

Entertainment

Ethel Simmons editor/644-1100



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COW

Plot's gruesome, but musical is great

Performances of "Sweeney Todd" continue through Saturday, Dec. 1, at the Music Hall in downtown Detroit. For ticket information, call the box office at 963-7680.

By Mary Jane Doerr
special writer

Perhaps if "Sweeney Todd," now playing as part of Michigan Opera Theatre's season, were written in German we would not be so aware of the grotesque plot and critics would dwell upon the score's music qualities.

Who considers the lust, incest, vengeance and murder in "Elektra" and "Der Ring des Nibelungen?"

Unlike a grand opera though, the music in "Sweeney Todd" does not carry the show and its success depends on superb acting and impeccable diction for audiences to understand the sing-song, spoken-sung rhythmic rhyme of composer Stephen Sondheim's libretto.

So the story's ugliness — derived out of 18th and 19th-century English nursery rhymes, Charles Dickens social commentary and the black humor of the Theatre du Grand Guignol — prevails in words which pattern the beat of

review

Patty Cake, Jack Be Nimble and Mother Goose.

So the English history of baking pies with all sorts of items in them is the source for the gory plot that pairs cannibalism with humor and graphically displays throat-cutting as TV did a few years ago in "Masada."

The music approaches opera in scale, such as in the last scene duet by Sweeney Todd (David Cryer) and Mrs. Lovett (Judy Kaye) and then descends to musical theater in songs like the intentionally monotonous "By the Sea" and the humorously witty "Priest."

THE TWO AND one-half-hour opera makes demands of the singers that vocal technology is not able to handle.

To get the projection and clarity of sound in the music the voice must be forced, as much of the music is composed in the voice's speaking range where projection over a period of time causes excess strain. If the parts are pre-learned in the more comfortable opera

range, where projection is more natural, the clarity of the words is lost in the vibrato.

Broadway's Sweeney Todd, Len Carrou, is no longer singing. Supposedly he ruined his voice singing this role.

In this production, the first without the collaboration of the Sondheim-Harold Prince team, MOT cast two strong musical theater voices in the leads as Sweeney Todd and Mrs. Lovett. Both Cryer and Kaye are skilled to ensure understanding of the words and to save their voices.

Cryer is increasingly demented in his acting style as the crazed barber, a penetrating delivery in both his singing and his portrayal. Kaye accentuates his performance with perfectly timed comical lines and a beautiful voice, when she takes it up into her soprano range. Her strong acting carries the show.

The duo is equalled by a superb cast who render a dramatically chilling interpretation. John Lee's tenor solo as Tobias Ragg, "Not While I'm Around," is the show's musical high point, and his mad scene following is matchless.

BIRMINGHAM'S Rochelle Rosenthal is powerfully degenerate as the

Beggar Woman. Rebecca Luker's voice is as pretty as her appearance. Stephen Lehou as Anthony Hope delivers with earnestness and simplicity. John Ferrante's countertenor voice as the Beadle brightens up the music. Eric Johnson is adequately deplorable as Judge Turpin and Rocco Cocchiarelli is weak vocally as Pirelli.

The versatile set, which makes effective use of shadows and light was designed by Joseph Tilford at Wright State University in Dayton. Costumes by Christina Weppner were muted though colorful enough to brighten the stage. Mark Flint, recently back from the New York City Opera conducted the orchestra in a precise fashion that allowed the actors to drive out their lines.

Blatant is the show's social comment when Susanne Acton's well-trained chorus vehemently points out to the audience, singing "Lift your razors high," obscuring Sondheim's subtleties as usual. Don't be fooled. Vengeance breeds from its own seed and virtue has its own disguise.

The musical score is Sondheim's best and the production is one of MOT's finest.



David Cryer as Sweeney Todd and Judy Kaye as Mrs. Lovett sing "Try a Little Priest" in the Michigan Opera Theatre production of the Broadway musical thriller, "Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street."

Santa visits museum for breakfast, snacks

"Breakfast with Santa" and "Snacks with Santa," two of the Detroit Institute of Arts' many holiday activities, will begin Friday, the day after the Michigan Thanksgiving Day Parade.

Santa will be in residence at the Detroit Institute of Arts through Sunday, Dec. 23.

Reservations are required for week-

day "Breakfast with Santa" and may be

made by calling the art institute ticket

office at 832-2750 during regular busi-

ness hours.

Especially created for pre-schoolers, weekday "Breakfast with Santa" at 9:45 a.m. Tuesdays-Fridays will include a sugar-plum surprise and milk at \$2.50 for children to age 12 and fresh pastry and coffee at \$2 for adults.

AFTER SANTA visits each table and breakfast is finished, small groups will be escorted on a "Holiday Art Adventure," complete with a printed, car-

toon guide to some of the museum's exhibits most popular with children.

A self-addressed coloring-book-style holiday postcard will be given to each youngster for mailing "wish lists" and secrets back to Santa at the DIA.

Weekend "Snacks with Santa" (11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturdays, 1-4 p.m. Sundays) will offer Mrs. Santa's cookies

and milk at \$1, hot chocolate and other favorites, as well as soup and sandwiches, salads, hot and cold menu selections and desserts for heartier appetites from Krueger Court's cafeteria, at 75 cents to \$5.

No reservations are necessary for weekend Santa visits.

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Thursday, November 22.

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