

'Sweeney Todd' in Brea scores with opera-caliber vocals

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London pie shop owner Mrs. Lovett (Laura Gregory) and homicidal barber Sweeney Todd (Rudy Martinez) form a lethal duo in Southgate Productions revival of the 1979 Broadway musical "Sweeney Todd," co-produced and presented at Breas Curtis Theatre. (Photo by David Anis)

By ERIC MARCHESE / CONTRIBUTING WRITER

'Sweeney Todd'

Where: Curtis Theatre, 1 Civic Center Circle, Brea

When: Through Oct. 23. 8 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays, 3 p.m. Sundays

How much: \$25-\$30

Length: 2 hours, 35 minutes

Suitability: Adults, teens and older kids (for language and content)

Phone: 714-990-7722

Online: curtistheatre.com

googleon: all

“Sweeney Todd” may be the closest thing we have to a grand opera suited to the Halloween season. With its ghoulish throat slashings and ghastly concept of using human flesh in meat pies, the hit 1979 Stephen Sondheim-Hugh Wheeler musical is ideal for this time of year

At Curtis Theatre, Southgate Productions’ staging gives us something more: singing so strong and clear as to bolster the concept that the show about “The Demon Barber of Fleet Street” is much closer to opera than most other Broadway tuners.

Director Stephen John moves the action from 19th-century London to, the opening prologue tells us, “the not-too-distant past.” What that period is, though, is open to interpretation. Smoky black-and-white projections of London during the blitz of World War II offer a clue, but Alexandra Johnson’s finely tailored, basic black-grounded costumes have a classic look that could derive from just about any decade of the 20th century. John’s all-purpose set design, meanwhile, defies being tied to any specific historical era.

In Rudy Martinez, we get a tightly wound Sweeney along with the unmistakable bitterness and thirst for revenge of a man cruelly wronged and stripped of everything dear to him. The actor’s most striking feature is his rich, deep baritone, making his every word, spoken or sung, something to relish and hang onto – so good, you won’t miss the absence of a British accent.

John and Martinez paint Sweeney not as gloomy, but proud. While his manner is quiet and his determination to extract revenge upon the oily Judge Turpin (Phil Nieto) is restrained, Sweeney is at times believably ferocious.

Martinez is well matched by Laura Gregory, whose Mrs. Lovett is a slim, not unattractive widow versus the more typical, broadly comical older crone reading of the role. Her marked Cockney accent, which she retains even while singing, helps define the character's more comedic aspects, as does Gregory's graceful comic timing.

Gregory's Mrs. Lovett and Martinez's Sweeney have a ball with the wonderfully inventive, darkly comedic duet "A Little Priest," the musical highlight that closes Act One, taking huge delight in devising more ingenious puns.

Solid singing is the hallmark of this staging from its 10 principals to seven-person ensemble. In fact, this "Sweeney Todd" delivers some of the strongest vocals you're likely to hear at any theater this or any other year.

Physically imposing Nieto shows the pious, corrupt judge's self-importance and his desperation to resist his lascivious urges toward his pretty young ward, Johanna (Carolyn Lupin), while fending off her chief suitor, Anthony Hope (Aaron Stevens). Stevens' pleasing tenor vocals support Anthony's innate decency, with Lupin projecting Johanna's idealism through lovely, bell-clear singing – and her fear of Turpin through Johanna's frantic demeanor.

Ricky Abilez conveys Tobias' youthful naïveté and solicitude toward Mrs. Lovett. David A. Blair serves up spot-on Italian and Irish accents as blackmailing barber Pirelli. Subservience to the

Judge is the primary trait of Ryan Coon's rotund Beadle, and like Gregory, Katrina Murphy imbues her character, the ubiquitous Beggar Woman, with distinctive Cockney inflections.

Curtis Theatre's superb sound system yields an ideal balance of vocals, allowing us to savor Sondheim's part macabre, part poignant lyrics. Music director Jo Monteleone has expertly modified and customized Sondheim's dark score from canned recordings, providing ample support for the cast's consummate vocal work.

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