

March 11–April 6, 2008 • Ahmanson Theatre



P.L.A.Y.
PERFORMING FOR LOS ANGELES YOUTH

SWEENEY TODD
MUSIC AND LYRICS BY STEPHEN SONDHEIM
BOOK BY HUGH WHEELER FROM AN ADAPTATION BY CHRISTOPHER BOND
MUSIC ORCHESTRATED BY SARAH TRAVIS DIRECTED AND DESIGNED BY JOHN DOYLE

SWEENEY TODD DISCOVERY GUIDE



Judy Kaye & David Hess.
Photo by DavidAllenStudio.com

STEPHEN SONDHEIM and Hugh Wheeler's musical *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* is the tale of a man, wronged in his youth, whose lust for revenge takes him down a bizarre and destructive path. Set in Victorian London, the legend of the murderous barber and his deadly accomplice Mrs. Lovett, as told through the music and words of Sondheim and Wheeler, has become a classic of American theatre. In the current Ahmanson production, Tony Award-winning director John Doyle twists the original Broadway presentation in unexpected and provocative ways, re-inventing the story for today's audience. ●



A 19th Century engraving of Fleet Street, London.

Synopsis



David Hess & Judy Kaye. Photo by DavidAllenStudio.com

THE STORY OPENS IN A MADHOUSE in Victorian London. There, crazed inmate Tobias Ragg relates the tale of Sweeney Todd, “the demon barber of Fleet Street”: Todd and Anthony Hope, a young sailor, disembark at the London docks, happy to be back in their bustling hometown. Though much older, Todd is grateful to Anthony for rescuing him at sea after his escape from prison. Immediately Todd heads for Fleet Street and visits with Mrs. Lovett, the owner of a failing pie shop.

Mrs. Lovett, who admits to selling the “worst pies in London,” recognizes Todd as Benjamin Barker, the **barber-surgeon** who used to live upstairs from her shop with his beautiful wife Lucy and infant daughter Johanna. Fifteen years before, we learn, Todd was arrested falsely and shipped to a penal colony by the lecherous Judge Turpin, who desired Lucy and wanted Todd out of the way. Mrs. Lovett tells Todd that after he was sent off, Turpin raped Lucy when she refused his advances. In shame, Lucy swallowed poison, and Johanna became Turpin’s ward.

Upon hearing his family’s fate, Todd fills with rage and vows revenge against Turpin and his police accomplice, **Beadle** Bamford. With the razors that Mrs. Lovett, who has long loved Todd, kept during his absence, Todd opens a barbershop above Mrs. Lovett’s pie shop, hoping to attract Turpin and

Bamford to his business. His plans go quickly awry when a rival barber named Pirelli figures out Todd’s true identity and tries to blackmail him. Todd kills Pirelli with his razors, and Mrs. Lovett suggests they dispose of his body by grinding it up and baking it into her pies.

TALK ABOUT...

A melodrama is defined as a drama in which the characters are presented as clearly good or evil and are pitted against each other in a sensational, suspenseful way. Today, melodrama can be found in TV soap operas and romance novels. Is *Sweeney Todd* a melodrama? In what ways does it deviate from tradition?

Many of the characters in *Sweeney Todd* withhold information from each other. Todd, for example, keeps his existence a secret from Johanna, but tells Anthony about it. How are secrets used in the play? Do secrets help or hinder the characters?

is a strange but familiar Beggar Woman who has been lurking around Todd. While Mrs. Lovett maneuvers to keep her criminal ways a secret, Todd races to unite Anthony with Johanna and exact his revenge on the judge. ●

After Mrs. Lovett’s “corpse” pies become the culinary rage of Fleet Street, Todd starts killing his customers to keep up with the demand. Anthony, meanwhile, has met and fallen in love with the teenaged Johanna, who is guarded carefully by Turpin. Johanna agrees to elope with Anthony, but the judge, who plans to marry Johanna himself, sends her to an insane asylum to keep the young couple apart. Todd then conspires with Anthony to free Johanna and use her to lure Turpin to his barbershop.

