

Revenge served cold: Cabrillo Stage's 'Sweeney Todd' cuts to the bone with powerful performances



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Quick Take

Cabrillo Stage's "Sweeney Todd" is sharp and strikingly relevant, delivering powerhouse performances and Stephen Sondheim's brilliance, even if the gore stays on the back burner.

If you think "Sweeney Todd" is just a creepy old musical about a murderous barber, think again. This show has serious bite — and not just in the throat-slitting department. Stephen Sondheim's masterpiece has always been deliciously dark. Still, in Cabrillo Stage's new production, which opened last weekend, the razor serves up a sharp revival.

Set in the grime and desperation of Industrial-era London, "Sweeney Todd" tells the tale of Benjamin Barker, a wrongfully imprisoned barber who returns to Victorian London under the alias Sweeney Todd. Consumed by vengeance, Todd seeks to find and punish the corrupt Judge Turpin, who destroyed his life and took his wife and daughter.

Reopening his barbershop above Mrs. Lovett's struggling pie shop, the two form a gruesome partnership — a business arrangement that turns vengeance into profit. As the bodies start to pile up and the past comes back to haunt them, Todd spirals deeper into obsession, with tragic consequences for everyone involved.

With Sondheim's brilliant score — rich in wit and emotion — "Sweeney Todd" is a chilling tale of revenge, madness, and morality, wrapped in one of musical theater's most unforgettable and timeless works. But it isn't just about revenge — it's what happens when a broken system leaves someone with nothing to lose.

Making her directorial debut with Cabrillo Stage, artistic director Andrea L. Hart taps into these politically charged themes, complete with a stunning 21-piece orchestra under the musical direction of Daniel Goldsmith, making this "Sweeney Todd" exuberant and exciting.

IF YOU GO

- **Who:** Cabrillo Stage
- **What:** "Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street"
- **When:** Through Aug. 10
- **Where:** Crocker Theater at Cabrillo College, 6500 Soquel Dr., Aptos **Tickets:** www.cabrillostage.com or 831-479-6154

Adam J. Saucedo as Sweeney delivers a powerhouse performance — controlled, simmering and magnetic. At first, Sweeney is almost understated, his angst seething just below the surface until he finally explodes, commanding the stage in a searing rendition of "Epiphany," which becomes Sweeney's *raison d'être*, spiraling into madness, declaring, "We all deserve to die." Saucedo's voice, paired with the emotional depth he brings to the role, draws the audience into the moral void at the heart of the show.

Angela Jeffries nearly steals the spotlight as Mrs. Lovett. She is delightfully cunning, balancing humor and horror with ease, making her pragmatic meat-pie maker oddly lovable and deeply unsettling. Her comic timing and chemistry with Saucedo are a highlight, especially in "A Little Priest" — a macabre duet that manages to be equal parts shocking and hilarious as they sing about the "flavors" of people.

Supporting cast members shine as well. Michael Navarro brings a gentle vulnerability to Tobias Ragg, and Jorge Torrez as the Beadle, Brittney Mignano as the Beggar Woman and Louis Santia as AdolfoPirelli all contribute strong, memorable performances. David Murphy's Judge Turpin is appropriately chilling, embodying unchecked, smug power.



Angela Jeffries as Mrs. Lovett and Michael Navarro as Tobias Ragg in "Sweeney Todd," on through Aug. 10 at Cabrillo Stage. Credit: Grace Khieu

The young lovers — Haley Clarke as Johanna and Conor Warshawsky as Anthony Hope — have lovely voices, but their performances feel awkward. Their characters are supposed to offer a glimmer of hope in this bleak world, and it would be satisfying to see them fully embody that idealism and emotional depth.

The show offers plenty of lurid fun, and for the most part, this production works well. Goldsmith conducts a fine orchestra, weaving Sondheim's melodies with precision and dramatic flair.

Hart leans into the show's moral ambiguity — asking us to both recoil from and empathize with Sweeney's descent — but the execution occasionally muddles the message. Whether due to directorial staging or Melissa C. Wiley's choreography, the ensemble scenes sometimes feel overly busy, pulling focus, when often all we need are the intricacies of Sondheim's music. This was particularly noticeable during numbers like the "Johanna Quartet" and "Pretty Women," where the haunting beauty of the music was lost amid competing stage action.

On the technical side, Skip Epperson's stunning set evokes a grim, industrial purgatory — equal parts beauty and decay. Marcel Tjioe's stage effects — particularly the trapdoor floorboards that Sweeney's victims fall through to the piping hot ovens — are clever and delightfully morbid.

However, a few visual elements fall short of expectations. Richard Fong's lighting design lacks the dramatic contrasts this show calls for. Soloists are sometimes lost in dim lighting, and few scenes embrace the high theatricality or gothic tone that more blood-red lighting or deep shadows might achieve. Overall, a sense of intimacy between the players and audience was needed, which could have been achieved through more distinct light design.

Costume design by Lidia Hasenauer misses visual character cues. Sweeney looks too polished for a man fresh out of prison or on a murderous rampage. Mrs. Lovett's red satin dress in Act II leans more toward prostitute than eccentric entrepreneur. And Tobias, who should look increasingly distressed and dirty by the end, appears curiously unscathed.

And then there's the blood — or lack thereof. "Sweeney Todd" is known for its over-the-top visual elements. While some directors may choose restraint, this production's almost bloodless approach undercut some of the show's most iconic moments. The absence of visual horror in a story built around murder leaves the ending, in particular, feeling oddly muted and unsatisfying.

Still, these are directorial choices, and interpretation is subjective. Hart's version leans more towards the psychological than the sensational, aiming to tell a cleaner, more metaphorical tale.

While that choice may work for some, it risks losing the grandeur that longtime "Sweeney Todd" fans relish and detracts from the message I believe Hart wants to convey: that "Sweeney Todd" is a timely parable in today's world of deepening inequality, institutional failures and public outrage at abuses of power. And let's be honest — there's something darkly satisfying about a story that calls out institutional rot while serving it up with Sondheim's brilliant lyrics and a macabre vibe.

It's worth remembering that "Sweeney Todd" has always walked the line between horror and melodrama. When it first emerged in the 19th century, it was presented as a "penny dreadful" and then onstage as a kind of theatrical thrill ride where audiences would gasp, laugh and cheer as villains were punished and justice (in whatever form) was served. This production touches those roots, but plays it a bit safe to capture the complete gleeful wickedness.

Still, "Sweeney Todd" remains a masterpiece piece of musical theater, and Cabrillo Stage's production is a thrilling, thought-provoking evening of theater. If you've never seen it before, you're in for a treat — and I would even suggest you go twice. The first time you'll enjoy the music and mayhem, but the second time you'll leave with something more: a chilling reflection of our world, and perhaps a whisper of warning.