

Sweeney Todd – the Demon Barber of Fleet Street

How extraordinary that Sondheim should have chosen the “Demon Barber of Fleet Street” as a likely subject for a musical. How even more extraordinary that his “Sweeney Todd” should be so popular as a school production. The love interest is two psychopaths with a penchant for cannibalism. The plot hangs on an understandable desire for revenge by a wrongfully imprisoned ex-convict against a corrupt official. But his method of execution is seized upon by his lover as a way to make money, and many innocents die in a frenzied orgy of killing. Where is the safe moral ground here? Where the triumph of good over evil? Granted there is a brief nod to a rebalancing of the moral law towards the end, as the culprits are unmasked and get their deserts, but however you summarise the plot, ethical ambivalence and nihilism dominate, and as always it is hard to see how two wrongs can possibly make a right. Add to this macabre plot the gruesome presentation in plain sight of violent and gory murder and the reaction of the Broadway audience, stampeding for the exits on the opening night in March 1979, seems entirely understandable.

When the house lights dimmed in the College Hall at the end of January as Stephen Le Prevost played the clangorous opening phrases of keyboard organ music, we were immediately catapulted into this challenging world of menace and moral turbulence. Forget “Phantom”: Sondheim writes truly disturbing music, not the schmaltzy ersatz horror of Lloyd Webber. Follow this with a tableau of street urchins, made up to kill and to terrorise, all of them focussed, bloodied, ghoulish and unflinching under the stage lights, and we were now transfixed. The discipline and consistency of this band of young actors marked yet another step in the onward march of College dramatic prowess, as did their nightmarish appearance pay tribute to the work of the make-up, hair and costume ladies. And could they sing - and sing with an ensemble that spoke of mutual confidence and trust not only with one another, but also the orchestra under the direction of Miss Willcocks. The musicians, a mixture of staff and students, kept to their task throughout the evening with aplomb, something by no means always easy to achieve given the unpredictability involved in accompanying singers in live, costumed performances.

The scene set was bold and effective with a simplicity of hard outlines etched and enhanced by lighting which established a twilight world of shadow and mystery. It was a clever evocation of industrialised dystopia and graveyard gothic, a perfect setting for the arrival on stage of the crazed beggarwoman, played with huge energy and physicality by Maddie Betley. Her serpentine writhings were truly magnetic, and the ideal foil to the arrival of Sweeney himself bursting from the tomb, a satanic Lazarus to lash us into submission with near psychotic force as he poured out his long-repressed anger. This was a riveting performance by Jamie Hardie, commanding in presence and strongly sustained throughout the show. It was hard to believe that this was his first time in a theatrical role, so good was his characterisation, and so precise his sense of timing.

Such a strongly realised Sweeney needed an equally powerful Mrs Lovett to provide the necessary balance. Without such a forceful collaborator this particular plot would sag

and collapse into incredulity. The storyline is so implausible, the actors have to seize the audience by the throat and not let go. And letting go is what Olivia Young made sure would not happen. As strong a singer as an actor she matched Jamie Hardie's stage presence and drive all the way. She also made the most of all the humour offered by the libretto, providing that uneasy sense of reality essential if the audience is to accept that real, live people could in fact behave like this.

This production by Miss Flood received great acclaim and was widely discussed by the various audiences subsequently, with the two leading characters being singled out for particular praise. Many thought that they elevated their performances to near professional standards. It would be hard to dispute this. But it must be said too, that they were able to rely on unflinching support from the entire cast. All revealed a strong feeling for the individuality of their characters, and all had learned the lesson that, once on stage and in character, you have to maintain that character by stance, movement, facial expression, and attention to the moment, whether speaking or not. Another sure indication of the strength in depth of College drama nowadays, especially bearing in mind the comparative youth of many of these performers. This was absolutely a most enjoyable evening of musical theatre, and all involved deserve sincere thanks and congratulations.

Reviewed by Alan Cross 2015