Matters come to a head when Tobias, Pirelli’s young assistant who now works for Mrs. Lovett, becomes suspicious and complaints about bad odors spewing from the building bring Bamford to Todd’s door.

Also complicating affairs

Cast of Characters



Sweeney Todd
(David Hess):
Skilled barber-surgeon
and escaped prisoner



Mrs. Lovett
(Judy Kaye):
Wily pie shop owner



Anthony Hope
(Benjamin
Magnuson):
Brave young sailor



Beggar Woman
(Diana DiMarzio):
Slightly crazy and
disheveled, but wiser
than she appears



Judge Turpin
(Keith Buterbaugh):
Todd's nemesis and
the lecherous, powerful
guardian of Johanna



Beadle Bamford
(Benjamin Eakeley):
Lawman, in league
with Turpin



Johanna
(Lauren Molina):
Todd's teenaged
daughter and Turpin's
unwilling ward



Pirelli
(Katrina Yaukey):
Barber and scam artist



Tobias Ragg
(Edmund Bagnell):
Deranged madhouse
inmate, Pirelli's assistant
and Mrs. Lovett's helper



Jonas Fogg
(Steve McIntyre):
Insane asylum director

**Oh, Mr. Todd, she's in
there with those screeching,
gibbering maniacs.**

— Anthony Hope in *Sweeney Todd: The Demon
Barber of Fleet Street* by Stephen Sondheim
and Hugh Wheeler

Madhouses:

Not surprisingly, early Victorian society was ill-equipped to deal with the mentally ill. Although the Madhouse Act of 1828 called for the building of asylums to house the mentally ill, these institutions – like Mr. Fogg's Private Asylum for the Mentally Deranged – resembled jails more than medical facilities. The intent was not so much to treat or cure, but to remove the patient from society.

Barber-surgeons:

During Sweeney Todd's time, men who cut hair and shaved faces were expected to undertake certain medical duties as well. Called **barber-surgeons**, these men extracted teeth, performed minor surgeries and sometimes even amputated limbs, all without anesthesia. Like Todd, their skills were more physical than intellectual. No special knowledge of the body's workings was required.

The Demon Barber— The Birth of a Legend

Poster for early play production of *Sweeney Todd*.



FOR MANY YEARS, historians have debated whether the fictional Sweeney Todd was inspired by a real serial killer. According to some accounts, a barber named Todd, who set up shop in Fleet Street during the late 1700s, murdered dozens of his customers and was hanged for his crimes in 1802. The real Todd supposedly killed his many victims by dropping them from his barber's chair into an old tunnel that ran beneath his shop. Margery Lovett, his neighbor, then baked his victims' remains into meat pies.

In the early 19th century, very few poor and working-class Londoners could read and write. News traveled by word of mouth and was frequently misstated and exaggerated. As they passed from person to person, reports about a criminal named Todd may have been distorted and mixed up with details about other crimes. Todd may have killed dozens, or he may have committed a single murder. Or none at all.

Over time, the story of Sweeney Todd was told and re-told. Within British culture, he became a favorite bogeyman, not unlike [Jack the Ripper](#), who went on his killing spree in the late 19th century. The facts behind the real Todd, if he existed, remain an historical mystery. The fictional Todd, however, has flourished in English lore for 200 years. "Sweeney Todd," as one writer observed, "will never die. We all need bogeymen and he was bogier than most." ●

English Cuisine

Mrs. Lovett's meat pies figure prominently in *Sweeney Todd*, both as a prop and a plot element. Below are a few other foods popular in Victorian England.

Bonbons/Bong-bongs: Candy, especially fruits and nuts, dipped in chocolate

Kippers: A fish, particularly a herring, that has been cured by smoking, salting or drying

Pasty: A pie filled with meat, fowl or fish

Scones: A small, light, biscuit-like quick bread

Shepherd's pie: A baked dish of ground or diced meat with a crust of mashed potatoes



Print the Legend

Poster for 1936 *Sweeney Todd* movie.



