

David Beach Trophy 2012

Iminster Entertainment Society

“Sweeney Todd”

Friday 26th October 2012



The Warehouse Theatre was a first for me. What a great venue with good open foyer accompanied by a coffee lounge and a licensed bar. With two good entrances into the auditorium. I was impressed. Was I further impressed as my visit continued? The following report will reveal all. I trust you will accept this report as constructive comments rather than criticisms.

As we entered the auditorium I was surprised to find that I had been seated in the middle of a row. The usual seating for adjudicators is with an end gangway seat so that the continued scribbling during the performance does not distract anyone. It was a full house so couldn't be re-seated. However, I explained to the person sat next to me and she kindly accepted the situation. I thanked her at the end of the show for her tolerance. Please could this matter be resolved for any future adjudications. Thank you.

Settling in my seat, I was able to have a brief scan of the auditorium and noticed how well equipped it was. The all black stage with the grave digging inset was quite dramatic. Lynne Merrifield and her Merry!!! band of musicians playing in the background made for a nice build up to the Prelude of **The Ballad of Sweeney Todd**. This was very strong in vocals both individually and as a group. It is not easy at times to keep to the harmonies of Sondheim but you did it justice. Well done.

The lighting on the group was very effective highlighting the static facial expressions and added to the dramatics of the scene.

Act 1 A London Street.

Sweeney Todd (Benjamin Woof) and **Anthony Hope** (Sam Rich) opening the scene, are about to say farewell to each other when they are interrupted by a **Beggar Woman** (Jen Boxell) This showed the seamier side of life in the London streets. You all gave good characterisations to this effect. Jen, your portrayal of the Beggar Woman was excellent. Sam, You could have shown more disgust when she offered her body services!!! to you . Benjamin, your admonishment of the Beggar Woman was well portrayed and your vocals good and strong.

The scene change into **Mrs Lovett's Pie Shop** was swift, silent and well conceived.

Mrs Lovett. (Kate Hallett) This is a great character to perform and you did her great justice.

“The worst Pies in London “ and “Poor Thing” came over well . Your London accent was good and continued to be so, throughout. Your comic timing was perfect in movement and dialogue. Your opening vocals were well delivered and sung. A performance to be proud of. However! Whilst your performance was everything one could ask of you, the makeup and wardrobe departments should have given better support with a little more thought to your character. The script calls for a vigorous slatternly woman. Vigorous you were but slatternly or slovenly in appearance, you were not. Your apron was smudged with slashes of makeup to make it look dirty. This did not work. A rub on a dusty floor would have done the trick. Your make-up

was far too pretty, almost china doll looking. This made it difficult to see the change in you in Act 2. The word slovenly depicts a dirty and untidy person. Your appearance was far too clean and tidy.

These sort of details if properly applied, can help enormously in your portrayal of character. Thank goodness you gave such a strong performance I was able to overlook but not forgive this oversight by the wardrobe and makeup departments. Most of this scene with the various goings on were well executed in it's conception. Ben, whilst for the early part of the scene you had little or nothing to say, your facial expressions said it all. The distant look of remembering events portrayed by Mrs Lovett was just right.

The presenting of the razors by Mrs Lovett to Todd was very dramatic in performance, Todd you lowered your voice to give effect to the dialogue to such a low degree that I had difficulty in hearing you, and I was in row G. I think possibly you were not aware of the amount of projection needed to produce this effect over the underscoring (which I considered to be of the right level of sound). The suspended mic in front of the proscenium I understand was not working. Nevertheless you handled it well and your duet with Mrs Lovett in "**My Friends**" together with the company was very well sung. The scalding light on the razor was the icing on the cake and made for another dramatic finish. Thank you all.

Another swift and silent scene change to **St Dunstan's Market Place**. We meet **Johanna** (Silvey Rose Webber) in the upper rooms of Judge Turpins House. Your "**Green Finch and Linnet Bird**" was beautifully sung. The expression and trueness of vocals were excellent. Anthony compliments the story with "**Ah Miss**", you have a good vocal range and put over the song with lots of feeling in trying to get Johanna to look at you. Please try to project more, especially in your dialogue areas. I had difficulty in understanding your words during some of your performance. Coaching lessons for projection could be the answer as you have good stage presence.

The Bird Seller (Tim Glenn) You had a lovely cameo part to play and you played it to perfection. Your characterisation and accent was excellent. Well done.

