

## [Review: If you've never met the Demon Barber, get to this 'Sweeney Todd'](#)



[Chris Jones](#)

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In Chicago and New York, "Sweeney Todd — the Demon Barber of Fleet Street" generally has devolved into a close shave.

The reasons are partly canonical. Ghosts of past productions now loom over the gothic masterwork by Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler; directors feel the press of the famous barber's knives at their necks so they look for nicks of their own. It's partly financial — musicians don't shave for free. It's partly a trend in Sondheim interpretation — the desire to drill deeper and deeper into the shared intimacy of the emotional revelation and dissonance of human connection inherent in his work. And it's partly simple reverence; the beloved Sondheim backlist is encircled by the arms of the protectively adoring. Size — and populism — can be a threat.

But what if you never had the pleasure of Mrs. Lovett's tasty pies? Never been stirred by the song "Pretty Women" nor marveled at the antithetical construction of "Johanna" nor wondered whether there being "No Place Like London" is a good thing, a bad thing, or both? More important, what if you have no advance sense of the plot, so that when personal grudges become pie-filling, genuine amazement ensues. It's still possible, especially for the young.

If this is you, or one of yours, then the show for you — more than any other "Sweeney" I've seen in the past decade — is Jim Corti's highly accessible, shrewdly cast and wildly entertaining Grand Guignol production at the 1,885-seat [Paramount](#) Theatre in Aurora. It's a thriller that uses the original full orchestrations (19 players lurk in the pit) but uses much younger actors

than is typical in the lead roles. No doubt there were practical and budgetary reasons but Corti turns this choice into a defense against the habit-forming aspects of the show.

Take Bri Sudia as Mrs. Lovett. Actually, don't take her anywhere since Sudia is far and away the most compelling musical theater talent to emerge in Chicago since Jessie Mueller. Sudia's more of an overt comedian and less of a vocal stylist than Mueller, who has found a Broadway niche as a legit star, yet Sudia's improvisational freshness in this famous role does not eclipse either palpable emotional need or her ability to sing the part. If you've seen many a Lovett before, you'll find this performance renewing in its comic sensibility (especially in the famous Act 1 closer "A Little Priest"), it being more "SNL" than Angela Lansbury.

Corti's operatic 20-something Sweeney from New York, Paul-Jordan Jansen, is a tad inscrutable and, for sure, in suspiciously good physical shape for guy who just did hard labor Down Under (briefly, one assumes), but his interpretations of the famous, beautiful melodies herein are a real pleasure for the ear and he stands tall at the center of the show. He's genuinely empathetic to boot, as are Patrick Rooney, who essays Anthony, and Cecelia Iole (another newcomer), who plays Johanna. You can believe these couples as thriving together, in some alternate intergenerational universe where the propagation of cannibalism, as born of desperation, is tolerated.

Inspired, it seems, by the twin metaphors of elevator shafts and the stone plazas of London, designer Jeff Kmiec makes full use of this historic theater's 30-foot proscenium opening, and his colossal construction rises yet further behind.

Most productions of this musical struggle to create Mr. Todd's famous tonsorial parlor on an upper level, with the convenient level-and-trap door mechanism depositing the lucky customer in Mrs. Lovett's pie oven below. Kmiec (this truly is an eye-popping set and Corti exploits it with relish) has built three levels, replete with an elaborate counterweight system and a fabulously slow-motion fall for those with a knife stuck in their throats, juicily deposited into a smoke-filled lair controlled by the chef de cuisine.

Add in more than ample use of footlights, and you have quite the scary spectacular. Subtle this production is not. But it is, to my mind, entirely compatible with what Sondheim, Wheeler and director Hal Prince first decided that they wanted to do in 1979, their artists' noses smelling blood in the air.

What was that? To pen a fun, quirky, bold Broadway thriller. Sure, it just happens to contain some of the most sumptuous melodies ever written, and that expresses the most profound truths about the human existence, especially love and forgiveness. But still. Lest we forget.

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**Review: "Sweeney Todd - The Demon Barber of Fleet Street" (3.5 STARS)**

**When:** Through March 19

**Where:** Paramount Theatre, 23 E. Galena Blvd., Aurora

**Running time:** 2 hours, 40 minutes

**Tickets:** \$44 to \$59 at 630-896-666 or [www.paramountaurora.com](http://www.paramountaurora.com)