SWEENEY TODD made his first literary appearance in 1846, in a story by Thomas Peckett Prest. Titled “The String of Pearls,” Prest’s bestselling story was adapted from a French short story and ran in installments in a [penny dreadful](#), a type of cheap magazine that specialized in horror tales. A year later, George Dibdin-Pitt penned the first play version of the Todd story. Also called *The String of Pearls*, the melodrama claimed to be “founded on fact.”

Other stage versions of the Todd legend were written and performed all through the 19th century. The first confirmed film version, a silent movie based on Dibdin-Pitt’s play, opened in British theatres in 1928. Another movie adaptation, *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, hit the British screens in 1936. In 1973, English playwright Christopher Bond wrote his version of the Sweeney Todd legend, also titled *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. Bond’s version fully embraced the melodramatic aspects of the story, while making Todd a somewhat sympathetic character. After seeing Bond’s play in London, playwright-composer Stephen Sondheim decided to turn it into a musical. Sondheim, who as a young man had worked with such renowned composers as Leonard Bernstein and Oscar Hammerstein II, collaborated with Hugh Wheeler, who wrote the musical’s book, and director Hal Prince. The resulting show won a slew of Tonys and opened to rave reviews in London.

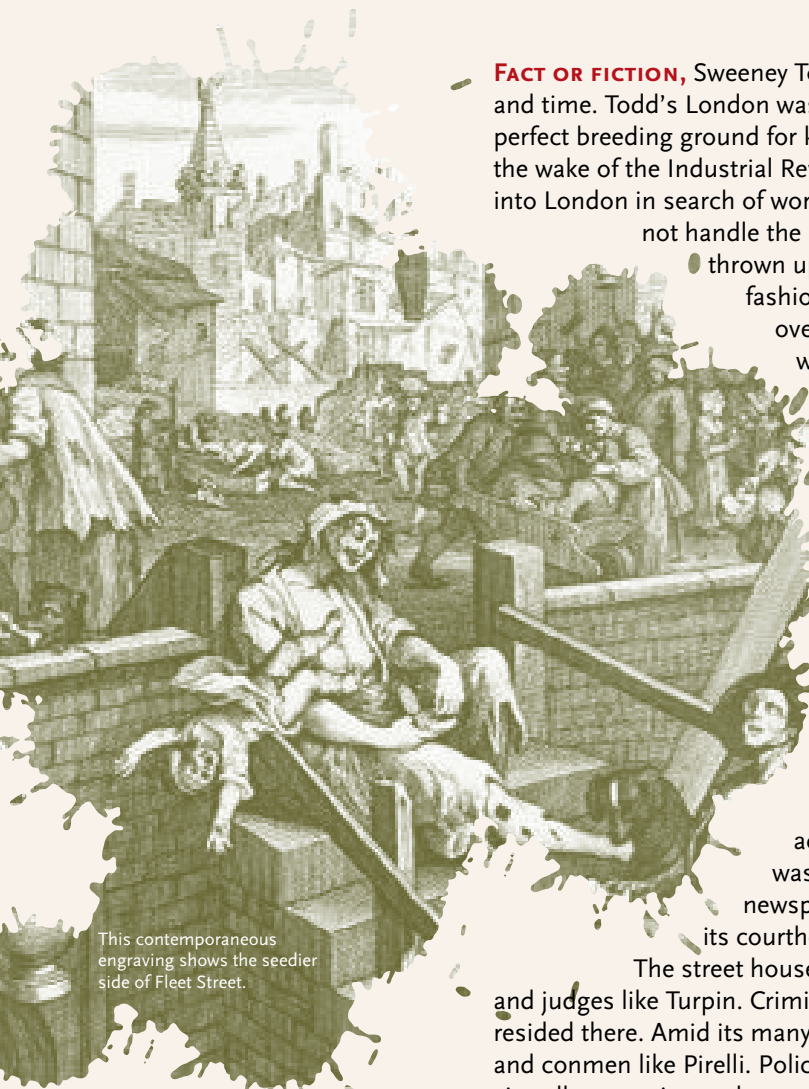
The musical has been revived twice on Broadway, filmed for television and has even been performed by opera companies. And it found an even broader audience through the film version, directed by Tim Burton and starring Johnny Depp. The demon barber of Fleet Street lives on. ●



The penny dreadful that included Sweeney Todd, 1846.

