

SWEENEY TODD

A Proposal for Staging

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Ars Pro Concreta

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I. ARTIST STATEMENT

The Show

Described variously as a “musical thriller,” a “movie for the stage,” but widely considered Stephen Sondheim’s masterpiece whatever one calls it (thanks to the many concert presentations and revivals that followed its Broadway premiere, and a popular Tim Burton film adaptation), *Sweeney Todd* is based on the legendary story of an English barber who murdered his customers and, with the help of his neighbor Mrs. Lovett, made them into pies.

In this version (initially adapted by Christopher Bond, and then re-adapted by composer/lyricist Sondheim and librettist Hugh Wheeler), Todd is out to get revenge on a corrupt judge who sent him to prison on false charges, raped his wife, and “adopted” his daughter fifteen years ago. Mrs. Lovett enables Todd’s bloodlust as it helps out her business, but also tries to dissuade him from this goal so that he can settle down with her. By show’s end, in the manner of all classic melodrama and Victorian “shilling shockers,” it all comes to a climactic ending with twists and turns involving mistaken identity, blackmail, murder, dark comedy, and a moral about the fruits of revenge.

My Background with the Show

I have a small confession to make: I *like* this show, but I don’t *love* it. The only reasoning I can give is that if you work with a classicist long enough, it rubs off on you. Once you’ve been exposed to stuff like Berg’s *Lulu* or Strauss’ *Elektra*, by comparison *Sweeney Todd* seems a watered-down, vanilla, lightweight imitation of those pieces. But I *do* like it as musical entertainment. Before I began the process of developing this proposal, I saw it as an “easy A” – a classic well-constructed potboiler that pretty much takes care of itself no matter what one does to it. And then I saw two recent productions which, while both had certain elements I felt could work well, also had enough that *didn’t* work that I was convinced I could do a better job, and that all it took was a little further exploration, a bit greater analysis, to avoid their respective pitfalls.

The first was John Doyle’s “actor/musician” revival in 2005. It had a great idea at its core (stage the show as a flashback playing on a never-ending loop in the traumatized mind of Toby, now confined to an asylum following the show’s events), but aside from that, it became incomprehensible with the actors-accompanying-themselves gimmick tacked on. Had you brought someone to the theater that had never seen *Sweeney Todd*, they’d have been hard-pressed to follow what was going on plot-wise. Hell, I *knew* the show, and I was confused as a lad of 15. Good idea (once I figured out what it was from the show’s press), but bad execution because of a useless gimmick.

The second was the September 2014 New York Philharmonic concert performance starring Bryn Terfel and Emma Thompson, as broadcast on PBS’ *Live From Lincoln Center*. I looked forward to its airing, until I saw it. The camera direction was great, terrific editing and cinematography; there was nice choral and orchestral work throughout.¹ I also thought the opening blocking was a lovely nod to the fact it would

¹ With the NY Philharmonic on hand in the case of the latter, frankly this was to be expected.

be a staged concert and not one with book and score in hand. Further, as far as I'm concerned, Audra McDonald (as the Beggar Woman) walked away with the show, vocally and acting-wise. Having said that, the fight choreography replacing the throat slashing and other rough business was repetitive², the back walls of the set spattered with paint (blood?) gave me pause (and led me to question if this was set in 1890s London or 1990s New York), and the casting, particularly of the leads, left *much* to be desired.

Bryn Terfel, while blessed with a fine operatic bass³, was no actor, musical theater or otherwise; he gave a wooden performance that quickly grew tired. As for Emma Thompson, though she's a terrific actress and nailed the comedy, she wasn't even close to singing the part, hitting some notes but with no control (or apparent knowledge) of the style; she was certainly no Angela Lansbury, who was magnificent and the show's notable highlight when she did it, or even Julia MacKenzie. I read lots of people online afterwards saying Emma sang better than they expected, which only made me wonder how low their expectations were. She'd have been better off doing more Rex Harrison-style talk-singing, and leaning on the acting.

Bottom line: I saw the DVD of (what amounts to) the original Broadway production, and while said DVD wasn't all that, I found this concert much worse, and, after a while, largely unwatchable. Vocally, the leads weren't fit to kiss the remnants of the asses of Lansbury and Cariou (or Hearn).

