

Movie Review: 'Sweeney Todd - The Demon Barber of Fleet Street'

by David_Elliott

Sweeney Todd is no sweetie pie. The meat pies made from his victims create a mental pungency you can almost smell in theaters showing "Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street."

'SWEENEY TODD: THE DEMON BARBER OF FLEET STREET' - Johnny Depp and Helena Bonham Carter star in the musical thriller 'Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street.' CNS Photo courtesy of Leah Gallo. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) It's an ugly story given a slick and sickly beautiful form of intensity by Tim Burton's version of the 1979 Stephen Sondheim musical. Burton preens his vision like a goth peacock, in a terminal London so dark and dirty even Dickens would have turned queasy.

Top feather of the peacock is Johnny Depp as Todd, who returns from distant penal service, believing his lovely wife a suicide, his daughter now the kept morsel of vile Judge Turpin (Alan Rickman). What's a sad

fella to do?

Well, lacking therapy, set up a barber shop where he can vent some spleen by slashing the necks of customers. No other musical stars a man who croons warmly to his razors.

Even before necks start spraying blood, there is a pall of doom. Morality is out of mind. The law is just sadistic putty for a pompous creep like Turpin (nobody sneers like Rickman).

In this ashen cesspool, a gal like Mrs. Lovett (Helena Bonham Carter) is just making ends meet by making people into meat. The foul smell from her pie kitchen seems to entice customers, who clearly lack a French nose for cuisine.

Depp is not fun here, no Jack Sparrow on a Halloween spree. But he's a rich figure of the macabre, with his graveyard pallor and sinister mop of black hair streaked with a shock. He is a good match with the deadly but weirdly peppy Bonham Carter, a sicko who dreams of sunny skies.

Rickman adds cello-toned hauteur. Timothy Spall of the rat-pig face is the Beadle, singing very primly. Sacha Baron Cohen un-Borats as the brazenly fishy con man Pirelli, a comic burst of color among tar and pewter tones.

The show looks at death and licks its chops, like a Victorian premonition of the Third Reich. Burton relishes the grisly thud of victims dropped down a chute for processing in a huge oven and grinder - turning people into pies may be worse than soap bars, but only the very cold can savor the difference.

Grand on style, good at casting, Burton has a witty sense of rhythm, as when Todd and the judge warble of

pretty women, sort of like Hannibal Lecter auditioning for "Gigi." But there is hardly any choreography, and there is a frequent musical problem.

Sondheim is a lyricist more than a melodist. Too many of his subtle, impish, layered phrases are lost by merger, soft voices or heavy orchestration. It is odd when an adult musical's clearest pipes belong to a boy (Ed Sanders as urchin Tobias).

Still, this is the showy slasher that DVDs will make last, despite lavish TV versions that starred George Hearn and Ray Winstone. Anyone care to speak up for the 1936 British film, pre-Sondheim, starring perfectly named Tod Slaughter?

As the defining alternative to a feel-good show, "Sweeney Todd" can make you swear off meat pies forever. Popcorn could suffer, too.

A Paramount Pictures / DreamWorks SKG release. Director: Tim Burton. Writer: Josh Logan. Cast: Johnny Depp, Helena Bonham Carter, Alan Rickman, Timothy Spall, Ed Sanders, Sacha Baron Cohen. Running time: 1 hour, 48 minutes. Rated R. 3 stars.

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