David Hess. Photo by DavidAllenStudio.com

There's No Place Like London



This contemporaneous engraving shows the seedier side of Fleet Street.

**There's a hole in the world/
Like a great black pit/
and the vermin of the world inhabit it/
and its morals aren't worth/
what a pig could spit/
And it goes by the name
of London.**

— Sweeney Todd in *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* by Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler

FACT OR FICTION, Sweeney Todd reflects his place and time. Todd's London was a dangerous place, the perfect breeding ground for killers and thieves. In the wake of the Industrial Revolution, people flooded into London in search of work, and the city could not handle the influx. Buildings were thrown up in a haphazard, cheap fashion, and housing was overcrowded. Sanitation was nonexistent. The stench of human waste and rotting animals permeated the streets. Whole families worked for pennies a day to make ends meet. Women were viewed as property by their husbands and fathers.

Fleet Street, where much of the play's action takes place, was home to London's newspapers and many of its courthouses and churches.

The street housed writers, publishers and judges like Turpin. Criminals and beggars also resided there. Amid its many taverns lurked shysters and conmen like Pirelli. Police protection was virtually non-existent, but punishments were severe.

Sondheim and Wheeler use the grim realities of everyday London life to underline their story. With the exception of Bamford and Judge Turpin, Todd's victims are disposable citizens. In another time and place, a murderer like Todd would be quickly exposed, but in the tough and tumble world of 19th century London, he is practically invisible. ●

TALK ABOUT...



Edmund Bagnell & Judy Kaye.
Photo by DavidAllenStudio.com

Although the current *Sweeney Todd* production still takes place in Victorian England, the abstract production elements give the show a somewhat timeless quality. Could *Sweeney Todd* be set in 21st century Los Angeles? Are there any aspects of the story that would not translate to today?

In earlier versions of the play, Sweeney Todd kills his victims in order to rob them. Did changing his motivation from greed to revenge make the drama stronger?

The Play's the Thing: Exploring Life's Dark Side

WHEN THE PIONEERING *SWEENEY TODD* made its debut on Broadway in 1979, audiences and critics alike wondered what to make of it. Though it went on to win eight Tony awards and played for over a year, the musical's initial reception was mixed. At that time, American musicals were associated with uplifting themes and cheerful tunes (*Grease* and *Annie*, for example). Never before had an American musical dared to be so dark and unforgiving as *Sweeney Todd*.

Musicals with serious plots and criminal characters certainly were not new when Sondheim and Wheeler sat down to write *Sweeney Todd*. In fact, the 1866 production of *The Black Crook*, considered to be the very first American musical, featured demons and an evil count. What made *Sweeney Todd* different was how it spotlighted the dark side of human nature, as embodied by its main character, Todd.

Todd's unrelenting pursuit of revenge and the ease with which he becomes murderous made for a puzzling musical protagonist. In most of the earlier versions of the tale, Todd was the story's villain, greedy and vicious. That the end is tragic for Sondheim and Wheeler's Todd does not change the conflicted feelings his bloody crimes create in the viewer. We pull back in horror, while at the same time, root for Todd to elude the police and exact his revenge.