But... it did get me thinking about what I could improve, using the workable elements of both of these productions and injecting a bit of my own flavor. Sometimes, one is inspired purely by the thought of being able to do better than what's in front of them. In this case, after mixing, matching, and some research, I'm convinced my *Sweeney* would be much better.

² Being a concert, I understand the need for clear direction, but did people have to get physically lifted off the ground so often to indicate the heat was on?

³ Albeit too low a voice for the role; as someone who's heard Len Cariou and George Hearn's vocal performances (I rank the former good but forgettable, and the latter the best), he didn't compare.

II. PLAY ANALYSIS

Conflict is part of human nature, and so it's hardly surprising that it forms the basis for a great deal of dramatic action, in literature, on stage, and on screen. Most English literature classes break down the seven most common types of dramatic conflict as follows:

- **Person vs. person** – One person struggles for victory over another, about as classic as conflict in a story can get.⁴
- **Person vs. technology/machinery** – Especially popular over the past century, thanks in no small part to increasing mechanization and improving artificial intelligence, a person fights to overcome unemotional and unsympathetic machinery that believes it no longer requires humanity.
- **Person vs. nature** – A person battles for survival against the inexorable, apathetic force of nature.
- **Person vs. self** – A person finds themselves battling between two competing desires or selves, typically one good and one evil.
- **Person vs. society** – A person fights (sometimes successfully, sometimes less so) against injustices within their society. Without this, the dystopian genre wouldn't exist.
- **Person vs. fate/god(s)** – A person is trapped by an inevitable destiny.
- **Person vs. the unknown/extraterrestrial** – A common thread in sci-fi and supernatural horror, where a person battles against an entity that isn't entirely known or comprehensible, whether extraterrestrial (in the alien sense) or metaphysical.

As it turns out, *Sweeney Todd* covers almost every type of conflict exemplified in literature or drama. In the title character's arc alone, one finds person vs. person, person vs. self (to an extent), and – most intriguingly – person vs. society, an element that initially wasn't nearly as explicit as it became under Hal Prince's direction.

Almost every source I've read about the original production's creation seems to agree that Stephen Sondheim was just trying to do a musical thriller. On the other hand, Prince, his then-frequent collaborator, was having trouble figuring out what *he* could bring to the table. He didn't get what Steve saw in this "revenge tragedy"-inflected variant of an old folk tale from the ass-crack of England that he'd caught while on holiday. Discussions with set designer Eugene Lee finally clued him to his way in, a "metaphor" that would "make it more political than perhaps my colleagues wanted."

Hugh Wheeler's book set *Sweeney* in the Industrial Revolution⁵, which called to Prince's mind "[t]he collective slavery of sweatshops, assembly lines, the blocking out of nature, sunshine lost to the filthy fog spewing from the smokestacks of factories." He couldn't have missed lyrics like "Sweeney pondered and Sweeney planned / Like a perfect

⁴ Its instances throughout literature are so numerous that mythologist Joseph Campbell wrote *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, a book outlining the archetype of a hero going on a journey and overcoming an enemy.

⁵ The original penny dreadful by George Dibdin-Pitt took place a century earlier.

machine, he planned" or "The engine roared, the motor hissed" either.⁶ Lee located an abandoned factory for sale in New England, and for \$25,000, the producers procured its iron exterior, its gates, and a mess of machinery that became part of the *Sweeney* set.

It's not hard to see how one informed the other. The show's filled with subtext – sometimes literal text – about man devouring man ("At the top of the hole sit the privileged few..." comes to mind, among many examples), and people being reduced to resources for others' consumption. Even the characters we're expected to root for, against all odds, have related inner flaws: *Sweeney* doesn't even bother to look at the Beggar Woman right after his first mention of humanity's general lack of charity; Mrs. Lovett is at least as motivated by money as she is by her love for *Sweeney*, and she has been so poor for so long that her greed, though monstrous, is understandable. As Prince himself put it, "*Sweeney Todd*'s principal cast includes the title role and Mrs. Lovett, the owner of a pie shop, who is bankrupt until she and *Sweeney* discover they can murder people and make meat pies of their cadavers. In addition, there are two young lovers, a crazy old lady, and very importantly, a villainous judge. The story also calls for a community of dirt-poor people of all ages – where better to set such a collective than the jail of a factory?"

