

Hearts shatter, blood splatters in edgy Sondheim masterpiece

THEATER REVIEW /// ‘Sweeney Todd’



Courtesy photo ATTEND THE TALE—Trevor Alkazian, right, plays the vengeful title character and Mikayla Flores co-stars as Mrs. Lovett in Moorpark College’s “Sweeney Todd.”

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“A cut above.” “Razor-sharp thriller.”

“A slice of life in seamy London.” After more than 40 years, all of the puns about “Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street” have been used.

Stephen Sondheim’s masterpiece is onstage now at Moorpark College, and all of those puns apply to the school’s ambitious production. The challenges inherent in “Sweeney”—operatic singing, the difficult score and how to rig a complex, multistory set that resembles an amusement park on Halloween—are handled with professionalism and imagination by director/producer John Loprieno’s all-student cast and crew.

As American life gets more violent, with mass murders appearing in the news on a daily basis, Sweeney Todd’s crime spree in 1846 London inspires more of an unsettling feeling of familiarity rather than shock. Its lurid story

encompasses cold-blooded murder, rape and cannibalism, but one still can't suppress a nervous laugh as we identify with Todd's unquenchable thirst to get the venal Judge Turpin into his barber's chair to receive his final comeuppance. After being sent to prison on a trumped-up charge, Todd is in torment to the point of insanity, and one would feel sorry for him if he didn't turn his fury onto unsuspecting innocents.

All of this depends on the actor who plays Todd, for one must be able to juggle the righteousness of his duty with the abhorrence of how he goes about settling his score. After arriving at the docks of London with his savior, the starry-eyed sailor Anthony, he meets meat-pie slinger Nellie Lovett, and the two become the most unlikely of allies.

Sweeney Todd is played by Trevor Alkazian, an outstanding actor who has no trouble assuming Todd's dark, menacing presence. One immediately realizes that Sweeney has retribution on his mind in the song "There's No Place Like London," the song's title intoned with wonder by Anthony and then repeated with disgust by Todd. Alkazian is at his best when singing the show's melodious love songs, "Pretty Women" and "Johanna," which Todd croons to lull his victims into a false sense of security.

All the other roles are played by rotating pairs of actors (excepting Beadle Bamford, well played by Nova Mandell). Mrs.

Lovett is given a standout performance by Mikayla Flores, decked out in a frizzy fright wig, who handles her uproarious patter songs with perfect comic timing, including "The Worst Pies in London" and the show-stopping "A Little Priest."

Though the show focuses more on the exploits of Todd and Mrs. Lovett, the scenes with the secondary couple, Anthony and Johanna, are some of the most effective in Moorpark College's production. Especially good is their song "Kiss Me," which requires the two lovers to sing simultaneous but totally different lines in rapid-fire patter, yet land on matching words at exactly the same time. Elizabeth Kastner adds a dimension of immaturity to Johanna, expanding her from your typical two-dimensional damsel-in-distress into a spoiled, annoying teenager, while William Flannery, as Anthony, exhibits a lovely tenor in the initial rendering of "Johanna."

Garrett Wilson is excellent as the apprentice Tobias and delivers a touching "Not While I'm Around" as he comforts Mrs. Lovett. In his small-but-

important role as the faux Italian con man Pirelli, Davin Robillard puts on convincing Italian and Irish accents in what are the most comical sequences in the show.

Special credit goes to the scenic designing team, led by Brian Koehler, for crafting the elaborate apparatus used to dispose of bodies after Todd does his dirty work. It consists of an impressive twisting duct system that looks like a water park slide. My only quibble with the set is Todd's anachronistically modern vinyl phlebotomy chair, from which he gives his victims their coup de grace.

“Sweeney Todd” runs through March 30 at Moorpark College's Main Stage Theatre, 7075 Campus Road, Moorpark.

Go to moorparkcollege.edu/pac for tickets.