

**DON'T MISS:**  
Arts Extra  
tomorrow

The cast of *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*.  
(Pictures by Tom Tardif, 6993485)



# Short back and insides

Dark things are afoot at Elizabeth College as pupils join those from Ladies' College in a musical production hell-bent on revenge. **Shaun Shackleton** talked to the cast and director of *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* ahead of tonight's opening...

Pictures by **Tom Tardif**

**T**HEY are screaming blue murder at Elizabeth College – and everyone's invited. The school's latest play is the macabrely humorous musical *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. And it promises to be a cut above the rest.

The musical, written by the Broadway master Stephen Sondheim, tells the fiendish story of Benjamin Barker's return to London after 15 years' incarceration in an Australian penal colony. Under the new name Sweeney Todd, the ex-convict is determined to seek vengeance against Judge Turpin, the corrupt official responsible for Todd's years in exile. He meets the amorous Mrs Lovett, owner of a popular pie shop whose ingredients turn out to be most unsavoury. And when Todd opens a barber shop he is soon branded with the moniker 'The Demon Barber of Fleet Street'. 'It's an ambitious project,' admits director Jo Flood. 'Usually there are about eight or nine songs in a musical. With *Sweeney Todd* there are more than 20.'

The play is a joint project between Elizabeth College and Ladies' College, with members of both schools acting and singing in the production and also playing in the orchestra, which is led by Elizabeth Willcocks.

Olivia Younger, 17, plays Mrs Lovett, owner of the notorious pie shop. She offered a simple reason why her character is complicit in the barber's dastardly doings.

'All she wants is Todd. She's a bit desperate. She loves him.'

The lead role went to 17-year-old Jamie Hardie who, at well over 6ft in height, is an arresting presence both off- and on-stage.

'It's my first school play,' he revealed.

'I always wanted to do one so, for my last year, I did.'

'I sing a bit. You could say I'm more of a singer than an actor. It's difficult because the time signatures are always changing.' Like all good actors his talent is matched by a streak of self-deprecation.

'I think I'm a good fit for the part. Some might say that I'm cold and creepy.'

He admitted that he watched the Tim Burton film to prepare for the role, but it didn't help much. 'In the film he speaks quietly, but you can't do that on stage. But I watched the original Broadway production and that helped. It's still daunting though.'

**B**efore the dress rehearsal the cast were being made up and costumed, their faces painted ghoulishly white, eyes slashed with red. And the clothes were perfect – frock coats, top hats and ragged trousers, shawls, corsets and voluminous skirts.

'I play one of the street urchins,' said 12-year-old Alex Rousser. 'I like the dark complexity of the play – it's what makes it stand out. It's a really professional production.'

'We've been rehearsing since mid-October,' explained Jo, who also teaches English and drama at Elizabeth College. 'We couldn't decide what to put on – I wanted to do *Bugsy Malone*, so maybe that'll be next time.'

Madison Betley, 18, last year starred in the Ladies' College production of *Chicago*, so is well-versed in musicals. In this she plays the mysterious Mrs Barker, who harbours a secret.

'*Sweeney Todd* is very individual, very unique,' she said. 'You have to get the dark humour.'

As the stage crew (all college boys too) ran around talking into their radio microphones, and as Jo took notes and the cast readied themselves for their first scene, the lights went up and the action began.

'I'm made up for all of them,' Jo beamed. 'They've all worked really hard.'



**Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street** is at Elizabeth College at 7pm tonight, 7pm tomorrow and at 8pm on Friday 30. Tickets are available from college reception during school hours – £7.50 for adults, or £5 for children/senior citizens – and include pies in the interval (if you dare), made by the cast.