He further developed this in his work with the ensemble, encouraging each cast member to create a character, with a life and a backstory, to elevate their contribution and enrich what was onstage throughout the show: "You are prisoners in a factory and collectively driven to cannibalism. You never see the sun because of the soot that covers the roof of the factory. You must decide, individually, whether or not you are married, whether you have any children. Make up a history for your character. [...] you have to make specific choices for yourselves." (For an example of results, one young actress, inspired by a period illustration of a young woman, chose to wear a heavy iron brace from thigh to ankle.)

The metaphor began to take over the show, leaving an indelible imprint that's still felt today. In the script, the musical begins, as it did in Prince's production, with a silk banner illustrating the British class system in the nineteenth century. As the houselights darken, two workers enter and tear down the banner, simultaneously triggering a factory whistle, which shrieks again during the show every time *Sweeney* cuts someone's throat – basically a baseball bat to the head in terms of subtlety.

This, of course, was a far cry from Sondheim's original concept, as outlined in Craig Zadan's invaluable *Sondheim and Co.*: an intimate chamber musical with few sets, in an environmental staging that kept the show close to the audience, with smoke and streetlamps and fog rising from the floor "and somebody would pop up beside you and scare you to death." I sympathize more with Sondheim's point of view; in my book, if a show can't be done small, it's not worth doing. But a small production could certainly incorporate the themes which Prince shed light on as easily as a bigger one could, and possibly incorporate interesting thoughts and images of its own.

⁶ Small surprise, then, that Hal was reportedly able to immediately tell the authors absolutely no rewriting would be required to accommodate the factory setting he'd just sprung upon them.

III. VISION

Guiding Theme

As might be clear from my writing about my background with the show, I saw merit in John Doyle's notion of staging it as a flashback playing on a never-ending loop in the traumatized mind of Tobias, now confined to an asylum following the show's events, but felt that his "actor/musician" conceit obscured his intent. I'd like to explore that idea again without the overlay, along with everything else I add to the mix below, and see if it holds any water without the gimmickry that once accompanied it.

Dramaturgy / Music and Lyrics

Sweeney Todd is one show that's no stranger to cuts. Material has often been added (or re-added) and deleted since the show began.⁷ As such, it's not a question of "should we cut," but of "what would we cut and why." The goal isn't wholesale restructuring; I love *Sweeney* as is. However, I think judicious editing would enable the show to become a fast-paced thrill ride, bringing the audience careening at top speed to its devastating ending. Further, I'd contrive to make any cuts as "of a piece" as possible, in that my editing should be unnoticeable to a first-timer. Nothing should seem lost.⁸

As more than one concert edition has been mounted for popular consumption, it's a logical choice to first review those productions and dramaturgical choices they made. The 2014 concert and the (far superior) 2000 San Francisco Symphony concert were both directed by Lonny Price, so it's hardly surprising both utilized the same basic adaptation. What is surprising is that, particularly in the former, the editing of text left much to be desired. I felt they didn't cut nearly enough, especially since they were broadcasting without an intermission. The pacing dragged, and while that's not necessarily the fault of edits (or lack thereof), they didn't help. One could've cut a bit more and still gotten the gist of story and show without losing any substance. Still, I could do worse as a starting point than with these commonly implemented changes.

One adjustment in particular makes better dramatic sense than the original. In concert, "Johanna (Judge Turpin)," as it's titled in the published score, a number both chilling and humanizing for the character singing it which keeps him from being reduced to an all-purpose "baddie," is usually positioned directly before "Kiss Me." This change not only works plot-wise, but addresses why it was initially cut, according to Sondheim's book *Finishing the Hat*. Aside from Prince's squeamishness about staging the Judge's flagellation-into-orgasm while peeking through a keyhole at the ingénue, it was primarily deleted because, as originally placed, the plot veered away from Todd and Mrs. Lovett a moment too long. Here, the moment's all of a piece: before going to work, Judge Turpin's impure thoughts compel him to propose to Johanna; Anthony shows up just in time to "save the day," and hurrah for young love and hormones too; and then

⁷ One example of noteworthy deletion is the "Tower of Bray" segment of "Parlor Songs"; one of addition would be "Beggar Woman's Lullaby," also in Act II. I'd retain both alterations.

