

Entertainment

Chilling 'Sweeney Todd' at Candlelight is the perfect show for October

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By Christina Perryman

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Before Hannibal Lector and Patrick Bateman, there was Mrs. Lovett and Sweeney Todd. Perhaps the original serial killer, "Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street," is a chilling tale of revenge and love, set to a gorgeous score. The show, with music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and book by Hugh Wheeler, is based on the play by Christopher Bond. "Sweeney Todd" is a perfect tale for this time of year and, under the exceptional direction of Bob Kelly, can be seen on stage at Candlelight Theatre.

At the beginning of the play, it's easy to feel empathy for Todd, who started as a simple, naïve barber. He was shipped off to Australia on trumped up charges by the corrupt judge who coveted Todd's wife, Lucy. Todd escapes and returns to London, hoping to regain his family only to find Lucy was raped by Judge Turpin and as a result poisoned herself. Their infant daughter, Johanna, was left to the care of the same nefarious judge. Todd can't reclaim Johanna because he was serving a life sentence. He is left a bitter, broken man, bent on revenge.

Todd is aided by Mrs. Lovett, a down on her luck widow who makes the "worst meat pies in London." Mrs. Lovett, who admits she always had a crush on Todd, agrees to help him get retribution on Turpin and his equally evil sidekick, The Beadle. The plan is simple – get Turpin into Todd's barber chair and with an "accidental" slip of the shaving knife, the judge will meet his maker. Unfortunately, things begin to go wrong when scam artist Pirelli recognizes Todd as Benjamin Barker, his old employer. Pirelli threatens to tell Turpin, one thing leads to another and Todd commits his first murder. This unexpected corpse put Todd and Mrs. Lovett in a bit of bind. What to do with the body? Well, let's just say Mrs. Lovett's pie business becomes a booming success and once Todd gets a taste of killing, there is no stopping him. In spite of the heavy, melancholy tone of the show, there is also a lot of humor.

Patrick O'Hara gives a forceful performance as the title character. O'Hara's gruff, angry Sweeney Todd is at times quick tempered and fierce, at others conniving and eerily patient. O'Hara's facial expressions and demeanor are sometimes maniacal, which adds a frightening element to the story. O'Hara becomes even more alarming when Todd begins to really enjoy killing people. Catherine Ard is a terrific balance for O'Hara. Ard captures the desperation of Mrs. Lovett's circumstances nicely. Her matter of fact and, really, down to earth approach to Todd's plans are more comical than scary and it works. Ard is charming in her role and her musical numbers are terrific.

Gerri Weagraff is unrecognizable as the Beggar Woman. She knocks it out of the park with her multi-faceted performance. Weagraff switches from harmless vagrant to rambling crazy lady in an instant with humorous yet sad results.

Theo Wampler is slick and smarmy as Beadle. David Wills perfectly plays villain Judge Turpin. Anthony Connell, who plays Tobias, continues to show great versatility and scope on stage. Tobias is a perfect blend of simpleminded yet loyal servant. Connell's gestures and body language are understated and he does a nice job not overdoing Toby's devotion to Mrs. Lovett.

With a show so full of "bad guys," Zachary Chiero and Joelle Teeter bring some light to the darkness as Anthony and Johanna. Chiero is inviting and open as the hopeful sailor. His voice is wonderful. Teeter is funny and enjoyable, giving Johanna an endearing sweetness.

This is another show where the ensemble plays a huge part in the storytelling, this time acting almost as a Greek chorus as they provide insight to the characters and keep the action clipping along. Candlelight's gifted ensemble is comprised of Erin Waldie, Ricky Rotandi, Brigid Rose, Jordan O'Brien, Dave McConney, Lindsay Mauck, Topher Layton, Stephan Dagrosa and Timothy Lamont Cannon along with good performances by Barry Gomolka as Jonas Fogg and Patrick Ruegsegger as Pirelli.

From the first, stellar opening number, "The Ballad of Sweeney Todd," the costumes (by Cindy Millison), lighting (by Chris Miller), make up (Clayton Stacey) and wigs/hair (by Lisa Miller Challenger) combine to set a sinister scene. The music, directed by David Snyder, is outstanding from the first song to the last. Wilbur Armbruster's set is subtle yet intricate.

IF YOU GO: "Sweeney Todd" runs at The Candlelight Theatre, 2208 Millers Road, Wilmington, Del., through Nov. 1. Tickets are \$59 per person and include the show plus a buffet dinner. The selections include chicken in a spicy peanut sauce, tilapia, mashed potatoes, stir fry vegetables, rice with peas and carrots, beef in a demi glaze, shepherd's pie and more. Doors open 6 p.m., Fridays and Saturdays. Buffet is served until 7:30 p.m., followed by the show at 8 p.m. Doors open at 1 p.m. on Sundays, with buffet until 2:30 and show at 3 p.m. A fog machine is used during the performance. For information or tickets, call 302-475-2313 or visit candlelighttheatredelaware.org.

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