

Sweeney Todd, Devonshire Park Theatre, 29th May-1st June 2013

In some people's eyes, musical theatre is harmless, lightweight entertainment, with not much challenge and plenty to sing along to. If you still think that, you missed Sweeney Todd.

Quite correctly, the EODS company isn't very interested in the unchallenging and the harmless. Sweeney Todd is a provocative, many-layered and ground-breaking musical, and at the Devonshire Park last week it truly broke new ground. Director Sandra Tomlinson always sets her production values high, and from her talented cast she drew breathtaking performances. This was simply a stunning theatrical experience, and in many years of my own EODS-watching it has seldom, if ever, been bettered.

Sondheim is musical theatre at its most challenging. He pinches you, provokes you, shakes you out of your comfy seat in Row G; and he frequently gives you an artful smile at the same time. The man who cut his teeth writing the West Side Story lyrics for Bernstein has, in the half-century since then, tugged musicals from flimsy plots and pleasant melodies into darker areas. Sweeney isn't particularly a great social statement, nor a profound psychological study. But what the show does is to play with its audience. Are we entertained, amused, startled, appalled? Or all of the above. You have to get everything right, from the set design to the singing, and that is what Sandra achieved.

This was a cast without a weak link. From the towering, genuinely frightening presence of David Morley in the title role, to the astonishingly assured ingénue performance of James Tomlinson, each one fitted.

There are no half-measures in Sweeney. Everything hangs on drawing the audience totally into the setting and atmosphere of a Victorian London where only sordid things happen. For this, the lighting was crucial and (forgive pun) absolutely spot on: fog-smothered deeds exposed by drilling shafts of light; and one fabulous moment when the piercing beam from stage right caught Sweeney's brightly fatal blade.

That was achieved within opening bars which combine the sinister and the declamatory. The Ensemble were indeed a revelation, getting stronger as the show progressed. Used by Sandra like a Greek chorus, often gathered in one physical group to comment on the action, they also at other times peeled away into separate characters. Rising superbly to Sondheim's challenging musical lines and stridently clashing harmonies, they truly answered his famous call for "actors who can sing, not singers who can act". A real feature of the production, and far from just a supporting cast.

The long first half burns just a little slowly, unfolding a rather contrived plot. From Sweeney himself it calls for, if not respectability, at least restraint, and David judged that perfectly with hints of the brooding evil which would later turn into dreadful action. He built the second half with growing, macabre power and his climactic final lines, filling the theatre, had us spellbound and almost – almost – sympathising. As his counterweight – in the context of the play, almost the Lady Macbeth role - Gina Cameron played a beautifully manipulative Mrs Lovett, in total command of both the part and the music. “Priest” was an absolute tour de force.

Equally well established by the first half were all the other main characters. Tony Bannister’s Judge Turpin, mellow of voice and odious of character, would gladly have earned the popular vote for the Shave of Death, while Chloe Shearer was a perfectly fragile and sweet-voiced heroine worthy of rescuing by Gareth Brighton’s Anthony – played with sincerity and excellent vocal range.

Paul Doling as Beadle had a really fine voice and an enjoyably nasty edge to the character, while Rebecca Bruce, wonderfully clad and just a little raunchier than your average Beggar Woman, made the very most of the role.

And then the other Tomlinsons. Roger cut a splendid figure as Pirelli – the very mirror image of a certain insurance company tenor – and more importantly, he was easily equal to the vocal agility needed for the role. And James, at a mere 14, enjoyed a quite astonishing debut at this level. Not as if Tobias is a bit-part: he has to hold his own and indeed at one crucial point hold the stage on his own. James was word- and note-perfect, he was confident and convincing, and he had real insight into the poignancy of Tobias’s character. Remember: you saw him first at....

Carl Greenwood directed both band and singers with superb skill, expertly negotiating a score that is full of pitfalls of timing and tuning. The crew handled a tricky set – brilliantly conceived and constructed by Ash Jones – with swift professionalism. And the costumes were perfectly fitted to the period.

Final accolade, though, must go to Sandra Tomlinson. This is as demanding as it gets for a director, and Sandra’s perfect mix of imagination and perfectionism pulled off a triumph.

Kevin Anderson