DVD Select: Bloody musical 'Sweeney Todd' is hard to swallow

by Robert_J_Hawkins

So, you pick up a copy of director Tim Burton's interpretation of the Stephen Sondheim musical "Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street" (DreamWorks, 2 1/2 stars) this week and you see it is rated R.

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

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the $1 bin These days they tell you why a movie is rated R - so that if you are a teenager, you'll know whether it has enough nakedness or sex or violence to be worth your while.

On "Sweeny Todd," the label merely says "For graphic bloody violence." (Well, it actually says "FOR GRAPHIC BLOODY VIOLENCE," but there's no need to shout.)

"Graphic bloody violence"?

Bloody hell.

You'd better believe it has graphic bloody violence.

By my count - and I am just sick this way - Sweeney Todd (Johnny Depp), the demented barber, slits 10 throats even. Not conceptual or off-camera slittings but 10 horrific, graphic, bloody in-your-face-and-you-could-be-next throat slittings. And he tosses one slightly mad dame into the roaring flames of a furnace. She's alive.

There's one last throat slitting in the picture, and you can imagine whose it might be, at the hand of a 10-year-old boy who has a fondness for gin. It is as cleanly and surgically done as any by the mad Mr. Todd. And yet, not gratifying in the least.

But I'm getting ahead of myself, so to speak. Perhaps because this has been a Broadway musical off and on since 1979, and performed on stages all over the world, you haven't the slightest idea what I'm talking about.

Sweeney Todd was once a fine young barber by name of Benjamin Barker with a lovely wife and child. The lustful Judge Turpin (Alan Rickman) trumps up charges and sends Barker off to the penal colonies in order to steal his wife.

Fifteen years later, a grim, Gothic, raging Barker comes back as the reinvented Todd Monster and sets up shop in his old quarters above Mrs. Lovett's Pie Shop. Nellie Lovett (Helena Bonham Carter) is as gothically creepy as Todd. A nice pair. A frightful pair. And she boastfully makes the worst meat pies in all of London.

Sweeney Todd learns that his wife had been raped by the judge and took poison and that his daughter is now the ward of the judge. So, can you blame the guy for being a little homicidal?

Right off, Todd's true identity is flagged by another imposter, the pseudo Italian barber Pirelli (a scene-stealing Sacha Baron Cohen). Throat slit. Problem solved.

And suddenly Mrs. Lovett has a tasty new source of filling for her meat pies. Win-win for the goth team.

Sweeney merrily slits away and Mrs. Lovett whips up her now-popular pies but neither keeps their eye off the prize: the grizzled neck of the nasty Judge Turpin and his porcine sidekick Beedle Bamford (Timothy

Spall).

There are secondary characters, like the young sailor Anthony Hope (Jamie Campbell Bower) who falls for Todd's daughter Johanna (a fragile lovely sprite named Jayne Wisener). And there's the scruffy workhouse child Toby (Ed Sanders) who is a heartbreaking mix of innocence and experience.

All of these characters have one thing in common. Not a one has ever sung before, in a professional musical, that is. But they could all coalesce around the singular detail that director Tim Burton hates musicals.

His wife Bonham Carter discloses as much in a most entertaining feature on the DVD titled "Burton Depp Carter = Todd." She also astutely notes that the main characters in all Tim Burton movies seem to "end up somehow a version of himself."

Burton says of Depp and Carter together "They had that quality of a weird couple."

Apparently there was great drama in the words of producer Richard Zanuck over the fact that "we are spending millions of dollars on the picture (in pre-production) and not one person on Earth had ever heard Johnny Depp sing. And he's the star of the picture."

It must have come as a relief when all discovered that Depp can't sing. Well, not really. But it doesn't matter. When you're a half-craze, vengeance-driven, homicidal barber who is slitting a throat every 2.3 minutes - the singing comes as welcome relief, no matter how awful.

In 30 years, audiences have about evenly loved and been revolted by "Sweeney Todd." I think Burton's personal style has ensured that 70 percent will now feel revolted. He may well have slit the throat of musicals on film for the next 20 years.

On the other hand, "Sweeney Todd" is perfectly positioned to replace the well-worn "Rocky Horror Picture Show" as the cult midnight audience participation movie of a new generation of people who have no life of their own. Just don't wear your good clothes because by picture's end you'll be drenched in fake (hopefully fake) blood.

"Sweeney Todd" comes with a second disc that is chucky jam full of great sounding features like "Sweeney Todd Press Conference Nov. 2007" and "Grand Guignol: A Theatrical Tradition" and "A Bloody Business" and "The Razor's Refrain" but I'm gong to need another week or two to recover from Disc 1 first.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"Alvin and the Chipmunks" (Fox) Wow. Can you believe it has been 50 years since Ross Bagdasarian Sr.

screwed around with a tape recorder and came up with this vocal sausage thing called Alvin & the Chipmunks? They've been hit songs, cartoon characters and tiny little voices trapped in our heads for days at a time. Now with the miracle of computer graphic imaging, they can co-star with one-time human actor Jason Lee (as Dave Seville). But then, somebody's kids liked it enough to plunk down $210 million at the box office.

And the rest: Three films from Italian brothers Paolo and Vittorio Taviani: "The Night of the Shooting Stars," "Kaos" and "Fiorile." Also, Gwyneth Paltrow, Penelope Cruz and Danny DeVito star in the romantic fantasy "The Good Night." Cuba Gooding Jr. and Anne Heche lead the cast of the romantic comedy "What Love Is." This time she's the hockey player and he's the figure skater in the sequel "The Cutting Edge 3: Chasing the Dream."

IT CAME FROM TV

As we channel surf this week: season six of "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit"; season eight of "Murder She Wrote" starring the original Mrs. Lovett in "Sweeney Todd," Angela Lansbury; season one of 1954's incredibly wholesome "Father Knows Best"; season eight of "That '70s Show."

BBC Video has packaged four spectacular David Attenborough-hosted natural history series into a hefty 17-disc box set. The titles included are "The Blue Planet," "Planet Earth" "The Life of Mammals" and "The Life of Birds."

FROM THE VAULTS

Happy 100th birthday Bette Davis, toughest dame there ever was in Hollywood. This is your box set. Well, volume three of "The Betty Davis Collection" from Warner Home Entertainment. The six titles: "The Old Maid" (1939); "All This, and Heaven, Too" (1940); "The Great Lie" (1941); "In This Our Life" (1942); "Watch on the Rhine" (1943); and "Deception" (1946).

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