

Sweeney Todd – The Demon Barber

In 1973, Stephen Sondheim was in London rehearsing for the West End production of *Gypsy* and, on a free evening, went to see a new version of the English classic *Sweeney Todd – the Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. Written by the young playwright Christopher Bond, it had created something of a stir at the time. Sondheim too reacted with enthusiasm:

"I remember thinking on my way home that it would make an opera and I spoke to John Dexter, one of the directors of the Metropolitan Opera, who at that time was directing in the West End ... I asked him if he thought that *Sweeney Todd* might make an opera, and he said 'absolutely' and that encouraged me to look into the rights for it. That's how it started."

Bond's play is heavily indebted to Dibden Pitt's original from 1847, both in dramatic invention and language. And, in turn, Sondheim and his colleagues have maintained much of Bond's style. At first Sondheim treated the material operatically – everything sung - but quickly realised that the show would last over nine hours if he continued in this style. The key was to ask someone else to write the "book". That someone was Hugh Wheeler, himself British. He understood the idiom of melodrama and equally understood that this simply wouldn't work as a musical where the audience might feel compelled to boo and hiss every time the main characters entered.

"We wanted to make it as nearly as we could into some sort of tragedy. The hardest thing of all was to take these two really disgusting people and write them in such a way that the audience can rather love them. And I think people really did love Mrs Lovett – yet she doesn't have a single redeeming feature."

Todd had a 16-month run on Broadway opening on 1st March 1979. It had a record-breaking 271 financial backers and received mixed reviews but went on to win eight out of nine nominated Tony Awards including Best Musical, Best Score, Best Book and Best Direction. By the end of the Broadway run, the show had only repaid 59% of its investment. The London run lasted only four months. And yet despite this, it is usually regarded as one of the top ten of Broadway shows – and by many as the best of Broadway.

So much for the show. The question on most people's lips is whether Todd was real or just the stuff of legend. What is certainly true is that, real or not, there is so much legend surrounding the received story that it is difficult to separate fact from fiction. But here goes...

One school of thought believes Todd to be an amalgam of a number of real-life villains. The earliest inspirations date from 15th Century France where an ancient ballad tells of a barber and accomplice very much along the lines of the story that we know of Todd. The infamous Sawney Beane is often cited in the same connection. Known as the "Man Eater of Scotland", Beane and his family had a 25-year reign of terror. He and his wife lived in caves near Galloway thieving from anyone who came near and slaughtering their victims to prevent their crimes being detected. By the time they were caught, Beane's eight sons, six daughters, eighteen grandsons and fourteen granddaughters (all the result of incest) were responsible for the death and cannibalism of about 1000 people. Their eventual captors were met by the sight of salted, dried and pickled human remains "suspended in rows like dried beef".

Later still, there were suggestions that the legend was inspired by a female barber in Drury Lane who robbed (but did not murder) her clients. Still later, around 1800, a French barber supposedly operated in Rue-de-la-Harpe in Paris. However, these events (and a similar legend from Germany) are almost identical to the story of Todd that pre-dates them. It has been suggested that they are, in fact, localised versions of the London-based tale.

Peter Haining researched the familiar legend at the time that Sondheim's show opened in London and is convinced that Todd was a real person, as was Mrs Lovett. The facts as he gives them are that Todd was born in 1756 in Brick Lane, Stepney to a destitute and drunken family. Abandoned

by his parents when he was only 12, Todd was apprenticed to John Crook, a cutler who specialised in making razors. Apprenticeship then was little more than child labour and Todd's came to an abrupt end when, two years later, he was accused and convicted of petty theft for which he received a five-year sentence in Newgate Prison. Had he been any older, he would almost certainly have been hanged.

Survival in gaol was dependent on having money with which to bribe the gaolers. Todd became acquainted with an old prisoner, Plummer, who became a sort of protector of the boy and allowed him to help as he earned money from the inmates through his profession; barber. Barbers in those days offered more services than we are used to now: it was usual for them to shave beards, pull teeth and conduct minor surgery. It was from Plummer that Todd learnt all the skills that were to serve him so well later.

The 19-year old Todd left prison a bitter man setting himself up as a barber near Hyde Park Corner. He began a relationship with a woman that was to lead (if one is to believe the circumstantial evidence) to his first murder nearly ten years later. A young man came to his shop boasting of his conquest with a local girl that Todd took to be his lover. An unknown assailant slashed the man's neck on the street.

As a result of this Todd fled to Fleet Street and started a fresh business; the barbershop being merely a front for the robbery and murder of clients who were obviously wealthy and preferably visitors to the Capital. His liaison with Mrs Lovett was necessitated due to the increasing difficulty in disposing of the bodies of his victims, Todd having already filled unused family vaults under the nearby St Dunstan's Church. Although the exact locations of the barber shop and pie shop are not known, it is believed that the latter was in Bell Yard, owned by Todd and ostensibly let to Mrs Lovett, with one of the many underground tunnels linking the two premises.

Over 15 years and at least 160 victims later, their crimes were finally uncovered by the Bow Street Runners (under the leadership of Sir Richard Blunt) responding to complaints from worshippers of foul smells in St Dunstan's Church. Todd and Lovett both were tried and convicted in 1801-2. Mrs Lovett somehow obtained poison in gaol and died before Todd's trial ended. He was hanged for his crimes.

Haining quotes liberally from various newspaper articles of the time – especially those at the time of Todd's trial. It is strange however, that our knowledge of the story owes more to the dramatisations of it that began to appear 50 years or so after the events in Victorian Penny-Dreadfuls and various stage-depictions of the story and these, of course, were often embroidered for the greater dis-ease of their audience.

Bon appétit!

TF

© East Surrey Operatic Society