⁸ In my opinion, the best edits should always leave an audience unaware that anything is missing.

the Judge, on his way home after an exhausting day, is waylaid by the Beadle's well-meant suggestion that if he looked less decrepit, he'd be more appealing to the girl.

Further research turned up information about the 1989 Broadway revival, popularly known (thanks to *Forbidden Broadway*) as "Teeny Todd." This production, among several unique changes, eliminated Sweeney singing "The Barber and His Wife" to Anthony towards the start of the show. It's a solid choice; the song gives away too much too soon, and Mrs. Lovett summarizes this story much more quickly, and, in my opinion, effectively, in "Poor Thing." In making the same choice, I'd echo the concert version by having Todd respond to Anthony's "half-crazed beggar woman" line by singing "There's a hole in the world..." After that, the book would continue as normal, except Todd would beg Anthony to leave directly after refusing his offer of any money or help. This would cover the change in the scene's overall shape and make it feel less like anything is missing.

The Playbill for this production suggested another possible cut: losing the "Kiss Me" / "Ladies in Their Sensitivities" quartet. The '89 revival didn't list it in the Playbill, and I feel more comfortable cutting something many people love if at least one other production has done so. However, someone who attended it informed me that though it wasn't listed in the Playbill, it did in fact appear in the show, so precedent was not in my favor. Nonetheless, I stand by the thought behind it: the quartet is pretty, musically, but plot-wise, one can lose it, as all we really learn is that Anthony and Johanna graduate from kissing to a little business on a couch (again, young love and hormones ahoy!), while the Judge and Beadle talk more about this contest-winning barber who could make the Judge look sharp. He said the Beadle should take him there; let's get to the barber shop, shall we? It's at least worth an experiment in rehearsal.

Last but not least, I'd like to take another look at a commonly deleted sequence: the tooth-pulling section of "The Contest," where Sweeney gets a volunteer for tooth extraction, but his opponent doesn't, and is about to win by default when Pirelli enlists his (very) reluctant assistant. While cutting it helps the show maintain a brisk pace, and people generally seem to think it distracts from the narrative, I quite like it. Properly done, it's the kind of dark comedy that elicits a sort of guilty laughter, and in a show packed with tension for the audience, it's important by whatever means necessary to lighten it by lightening up the mood for variety. Besides, it illustrates just how cruel Pirelli's willing to be to Tobias; without it, his assertion later in the show that "it seems like the Good Lord sent" him Mrs. Lovett rings hollow.

Recent research with the help of a Facebook collective of Sondheim fans known as "Finishing the Chat" brought it to my attention that, despite what both Sondheim (including in *Finishing the Hat*) and Hal Prince have said over the years, the tooth-pulling sequence was *not* cut from the original Broadway production following previews.⁹ What was gone by opening night was the "Now, Signorini, Signori..." section.

⁹ This was borne out by evidence: a bootleg video of the original production with Len Cariou and Angela Lansbury, dating from roughly January 1980, which recently appeared on YouTube (it can be seen at [this link](#) at the time of writing). Unfortunately, Eighties bootleg videos weren't what they are today quality-wise, but for those who want to refresh their memory or experience it for the first time; you can see the tooth-pulling sequence within.

Later productions, including the first national tour and the original London run, first made the now-standard cut and restored half of "Now, Signorini, Signori...", with one small lyric adjustment in the mix.

Memory makes fools of us all, and this change was implemented so early – and became standard so quickly – that Sondheim and Prince can be forgiven for their confusion. Luckily for me, their original choice (which, to be specific, cuts everything Pirelli sings before "To shave-a da face...") enables me to re-include the tooth-pulling without bogging down the running time.

Casting

In reading Christopher Bond's foreword to the mass market paperback edition of the *Sweeney* libretto, my attention was immediately drawn to two things: one, the unusual notion that an author would be so excited by someone's adaptation of their work that they'd willingly direct a later production of said adaptation (at the Liverpool Playhouse in 1981, in this instance), and two, an idea he had for costuming the ensemble.