Judge Turpin (Steve Williams) and **The Beadle** (Marcus Palmer) Two nasty characters portrayed by you both with all the requirements needed for us to dislike you. Good characterisations. I should be careful when throwing items out into the audience (health and safety and all that!) I refer of course to the bird after it's neck had been wrung. This was thrown to someone in the front row. My concern over something like this is (unless it has been pre-arranged) the person who received this bird could have had a fear of birds which could have caused a nasty moment. A minor happening I know but thought it worth a mention. The addition of the caravan in the Market Place worked well. The company were called on by the drum beating by the adolescent and simple minded **Tobias Ragg** (Chris Williamson). Chris, you really got into your character. Simple he may have been but not so simple to portray. You did the part justice and your rendering of **Pirelli's Miracle Elixir** together with the various interjections from the company made good entertainment, well performed by all.

Adolphi Pirelli (Philip Wells) made the entrance expected of him, immediately challenges Todd to a race as the fastest shaver and eventually as champion tooth puller. This was very well conceived requiring a lot of business during the contest and a lot of reaction from the crowd. Your Italian accent was good and audible. So many actors try too hard to concentrate on getting the accent right that they wrap it around the dialogue losing clarity. You did not have that problem. Your vocals were strong with good projection.

Todd you also played your part extremely well giving as good as you got. Everyone entered into the proceedings, working well and gave some comic relief in a show which can be considered to be somewhat dark in its context. Well done all.

I thought the scene change during the group singing of **Ballad of Sweeney Todd** should have waited for the blackout at the end of the singing. I couldn't perceive a reason as to why it was not done in this way. Perhaps I missed something!

Judge Turpin's House. This scene gives the judge complete freedom in acting and vocals. Judge, the revelation of your stronger than parental love as guardian to Johanna The realisation that you are wrong and constantly whipping yourself in penance as a result. The peace that descends over you when you conceive the idea that you will keep her hidden in marriage from the public. You portrayed all of this with excellence and caught every mood as it appeared. A super performance, well done.

One thing I did notice, however, the braces holding up your trousers were much too modern and narrow for the period.

Swiftly on to **Mrs Lovett's Pie Shop and apartment.** Kate, another strong and well performed scene from you. Sam, you were anxious to get Johanna somewhere to live, but your characterisation required a lot more desperation in your delivery, than you gave us. Ben, you interacted well with Pirelli and Tobias giving good characterisation. Philip, your change of character to Irish was well portrayed and you interacted well with Todd.

Chris, you interacted well with Mrs Lovett during your cameo performance. **The Ballad of Sweeney Todd.** This Trio was brief, bold and well sung.

The use of the auditorium worked well for Judge Turpin and The Beadle during the next scene. This left room to bring **Johanna's Room** into play with "**Kiss Me**" Silvey and Sam, you conducted this scene with lots of feeling and understanding of your situation. Your voices blended well resulting in a good overall performance.

Moving back to Judge and Beadle's stroll in the auditorium gave a good rendering of "**Ladies in their Sensitivities**" ending up in Johanna's room with "**Kiss me**" part 2, Anthony and Johanna. A lot of musical dialogue throughout this scene, all very well constructed in timing and delivery.

Back to the Pie and Barber shops. The discovery of the body of Pirelli in the trunk was a hoot, Kate, once again you gave a super performance and revelation of your talent for comedy.

"**Pretty Women**" parts 1 & 2 with Todd and Judge was excellent. You both played up to each other extolling a great sense of timing and comedy to the piece.

"**A Little Priest**" with Mrs Lovett and Todd, you both worked very hard to put together what I consider to be the crux of the whole show. The realisation that there was a market in the disposal of the body of Pirelli as the contents of the Lovett Pies!! needed careful handling. You were aware of this and gave splendid performances all round to conclude Act 1. Well done.

Act 2:

We find the company enjoying the fruits of Mrs Lovett's new found wealth in the introduction of an eating garden outside the Pie Shop. The customers conveying great enjoyment in this new

venture, you all interacted well with lots of expression in your activities and vocals with “**God That’s Good.**” Tobias, a good performance of how to be a good salesman. Likewise. Mrs Lovett making the most of your new found customers. Sometimes when working in pairs one tries to upstage the other, however, not so in your partnership. You worked so well together it was a joy to watch.

