

Sweeney Todd

Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

Book by Hugh Wheeler

From an adaptation by Christopher Bond

The story of *Sweeney Todd* came from the Grand Guignol¹-like melodrama—a comic thriller most commonly called *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. The macabre story can be traced as far back as an 1825 article in *Tell-Tale Magazine* called "The Terrible Story of the Rue de la Harpe," which was in turn taken from an earlier account in the French Joseph Fouche's *Archives of the People*. By the time Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler saw a revisionist Marxist-style adaptation of *Sweeney Todd* by Christopher Bond in London in 1973, the story had acquired layer after layer—giving it, all at once, an ambiance that is horrific and funny, yet in its final count, a song of social significance.

So, the story taken by Sondheim and Wheeler was extraordinarily complex, a farcical tragedy. Here the theatre-of-the-absurd concept of Mrs. Lovett making delicious meat pies out of the victims of Todd's murderous razor and mechanical barber chair, which stealthily converted into a chute to the pie factory below, was amazingly combined with the Bertolt Brecht more: "the history of the world, my friend, is who gets eaten and who gets to eat." The major success of the musical on purely dramatic terms is the way in which these two divergent theatrical ideas are seamlessly fashioned together, leaving the audience never quite certain of the reaction expected of it, yet accepting, as it would in Shakespeare, laughs amid the bloodshed.

In terms of aspiration, ambition and range, a perfectly good case can be made for *Sweeney Todd* being one of the creative turning points in the 20th century Broadway musical—taking its place alongside *Show Boat* (1927), *Porgy and Bess* (1935), *Oklahoma!* (1943), and [West Side Story](#) (1957). The only difficulty with *Sweeney Todd* was in knowing quite where it was turning! Many "serious" composers had worked on Broadway before, but Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*, like the later [Passion](#), had a special kind of gravitas that to many people suggested opera rather than a Broadway musical.

The operatic tag is one that Sondheim, and his collaborators, have apparently opposed, possibly on the time-honored grounds that opera, like satire, closes on Saturday night. Certainly all of Sondheim's works have moments of pure Broadway, be it Broadway lyricism, Broadway fun, or just Broadway edginess, that are difficult to relate to the more constrained playing fields of opera. And, after all, neither composers Verdi nor Wagner had their scores orchestrated by the brilliant likes of Jonathan Tunick.

1. Grand Guignol is the theatre form originally from Le Grand Guignol theatre in Montmartre, Paris (opened in 1897), which specialized in portraying the macabre and gruesome to the delight and horror of the audience.

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Find out about the Kennedy Center's production of [Sweeney Todd](#).

Sidebar Synopsis:

In Victorian England, Sweeney Todd has just been released from jail for a crime he did not commit. The former barber has only one thing on his mind: cold revenge against the corrupt judge who framed him, murdered his wife, and stole his daughter to raise as his own. Teaming up with the dazzlingly demented Mrs. Lovett, a struggling baker of meat pies, the "demon barber of Fleet Street" cooks up a hilariously macabre revenge scheme that fulfills *both* their needs in very unexpected ways! Comedy, tragedy, romance, and madness intersect brilliantly in this Sondheim favorite, which won eight 1979 Tony Awards—including Best Musical.

Things to think about:

Do you agree that *Sweeney Todd* is an opera rather than a musical? What operatic conventions do you notice in the musical? Watch an opera by Giuseppe Verdi. What are the similarities and differences between an opera and *Sweeney Todd*?

Sweeney Todd has been ranked with *Show Boat*, *Porgy and Bess*, *Oklahoma!*, and *West Side Story* for being an innovative, ground-breaking musical. Compare and contrast three or more of these musicals. Why do you think they are considered creative turning points in 20th century Broadway?

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