I'll quote the relevant portion:

...when I have directed the show I have always shifted the emphasis of the first two scenes of Act II by having grotesquely frock-coated and crinolined figures in half-masks as Mrs. Lovett's customers and Sweeney's anonymous victims because I don't want people involved with them. Visually, this ties up with the dumb-show rape of Sweeney's wife in Act I, and I like the idea that the pie shop and barber shop have become a chic venue for the gentry to attend – the white folks slumming it in Harlem, so to speak.

Reading that last turn of phrase immediately – though this likely wasn't Bond's intention – brought to mind images of the barber shop culture of the Harlem Renaissance era, and the added juice that racially charged casting would bring to Prince's political subtext, especially in the current climate. With that in mind, barring the Judge and Beadle (and possibly some ensemble), I'd explore the possibility of casting a largely black company, to shed new light on that aspect of the show.

I further learned from this introduction that Bond's production was considerably more intimate than the original staging; it boasted a cast of ten and an orchestra of five, "which [he thought] is the minimum it should be attempted with!" I felt this approach was right on track with Sondheim's original vision, and though the massive Prince production was very effective, the same message could come across without the trappings he added. Though I felt the current lowest orchestration available (9 pieces) was more than adequate, if a little confusing and poorly laid out on paper, and didn't need to be reduced further, I definitely agreed with his notion of a smaller cast.

Taking Bond's production as my cue, and adding a thought I had when a woman played Pirelli in John Doyle's 2005 revival for the purpose of balancing the vocal sound, I drastically reduced the size of the cast to the following:

- ANTHONY HOPE
- SWEENEY TODD
- BEGGAR WOMAN / ADOLFO PIRELLI
- MRS. NELLIE LOVETT
- JUDGE TURPIN
- BEADLE BAMFORD
- JOHANNA BARKER
- TOBIAS RAGG
- BIRD SELLER / JONAS FOGG

Those not appearing in a given scene would double as ensemble, with some form of costume to distinguish them from their lead role, given that in this concept, á la Doyle, they're all asylum inmates.

General Staging and Design Ideas

For design inspiration, I turned to an extraordinary Peter Weiss play which swept Europe before coming to America in the mid-Sixties: *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*, more popularly known as *Marat/Sade*.

This visually terrifying piece of total theater, which engaged the eye, ear, and mind with every imaginable dramatic device, technique, and stage picture, all the forces and elements possible to the stage fused in one overwhelming experience, is a play within a play based on two historical truths: the infamous Marquis de Sade was confined in the lunatic asylum of Charenton, where he staged plays starring his fellow inmates for the French aristocracy (it was common in those days, play or no play, for sane – usually rich – people to view the mentally disturbed in a controlled environment as recreation); and the revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat was stabbed in a bathtub by Charlotte Corday at the height of the Terror during the French Revolution, which becomes the subject of de Sade's play in *Marat/Sade*.

I was struck by the design elements captured in the filmed version: a wire fence surrounded their stage. Some wore clown costumes, like a demented Commedia dell'Arte troupe. The theater looked almost like a boxing arena, with benches on both sides. Actors would sit on benches in sight of the audience, and when they had to do something, they just got up and became that character. This became the framework of my reinvention of Doyle's *Sweeney*: Toby's ongoing traumatic flashback takes the form of a play performed by his fellow inmates, who are transformed by his mind's eye into the characters they resemble. Without overwhelming the plot, set, costumes, and performing style would mimic *Marat/Sade*.

This would be best suited to an in-the-round venue, with the audience surrounding a main stage being used only as *Sweeney's* barber shop, with two satellite stages, one on the left of the main stage and one on the right. During "City on Fire!" in Act II, however, the walls come down, so to speak. The cast of "lunatics," in a manic pique, start to melt down. They break through the wire fence and scatter out among the audience, mirroring

the chaos of that point in the second act. From there on out, the staging takes a chilling turn, with the cast spaced and staggered the width of the theater on the floor in front of the main stage. As each new moment is played, the audience's heads will turn in unison towards each new sound, each new line, not sure what will come next or from where.

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