During all the action, Todd’s new barber chair arrives and is put into place in the Tonsorial Parlour. Here again comedy comes through in spite of the gory theme behind it, ie the signal for Mrs Lovett to receive her next supply of meat from the barber!!

Various customers have their throats cut and despatched down the chute. A bit of a struggle from the victims would have been more effective. The scalding light being brought into action just at the crucial moment of the spurting of blood. All well timed and effective.

From blackout to **Outside Fogg’s Asylum** where we find the beggar woman, Jen, your portrayal of this character was real and correct in every way. I just wish that the lighting was a tad up to allow us to see your facial expressions which I am sure were there. Well done.

Mrs Lovett’s Parlour. Finds Mrs Lovett sat at her newly acquired harmonia and Todd cleaning his pipe. The following dialogue between you both (somewhat less from Todd) was very well portrayed the balance of your characters just right. “**By the Sea**” and following dialogue came over clear and understanding. This was a long scene and you held everyones attention to the end. Every expression and innuendos were picked up by the audience. That in my book speaks volumes.

The Quintet from the company appear in **The Wigmakers Sequence.** Nicely sung with a good balance of well controlled harmonies. Continuing the Quintet, Todd writes his letter. I liked the way this was portrayed with Todd at S.C. and quintet to S.L. More emphasis could have been given to this scene had the lighting on Todd’s Parlour had been blacked or at least reduced to just a glimmer.

The Garden of Mrs Lovett: Mrs Lovett and Tobias chatting about life and Tobias telling her how he would protect her from a monster or an ogre. Softening the heart of Mrs Lovett with that lovely song “**Not while I’m around**”. You both showed great feeling for each other with almost a son and mother relationship. The change in mood Tobias, when you discovered Pirelli’s purse was good. Likewise when Mrs Lovett realised that she had been found out but softly brought Tobias away from his discovery to showing him that he could help out in the making of the pies. Both your characters came to the fore with excellent results and made for a very moving and well portrayed scene. Thank you.

Parlour Songs This was a nice bit of light relief. Beadle, you entertained us nicely with Sweet Polly Plunket and Ding Dong etc. You have a good strong vocal and your characterisation was just right. Your interaction with Mrs Lovett and Tobias in this scene was excellent.

Fogg’s Asylum: The company gave a strong rendering of The Engine Roared etc. and the musical effect of Fogg’s Passacaglia and the transformation into Fogg’s inmates, the lighting and the screaming. All this came over extremely well. You all played your individual characters as mad people very effectively. Well done all.

The City on Fire produced a lot of characters and company in general melee. This was another well portrayed scene with everyone playing their part in every effective way in creating this atmosphere of panic.

In **Searching**, Johanna and Anthony dressed in the disguise of sailors in Todd's Tonsorial Parlour are anxious to fine Todd. The Beggar Woman nursing an imaginary baby. Todd waiting for the appearance of the Judge. There was a lot of business here and very well portrayed by all. Good underscoring from the Band showing consideration to the players, well done.

Judge's Return. This was a powerful moment of truth will Todd get his revenge. Well, we all know the answer to that. This was very well put over by the both of you. Judge, the moment of truth with the expression of realising who you were facing and Todd, the sheer joy of knowing at last you were going to have your revenge. This was an instant revelation from you both. The ending was short, sweet and very bloody. Excellent.

There followed a very dramatic ending including the death of Mrs Lovett and Todd. I can only admire you all for the way you interacted during this business. It was full of tension and drama with very strong vocals.

I walked away feeling a little depressed but at the same time pleased that you had tackled a difficult show and were successful in performing it. Thank you all.

Production Summary

A lot of thought and expertise was brought into this production. After the performance I had the pleasure of being shown backstage. This was a great help in being able to see the workings of this particular set and some of the difficulties involved in staging a production as challenging as Sweeney Todd.

This was a production of high standards. The music and lighting were complimentary to the production throughout.

The company bonded as a whole with good pace and complete understanding of what was required of them.

Thank you for inviting me,

Brian Saunders
Adjudicator
Somerset Fellowship of Drama

Individual Performance of Main Characters

Sweeney Todd (Benjamin Woof) You gave an excellent portrayal of Sweeney, (with the exception already mentioned in my report) you were strong in both dialogue and vocals. You interacted well with everyone, especially Mrs Lovett. A good all round performance.