How do Sondheim and Wheeler succeed at making their Todd watchable? First, Sondheim's complex libretto and score, with its textured counterpoint and adept poetry, bring beauty to a terrifying subject. For example, "My Friends," a song about Todd's deadly razors, proves just as exquisite as the show's straightforward love song "Johanna." Second, the humor that runs through the libretto and book, particularly the sections that deal with Mrs. Lovett's pies, help deflate the more grotesque aspects of the



Judy Kaye. Photo by DavidAllenStudio.com

**The history of the world, my sweet—
is who gets eaten and who get to eat.**

— Sweeney Todd in *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* by Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler

The Play's the Thing: Exploring Life's Dark Side

story. "A Little Priest," with its cheerful references to cannibalism, for example, puts just enough distance between the audience and the subject matter to make the story bearable.

In the end, however, it is the musical's attention to Todd's psychological torment that makes him a worthy protagonist. Theatregoers may not identify and agree with his deeds, but they can understand his outrage and desire for justice.

After *Sweeney Todd*, Sondheim wrote another "dark" musical, *Assassins* (1991), whose protagonists are the various real-life people who have slain or tried to slay American presidents. *Sweeney Todd* also paved the way for such musicals as *Little Shop of Horrors* (1982), *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1993), *The Capeman* (1998) and *Shock-headed Peter* (1998). ●

CASTING FOR "Actor-Musicianship"...

CASTING A JOHN DOYLE PRODUCTION like *Sweeney Todd* might seem a daunting task. How do you find performers who are good at acting, singing and playing an instrument? But Doyle discovered the job was easier than expected. "It's so interesting," he says, "how many people who have come out of the woodwork" can act, sing and play an instrument.

Doyle notes that actor-musicianship has the

added benefit of giving opportunities to actors who otherwise might be overlooked for certain roles. According to Doyle, casting for a combination of skills and talents "allows you to go against type... because types don't carry trombones." ●

Benjamin Magnuson & Lauren Molina.
Photo by DavidAllenStudio.com

Creative Challenges: Taking the Broadway out of Broadway

IN THE YEARS SINCE ITS FIRST

performance on Broadway, *Sweeney Todd* has become a staple of musical theatre, translated into many languages and produced on many stages. The best-known of these later productions remain faithful to the original Broadway concept – authentic period costumes, an offstage orchestra and a substantial cast and chorus. For the current touring production, however, something different was tried.

It began in 2004, when director John Doyle reconceived the musical for the tiny stage at the [Watermill Theatre](#) in England. In a recent interview, Doyle stated that while he was always attracted to the musical theatre form, he was not interested “in the traditional musical theatre way.” Prior to directing *Sweeney Todd*, Doyle asked himself, “How can we, in the time that we live in, take the musical theatre form and transform it? It needs a new language.”

So instead of a large, realistic set, Doyle filled his Watermill stage with nine chairs, step-ladders, an oversized dresser and a coffin atop two wooden planks. Gone was the barber’s chair that had figured so prominently in previous productions. Also absent were the Victorian costumes and sets, replaced with mostly contemporary clothes and suggestive, symbolic props.

And instead of a big cast (the original Broadway show employed 28 actors) and an orchestra or band, Doyle hired actors who also played instruments. Doyle came up with the idea of multi-purpose casting in the early 1990s, dubbing it “actor-musicianship.” In the Watermill show, the actress playing Mrs. Lovett also played the trumpet, while Bamford played keyboards. Other actors played flutes, cello, double-bass and accordion.

Although Doyle’s original artistic choices for *Sweeney Todd* were prompted in part by his budget



Judy Kaye & David Hess. Photo by DavidAllenStudio.com

and the size of his theatre’s stage, he never viewed these requirements as limitations. Instead, he used the smaller space and cast to “find clarity in the story.” By stripping away the usual elaborate sets and costumes, Doyle

Creative Challenges: Taking the Broadway out of Broadway



The Company. Photo by DavidAllenStudio.com

was able to narrow his and thus the audience's focus to the plot elements and characters.

