

## Sweeney Todd a smashing success

By [Eliana Carmona](#)

Stephen Sondheim is widely known for being fluent in the macabre, and in **“Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street”** he fully delivers, deftly weaving together wit and wordplay with gruesomeness and grotesquerie. “Sweeney” also happens to be one of my favorite musicals, so it was a pleasant surprise when the Ram’s Head production managed to meet my unreasonably high expectations. The story follows Sweeney Todd (James Everett ’13), a murderous barber who seeks vengeance on Judge Turpin (Chris Lewis ’12), who stole his wife away and banished him from London. Upon his return to Sondheim’s dark and foul London, he joins forces with the darkly hilarious Mrs. Lovett (Olivia Haas ’11) and naïve young Anthony (Ken Kansky ’12) in an attempt to free his daughter Johanna (Kali Lindsey ’12) from her unrighteous imprisonment and to kill the dishonorable judge.

Production values set a high bar from the start; upon the curtain’s rise, the lighting took in a mass of chorus members hanging their heads and painted them to look like nothing more or less than a mass of corpses on the gallows. After this initial vision, lighting was more or less tastefully done, and was intermittently breathtaking. There were moments of occasional tackiness – whenever Johanna and Anthony shared the stage, for instance, the stage would be lit from the back by a massive, hilariously colorful screen alternating purple and blue light; doubtless the intention was to achieve some sort of dreamlike quality, but it fell just short — but overall, the lighting managed to maintain and accentuate the mood of the piece.

The cast was extremely talented, though some of the acting was at times stiff. Everett’s Sweeney was a wholly imposing one, and his voice carried a deep, ringing timbre that forced the audience to provide their full attention. Haas was surprisingly likeable as Lovett, despite a heavy fake accent that I expected to be a lot more annoying than it was. Her character demonstrates Sondheim at his most playful, all reproachful self-righteousness and domestic compassion and a cold-blooded lack of humanity. Kali Lindsey was almost eerily perfect as Johanna, her high, pure tones bringing to life the character’s delicate fragility. And although Ken Kansky’s acting was at times somewhat wooden, his voice was strong and more than made up for it.

The most striking talent in the show, though, was the beggar woman (played by Sarah Guerrero ’11). The moment she capered onstage, howling for alms and limping dramatically, every eye in the room was drawn to her, and for the rest of the play, whenever she was present I could not find myself able to look at anyone else. Guerrero was perhaps the only one onstage who truly threw her entire body into her work, the only one *physically* committing to the role. It could have been too much, but she pulled it off, and it was mesmerizing.

Another notable factor was, surprisingly enough, the chorus in the background. Throughout the show, I spent a good deal of time watching individual chorus members react to the scenes unfolding before them and was surprised to find their reactions to be entertaining and wholly believable, even on an individual level. Particularly remarkable was their performance as a rabble of semi-demonic lunatics at the very end of the piece, in which their mad, contorted frolic was genuinely disturbing.

High points to look out for: Lovett and Sweeney’s playful duet, “A Little Priest” was Sondheim at his best; the joyful mood that Everett and Haas create is wholly infectious, and Everett’s all-consuming rage in “Epiphany” is genuinely believable.

Of course, in every show you will also have low points. Judge Turpin’s scene of self-flagellation (in which he proceeds to beat himself about the back with what looked to be a riding crop) was almost too uncomfortable to look at, despite Chris Lewis’s lovely voice. Young Toby’s (Josh Siegel ’14) costume (complete with silly ankle socks and, for about half of his time onstage, an absolutely absurd yellow wig) made it difficult to take the character seriously (though, to his credit, the actor managed to surpass this hurdle in his tragic performance of “Not While I’m Around”).

Despite these small shortcomings, the Ram’s Head cast managed to put on a visual spectacle and an aural masterpiece, and I’d recommend it to anyone who can appreciate a truly dark comedy.