesis to the cheery persona that often defines Lovett. By show's end, we "get" what it is Lovett wants and deserves, and we continue to believe it. Long past her untimely departure.

Keith Weirich is, simply, wondrous as Sweeney; it's a performance that mere words cannot fully do justice. It must be experienced. A man of singular presence and physiognomy, Weirich slips into Sweeney as though the character were a second skin, capturing the essence of Sweeney to perfection.

One cannot tell where Weirich ends and Sweeney begins, and because of this seamless transition, Weirich owns not only the part, but the production. He's riveting as he explores the panoply of dark emotions and urges that compel Sweeney to lift his silver razors from a dusty box, integrating their lethal sharpness into his desire to transform into an engine of terrible destruction.

And this he becomes; Weirich does not lift Sweeney up and out of the bitter depths in which he dwells, but instead take him far deeper It's a place that Sweeney goes knowing that there is no redemption but that which comes from his own destruction, yet he goes willingly, because he must; there is nothing else.

While Weirich shows us the monster that Sweeney embraces and eventually becomes, he does not let it wholly define Sweeney. Weirich knows well that it's the fleeting glance of the monster that most terrifies us, and he keeps that monster in check. Rather, Weirich shows is the man, a man bent by deprivation, corruption, and loss, yet not quite broken.

While Sweeney returns to London with thoughts of revenge, it's hope that keeps him from turning into the monster; hope that he will reclaim his life, his wife, and his child. It's when hope slips away bit by bit, that the monster slips its chains, and engulfs what is left of the man. Weirich succeeds in illuminating that eternal struggle between light and dark, and makes it his own.

Music Director and conductor Judy Hayward once again shows why she's consistently so award-worthy; she endows this cast with a sense of restraint when it comes to the recitative qualities of the score, so that they never over-sing, be it any of the well-crafted ensemble numbers or the gripping solo work by SWEENEY'S principal cast. As a result, the songs always deliver, having avoided that bombastic quality which often dominates big musicals like SWEENEY. As conductor, Hayward leads an orchestra that's less a production element and more of an atmospheric phenomenon; it seems that there is always music in this production, and it's always in the right place, doing just the right thing to support and enhance the changing moods and themes of this classic piece of musical theatre.

Lights by Rick Brooks are richly patterned and textured, adding an dimension of vividness and drama to every scene. Brooks' sketches out an incandescent leitmotif that brings everything that this play is capable of evoking to the surface, adroitly illuminating the constantly shifting ambiance with an expertly rendered palette of color, light, and shadow.

Costumes by Jennifer LaFrance and Lizette Estrada are for the most part faithful to the era and setting of working-class Victorian London; of particular note are the wonderfully detailed costumes donned by Mrs Lovett through the course of the play as she makes the progression from failing pie maker to a self-made lady.

SWEENEY'S unit set, as designed by its director, is spare.

representational and simple, made up of levels and stairs painted in drab earths and darks; a wise choice, and one befitting the constraints and challenging sight lines of the space in which the play is staged. Set up and off to the upstage left corner, and cocked at an angle, this set is clean and utilitarian, with just enough clutter scattered about to elicit the impression of a downtrodden London street, and plenty of room left over for the playing out of a variety of scenarios for which the main set acts as a serviceable backdrop, supporting without distracting.

In and of itself, SWEENEY TODD is a musical that's rightly taken its place at the apex of the American musical theatre experience; its compelling narrative of a book, combined with Stephen Sondheim's luminous score, are theatre legend.

This, coupled with all that StageCoach Productions adds to their compelling interpretation of the events and circumstances that consume a half-mad barber and his company, honors that legend, and makes it their own.

Attend the tale, for it is a tale told mightily well by those who tell it.

SWEENEY TODD runs through October 26 at the Janice B. Streeter Theatre, 14 Court Street, Nashua, NH.

For further information, please call the box office at (603) 320-3780 or (603) 672-9664 between 10 am. and 4 pm., or visit the [Stagecoach website](#).

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