Doyle described this approach as taking “the Broadway out of Broadway” and “back to basics.” Rather than impressing the audience with the loudness and largeness of the production, like a symphony, Doyle's production works more like a chamber piece. “It draws you in,” says Doyle, “rather than coming out to you. There is a more poetic, elegant way we can tell a story, without the expected clichés of the musical theatre.” Literally and figuratively, in Doyle's view, the audience feels closer to the drama.

The end result is a production that breathes fresh life into a musical theatre classic. Following the success of the Watermill production, Doyle took his *Sweeney Todd* to other theatres, including stages on London's West End and on Broadway, where in 2006 it won two Tony awards. Doyle launched a touring version of the musical in 2007 and will bring the show to the Ahmanson for the first time in the spring of 2008. ●

“How can we, in the time that we live in, take the musical theatre form and transform it? It needs a new language.”

— Director John Doyle

TALK ABOUT...

Sondheim and Wheeler's *Sweeney Todd* broke musical theatre convention through its gory subject and morally conflicted protagonist. Can any subject become the basis of a musical? Are there any “taboo” topics?

Sondheim described his piece as “almost an opera” because so much of it is sung, not spoken. How does the singing add to or detract from the storytelling?

Casting in John Doyle's “actor-musicianship” is dictated in part by what instruments auditioning actors can play. Do the instruments each actor plays affect how a character is perceived?

Resources

WEBSITES

www.sondheim.org

Informative, up-to-date site sponsored by the Stephen Sondheim Society

www.sweenytoddtour.com

Official website of the *Sweeney Todd* national tour

www.victorianweb.org

Comprehensive site covering literature, history and culture in the age of Victoria

Books

[*Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*](#) by Christopher Bond (Samuel French, 1974) The dramatic play on which the musical was based

[*Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*](#) music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, book by Hugh Wheeler (Dodd, Mead & Company, 1979)

[*Sondheim*](#) by Martin Gottfried (Harry N. Abrams, 2000) Authorized biography and examination of Sondheim's musicals; includes interviews and reviews

[*Sondheim's Broadway Musicals*](#) by Stephen O. Banfield (University of Michigan Press, 1993) A scholarly look at Sondheim's musicals

[*The London Underworld in the Victorian Period: Authentic First-Person Accounts by Beggars, Thieves and Prostitutes*](#) by Henry Mayhew (Dover Publications, 2005) Compiled in the mid-19th century by noted English historian Henry Mayhew

[*Victorian London: The Tale of a City, 1840-1870*](#) by Liza Picard (St. Martin's Press, 2007) An intriguing look at three decades of London life, its sights, sounds and odors

[*What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew: From Fox Hunting to Whist - The Facts of Daily Life in 19th-Century England*](#) by Daniel Pool (Touchstone, 1993) Humorous, thorough guide to the rules, regulations and customs of everyday life in Victorian England

[*Life in Victorian England*](#) by Gwen Remington (Lucent Books, 2005) Examination of English society, politics and culture, from the lower to the upper classes

[*Food and Cooking in Victorian England: A History*](#) by Andrea Broomfield (Praeger, 2007) An introduction to everyday dining, food preparation and nutrition; includes nine recipes

FILMS

[*Sweeney Todd*](#) directed by Tim Burton (DreamWorks, 2007)

[*The Hound of the Baskervilles*](#) directed by Terence Fisher (Hammer Film Productions, 1959) Another Victorian-era horror story

RECORDINGS

There are literally hundreds of recordings featuring the music of Stephen Sondheim. Here are just a few.

[*Sweeney Todd \(2005 Broadway Revival Cast\)*](#) starring Patti LuPone and Michael Cerveris (Nonesuch, 2006)

[*Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street \(1979 Original Broadway Cast\)*](#) starring Angela Lansbury and Len Cariou (RCA, 2007)

[*Sondheim - A Celebration at Carnegie Hall*](#) (RCA Victor Broadway, 1993)

Glossary

Barber-surgeon:

A person practicing barbering and surgery

Beadle:

A police officer who assists in keeping order at church or among the poor

Penny dreadful: A cheap magazine that specializes in horror tales

About P.L.A.Y.

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