

SALOS

Sweeney Todd.

The Wyvern Theatre, Swindon.

October 25th 2013*Director: Russell Langdown**MD: Malcolm Webb**Associate Director: Sandra Gilbert*

This is an extremely challenging production from many aspects. Many modern audiences shy away from anything remotely associated with 'horror' on stage, and as the name Sweeney Todd conjures visions of bloodletting and 'meat pies', is not a promising start. Then there is the difficult music by Sondheim, and to quote from the programme his music is "A little like marmite, people either love or hate Sondheim's original and complex style." Added to this it requires complicated staging for the disposal of the bodies; but this company enjoys a challenge and met it head on. There was no doubting from the beginning there would be blood, the opening projection was of, an open cut throat razor dripping blood, with a pair of eyes peering through the open blade, just before the show started, there was an increase in blood and the eyes came towards you and then disappeared, it was extremely effective; this then went into a powerful opening with 'The Ballad of Sweeney Todd'. This Theatre has a large stage with plenty of height, so there were no problems accommodating the upstairs barbers shop. The set from Scenic Projects was well designed to incorporate all the different locations in the story; with efficient stage management the action moved on smoothly in full view of the audience. The lighting had been well designed to add individual atmosphere to each scene. It was very effective in the opening when each soloist was lit, with the rest of the stage in darkness. There was excellent cuing as the show continued with isolated areas being lit, with no light spill. There was no mention of a choreographer in the programme, as it does not have dance routines, but the scene when Mrs Lovett was recounting the ravaging of Todd's wife by Judge Turpin, was very effective, with well-choreographed movements and masks adding to the brutality. The costumes generally reflected the status of the characters and all looked appropriate, with hair and makeup adding to the overall picture, particularly in Bedlam. The show had been well cast, all the roles are demanding, and the chorus is very different from other shows in that they have to be static for most of the show. The roles of Sweeney Todd and Mrs Lovett are extremely taxing and need strong actors to play them confidently. Husband and wife team of James and Alison Canning did justice to the roles in both singing and characterisation. Director Russell Langdown saw Sweeney Todd as a man initially trying to avenge the injustice of transportation for a crime he did not commit, because Judge Turpin had taken a fancy to his wife and

wanted Todd out of the way, rather than an insane murderer with a blood lust, which is the more usual concept of the character. This came across and the audience had great sympathy with the character at the beginning, but as the show progressed a more ruthless streak began to show itself, encouraged by Mrs Lovett. Alison Canning played Mrs Lovett as a straight-forward person whose business was failing, who wanted to help Todd, but there was always the feeling there was an underlying motive. They worked together well and brought out the dark humour in 'A Little Priest' and 'By the sea' creating lovely images with the clarity of their singing and actions. Anthony, the young sailor who accompanies Todd on his return to London, was well played and he sang 'Johanna' with a great deal of feeling. The role of Johanna, the daughter of Todd, was played with innocence and naivety and again well sung. They worked well together as the young lovers. Beadle Bamford was well portrayed as the facilitator of Judge Turpin's evil schemes. Simon Roberts as Judge Turpin was truly evil and lustful, no one was sorry when he met his gruesome end. Again you felt that Adolfo Pirelli received his just desserts when he tried blackmail. The beggar woman was well portrayed as a poor woman, deranged by the loss of her daughter and husband, and her treatment at the hands of Turpin. The changes from simple beggar to raving prostitute were good. Henry Firth, as Young Tobias, handled the role well showing the vulnerability of the orphan working for Pirelli, a change in character when he had been taken in by Mrs Lovett, and again when he realised what was happening, nice characterisation. The chorus had an extremely important but challenging time in this show, they are the remote storytellers acting like a Greek Chorus and then required to become part of the action in such scenes as 'The Contest', the beginning of Act 2 and in Bedlam. The show requires excellent diction from both principals and chorus, as the work is sung throughout, if the diction is poor the storyline is lost. There were times when the chorus diction was somewhat lacking, and I felt a couple of the chorus numbers would have benefitted from more rehearsal. Musical Director Malcolm Webb had full control of orchestra and singers, which must have been difficult at times, with the chorus appearing in unusual places. Russell Langdown had some interesting interpretations and made good use of the stage, setting the chorus apart from the main action. He had obviously worked hard with his cast to present an accomplished show, it was a pity the people of Swindon stayed away; they did not realise what they were missing.

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