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Sunday, May 24, 2009

# 'Sweeney Todd' slays them in Westboro

## THEATER REVIEW

By Paul Kolas Telegram & Gazette Reviewer

**WESTBORO** — Westboro Players' freshly minted, handsome production of "Sweeney Todd," Stephen Sondheim's musical, may not actually drip with blood, but it certainly exudes a wealth of talent. Director Brian Kelly's dynamic staging Friday night overshadowed some technical shortcomings that blemished an otherwise thoroughly satisfying experience.

The cavernous confines of Gibbons Middle School seemed to amplify the soaring expertise of musical director Kallin Johnson and his excellent orchestra, which battled to find an ideal aural balance with the generally powerhouse vocals of the cast. Margo Law and Al Dano's set is a cube that cleverly multitasks as Mrs. Lovett's pie shop and her parlor room, where she keeps her harmonium.

Perched on top is Sweeney's barber chair and the trap door and chute through which Sweeney dumps his victims after he's slit their throats. The bake house and the "fire" glowing from its grate make a visually efficient set. It may lack Mark Goodney's more intricately realized set in Worcester County Light Opera's production two years ago, but what this effort can proudly lay claim to is the superior quality of voices that rise beautifully to the demands of Sondheim's breathtaking musical obstacle course. Not only that, but Kelly makes it clear in this interpretation that Mrs. Lovett is a creature of malevolent machination, steering Sweeney toward tragic disaster in the name of her twisted notion of love.

Catherine K. McTyre invests the role with alluring, coquettish calculation; she's a more feline version of Lady Macbeth. You relish the way McTyre uses physical gesture and purring voice to manipulate Sweeney for her own selfish desire, cunningly singing "Poor Thing" to exploit Sweeney's grief over his "dead" Lucy in order to confirm his true identity as Benjamin Barker. Her cockney accent, as authentic as it may be, could be toned down a bit, but she's terrific in the part.

### SWEENEY TODD: THE DEMON BARBER OF FLEET STREET



Music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, book by Hugh Wheeler, directed by Brian Kelly, musical director Kallin Johnson. Presented by The Westborough Players Club at the Gibbons Middle School auditorium, Fisher Street, Westboro. Performances today at 3 p.m., next Friday and Saturday at 7:30 p.m., and next Sunday at 3 p.m. Tickets: \$18, adults, \$15, seniors and students, \$14 group discount for 10+ tickets. Call (508) 796-0076 to purchase tickets by cash or check, or visit [www.westboroughplayers.com](http://www.westboroughplayers.com) online to purchase by credit card.

With Charles J. Grigaitis Jr., Catherine K. McTyre, Jonathan Eldridge, Christina Friedman, Danny Kircher, Donna Wresinski, Al Dano, Brian Higgins, Jayme Rubenstein and Stephen D'Alessandro.



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Charles J. Grigaitis Jr. is a commanding presence in the title role, a truly tormented figure consumed with hate and revenge. He chills you when he addresses his sterling silver razors, kept by Mrs. Lovett for the 15 years he's been in exile, as "my friends." His voice resounds with fury on "Epiphany," and he and McTyre delight us with the puns that flavor "A Little Priest."

"By the Sea" is a hilarious picture of motives at complete odds with each other — McTyre envisioning a future romantic utopia while Grigaitis sits in her parlor chair with stoic indifference.

What Grigaitis manages to do is make us feel complicit sympathy for a man who slashes innocent throats in his blind thirst for retribution. Jonathan Eldridge is perfectly cast as Anthony, the young sailor who falls in love with Sweeney's daughter, singing "Johanna" with piercing sweetness. Christina Freidman is a luminous Johanna, with a voice to match, on "Green Finch and Linnet Bird."

Other standouts include Jayme Rubenstein's marvelous flourish as rival barber Adolfo Pirelli; Danny Kircher's Tobias Ragg (movingly singing "Not While I'm Around"); Al Dano's corrupt Judge Turpin; Brian Higgins' obsequious Beadle Bamford; and Donna Wresinski's emotionally tattered Begger Woman. It should be noted that Friday evening's performance was the first time the entire acting ensemble was intact, an astonishing revelation considering the overall results.

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