



SERVING AMATEUR THEATRE SINCE 1899

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Our visit to The Harlequin on Thursday evening to see your production of 'Sweeney Todd' provided my wife, Jackie, and I with a theatrical experience we will remember for a very long time. Generally in my capacity of Regional Representative I have a good idea what to expect when invited to see a show and perhaps write a review afterwards. This is because the majority of amateur musical societies choose the shows they perform from a rather limited selection of those available. The choice is often dictated by the financial considerations of filling seats, being considered more important than the satisfaction the show gives to those taking part and the degree of challenge that it presents.

I had never been fortunate enough to see this particular show before although I had heard and read a great deal about its content and the inherent difficulties in staging it. I was also most interested to discover whom you had chosen for your production team following the decision by Gillian Jarvis and Angela Barker, a team that had resulted in some first class shows over the last few years, not to be responsible for this year's production. As a result, it was with a feeling of some curiosity that I took my seat in the Harlequin's auditorium.

From the very moment the performance began I was absorbed and astounded by what was being presented on stage. Although I am not a great lover of opera I found this near opera fascinating not only because of the subject matter, or by the performances of those taking part but also by the complexities of staging it and the ways these were dealt with.

Most of the many scenes were presented using trucks in various configurations combined with pieces of furniture etc. that had to be positioned, secured and struck by your stage crew. From my point of view, this seemed to be done faultlessly and is all the more commendable when one realises the limited time and opportunity given to them to get it set up and right. Performers have weeks of rehearsals, whereas technical staff have, at most, two days. Your Chairman was quite right to draw your audiences' attention to their efforts in his message in your programme. The score for this show contains few songs that are known or performed out of the context of the piece itself and consequently not heard that often. I was therefore very impressed by the manner in which they were delivered. I marvelled at the principals' competence in remembering the words, the cues and the necessary inflections particularly when several of them were participating in a single number. One can only imagine the hours devoted to learning them. That they appeared to be sung faultlessly was undoubtedly due to a lot of concentration and confidence, no doubt, engendered by long periods of tutelage under Jonathan Butcher's direction.

I understand the Director originally chosen for this production was unable to continue and that you had to search for another capable of carrying on what had been started. You were fortunate to find Boo Wild whose considerable experience of directing opera must have been essential for a show of this type.

These days, the Costume Workshop, Isle of Wight are selected by many societies with whom I come into contact and the costumes they provide are always first class as was the case for this show. With so much 'blood' around, were there problems in keeping the clothes fresh each evening? Ingenious use was made of some of the props such as the barber's chair by which the victims were despatched and I was concerned that those making the drop did not actually suffer any injury. Apart from one small hiccough, lighting was generally good and assisted with the creating of the appropriate mood and atmosphere.

For their performances, the whole company deserves credit, for there was no one who did not contribute to a production that I found rather overwhelming. In the two principal roles, Terry Foster looked tormented throughout the evening as he prowled the stage. Lydia Easton, by her smile and chirpy manner, made even the odious Mrs. Lovett seem quite acceptable. Anthony Hope was one of the few agreeable characters in the piece and was played

very capably by Jim Apted. As the object of his affections, Marie Cousins made a pretty Johanna. Hilary Samways captured perfectly the deranged Beggar Woman who was revealed as Todd's wife. James Gautrey was the trusting Tobias, little realising the gruesome nature of the business in which he was involved. I was pleased to find Frederick Harrison (Judge Turpin) still able to tackle major roles with aplomb and his obnoxious Beadle was played most convincingly by Alastair Lindsey-Renton. Although the company was superb throughout, their ensemble playing when portraying the lunatics in *City on Fire* was particularly compelling.

With such a grisly series of events as the subject of the piece, it is difficult to say that one enjoyed the show. Nevertheless, it was so powerful that one came away from the theatre feeling a little stunned at what one had seen. Of course my wife and I were very pleased that you should invite us once again to one of your presentations. We thank you for doing so and for the hospitality extended towards us by Andrew and Julie Glass and Chris Wait during the interval.