Mrs Lovett (Kate Hallett) Your characterisation was spot on. Your timing of dialogue and vocals great. Your comedic portrayal was excellent throughout. What more can I say that hasn't already been said in my report. Excellent.

Anthony Hope (Sam Rich) Your performance as the young suitor came over well. You also interacted well with your beloved Johanna and other characters. As mentioned in my report, you have good stage presence and vocals and I know a few lessons with a voice coach would help you a great deal.

Johanna (Silvey Rose Webber) Your character was in strict contrast to other characters in the show, more of a beauty and the beast scenario. You fully understood your character and portrayed her well. Your projection was good and your vocals excellent.

Tobias Ragg (Chris Williamson) A super character part to perform. It has all the challenges that an actor likes to take on. It has comedy and drama and the power of exciting and tender emotions all rolled into one. What a challenge. Chris you did the part a great justice, bringing out what was required from your character. Well done.

Judge Turpin (Steve Williams) Another great character to perform. You were well cast in this part, you had all the elements that the character required. Excellent pathos and timing throughout.

The Beadle (Marcus Palmer) You were a perfect foil for the judge. Your characterisation was spot on and you interacted well with your fellow thespians.

Beggar Woman (Jen Boxell) It must be quite a come down after the performance to re-adjust to normality of life. You were a very convincing beggar woman, your gestures (somewhat risqué at times) and mannerisms were well displayed!!! Well done.

Adolphi Pirelli (Philip Wells) Your entrance gave a little light relief with your flourishing attitude and Italian accent. Your portrayal of this character was good and you emulated all the gestures in portraying the character. Very Good.

Jonas Fogg (Nick Pridden) This character needed someone who didn't mind a small part but able to get stuck in and make the most of it. Nick, you did just that. Your portrayal was good in its characterisation and came over well.

Bird Seller (Tim Glen) Tim, you showed great aptitude in your portrayal of this character. Small it may have been, nevertheless, a very important part of the story very well done.

Child (Abbie Pridden) Abbie, you neither spoke or sang but the most important thing was that you were there. Acting in a big show. Not many little girls can say that. Your character played a very important part in the scene, if you hadn't been there, what would have Judge Turpin done?

You have stepped on the first rung of the ladder in musical theatre. Who knows what the second step will bring. Keep it up.

Presentation

Stage Manager, Set Design & Construction (Dave Goodall) You must have put a lot of thought into the design of this set. I thought the centre pivot for the scene changing was a spark of genius. The chair was another. Keeping everything to black was fine and it all worked well. Congratulations.

Not forgetting your **Assistant S.M. (Maggy Goodall) and Crew (David Levi & Paul Smethurst)** You all had your various part to play and I congratulate you on the speed and the silent way in which you worked. Thank you.

Lighting & Sound. (Brian Perkins & Jim Hawkrige) You gave us some very effective lighting. This was not a show that you could do much with but what you did was very well conceived and portrayed. There were a couple of times I felt that some cross fading would have helped from Mrs Lovett's Set to Todds set & vice versa, during the long period of some of the action going from one to the other. At one stage Mrs Lovett and Tobias were in full light for some time whilst the action was concentrated on Todd's Parlour. The sound could have been improved possibly by putting floaters on the floor at the front of the stage perhaps?

Properties (Philip Wells) Another job for a very busy man. The props were all in keeping with the production. I recognised a few from when I did props for Weston Operatic Society's Sweeney. Wasn't the razor good! It all worked well especially the chair.

Hair-Make-up and Wardrobe (Teresa Ravenscroft, Flame Torbay and Cast) With the exception of my comments in my report I found everything to be in keeping with the show. The costumes were correct in style as were the hair styles. Well done .

Musical Director (Lynne Merryfield) This was a well balance band and your detail to the harmonies came over to great advantage to both singers and the audience. I thought you handled the underscoring very well. A couple of very brief moments, the sound exceeded the dialogue during the underscoring but I feel that this can be unavoidable with Sondheim. However, the cast coped well and it didn't spoil the overall sound. The balance of sound was complimentary to the cast throughout. Excellent.

Director (Philip Wells) You gave a great deal of thought to this production. You knew your cast and their strengths and worked on them. I know you had problems with having to rearrange characters and ended up playing one yourself. This makes a director's job much more difficult but you coped and tackled the challenges as they appeared. The company were behind you all the way and you can be very proud of them. Very well done.