Reg Humby -Noda Regional Representative



Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street is a macabre tragicomedy based on the legend of a half-mad 19th Century English barber. He is driven to crime when an evil judge takes his wife and child from him. Unjustly imprisoned, Todd eventually escaped and vows to bring justice not only to the judge who destroyed his life, but also to all the people of London. To this end, he forms a partnership with Mrs Lovett, an enterprising pie shop owner whose meat pies soon become the tastiest in London.

An odd theme for a musical? Yes of course it is but Stephen Sondheim's dark and brooding work took London by storm in the early 1980's. Consequently the thought of an amateur group contemplating it in their repertoire would seemingly be unthinkable, or would it?

From the first moment that Terry Foster's Sweeney came on to a forbidding and bleak set, the mood was set. Here was man whose torment at his loss was evident before we heard as much as one word. By contrast Lydia Easton's Mrs Lovett brought an exuberance that underlined the macabre plot as it unfolded.

ESOS have bitten the bullet by straying from their normal fare and bowled us over with a show that is worth at least a second or third look. Principals from Hilary Samways' crazed Beggar Woman to Kevin Stuart's absurd Italian were poised and thoroughly convincing in their roles. Marie Cousins and Jim Apted's vulnerability in stark antithesis to the gloom that surrounded them was sensitive and tender and completely convincing. Frederick Harrison's evil Judge Turpin defies description in its loathsomeness proving that the human being has the ability to stop at nothing to satisfy its darkest desires.

The chorus must have had many sleepless nights in trying to come to terms with the complexities of Sondheim's anarchic score, but they did and there was not a weak link in a show that provided a challenge surely hitherto unthought of by any theatre group.

There was ample opportunity to over do this piece. The lunatic asylum and the tavern scene could have descended in to Op. Soc. Farce. It did not. Skilful direction by Boo Wild in clearly seeing a truth and honesty within all the characters who could easily have been portrayed as caricatures but were not.

Backed by a rich and sympathetic orchestra under the experienced baton of Jonathan Butcher guaranteed that even if one did not go home singing *Sweeney's* music, one could not forget the sinister and tragic outcome of the tale that has captivated us for decades. A truly memorable evening.

Peter Benthom

Sondheim's neo-operatic 'musical thriller' may not be a cosy play to watch but is powerful, worthwhile theatre. It is, additionally, particularly demanding on and, correspondingly, satisfying to the performers. One accomplished

local singer in the audience admitted that it drained him just to watch it! ESOS's talented, experienced team did, indeed, put that much effort into its production.

Two characters dominate. Todd himself is driven to commit his crimes because of his deportation on a false charge. Terry Foster brought this sinister, brooding personality to life in his acting as well as his highly emotive singing. He did, though, hint at his lighter side in *A Little Priest*, duetting with his accomplice Mrs. Lovett, equally evil but motivated, in her case, by the need for money and security. She was played with tireless energy by Lydia Eston, whose singing encompassed the lively *By the Sea* as easily as the reflective *Not While I'm Around*.

Jim Apted, too, showed a wise vocal range as Anthony, the too-good-to-be-true sailor, pairing naturally with Marie Cousins, (Johanna), the sugary heroine with the equally sweet voice. Fred Harrison conveyed the hypocritical judge's torment convincingly. Alastair Lindsey-Renton stole his showcase scene with camp renditions of the parlour songs. Kevin Stuart was outstanding as the flamboyant mountebank Pirelli, slipping seemingly effortlessly from Italian to Irish accents. Hilary Samways moved and delivered her lines expressively as the deranged beggar woman.

Whilst the orchestra, under Jonathan Butcher, interpreted the score faithfully, it sometimes appeared to forget that the audience wanted to hear the lyrics, too. James Gautrey, (Tobias), for example was constantly overpowered, although this may have been partly because of his own under-projection or the lack of sound balance. Unfortunately, the words of Mrs. Lovett's *The Worst Pies in London* were, similarly, lost due to over-enthusiastic musicians.

The chorus added an extra dimension to the show. Perfectly harmonised in its singing, the entire ensemble also always moved purposefully. The hard-working stage crew manoeuvred the versatile, mobile set quickly to create the many locations with barely a break in the action. Lighting was, appropriately, mostly subdued and subtle, although suffering from the Harlequin's inescapable downstage dark-spots at times. Light entertainment it was not - high quality, multi-faceted drama it most certainly was.

Tony Flook - Words & Music