

## Theater Review: Drury Lane's 'Sweeney Todd' Deals Deftly With Demonic Passenger

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CHICAGO – In Chicago's continuing trend of borrowing from Broadway high-accolade actors rather than drawing upon the profusion of genius in our own backyard, at least now-Broadway star and New York local Gregg Edelman is a Chicago native. And the TV voice of the peanut M&M.



Play Rating: **4.0/5.0**

Following Edelman's previous 15 Broadway shows and four Tony Award nominations, now he's confidently embodying the diabolical vigilante Sweeney Todd with precision, power and patience. While the 52-year-old Edelman was born in Chicago and attended Northwestern University, prior to this performance his only Chicago credit is just out of college from three decades ago: 1980's "Evita".



Gregg Edelman (front left) and Liz McCartney (front right) in Drury Lane Theatre's "Sweeney Todd".

*Photo credit: Brett Beiner*

Running from Aug. 11, 2011 through Oct. 9, 2011, the Drury Lane Theatre in Oakbrook Terrace, Ill. spotlights the beloved musical thriller with Edelman as well as New Jersey's Liz McCartney (both of whom are new to Drury Lane's stage). While the two out-of-town stars are the performance's most powerful players, the choice *not* to cast locals also represents a disappointing double sword.

Like always, Edelman's Todd portrays a blood-hungry, revenge-stricken barber who returns from a longtime wrongful incarceration. Upon his



Fleet Street arrival, he learns that his daughter is under captivity by the town's judge (Kevin Gudahl, who's actually currently a Chicago actor). But the surprise in this version isn't Edelman's safe portrayal of the well-known character. He performs Sweeney precisely as we've seen it before with justice to the character but also without creative reinvention.

Instead, it's McCartney's version of the hilarious and desperate Mrs. Lovett that steals this show with humor, charm and, most interestingly, underlying evil. While most people pin much of the malevolence in this story on Sweeney's murderous rampage to get to the judge, his character shows bipolar flirtations with *both* what's right and also what's very wrong. Sweeney's got a mission, he accomplishes it and then his razor blades are put to rest.



Gregg Edelman (left) and Matthew Jones in Drury Lane Theatre's "Sweeney Todd".

*Photo credit: Brett Beiner*

But while Mrs. Lovett doesn't do the actual slicing, her use of Sweeney's dead body parts as the secret ingredient in what was previously the "worst pies in London" is even more sinister. She feels absolutely no remorse. Rather, she finds humor in it, enjoys profiting from it and relishes in feeding human grindage to people without their knowledge. And it's all done "without conscience or a moral center," says director and choreographer Rachel Rockwell. Rockwell views the performance as much as a morality play as a story about vengeance.

While Edelman's character inundates the show with morbid drama, McCartney's comedy is the perfect compliment. We're constantly alternating between intense thrill and uncontrollable laughter. What's most notable and celebrated about McCartney's rendering of Mrs. Lovett, though, is her ability to amalgamate wit with absolute wickedness all while being completely naïve and natural about it. To her, petting a small puppy is no more an act of good or bad as her profitable cannibalization business.

Vocally, while this group sounds exactly like what we've come to expect from equity musical theater, this version of Stephen Sondheim's Tony-winning masterpiece sometimes sounds *too* musical theater with excess, operatic vibrato. Overall, that Andrea Bocelli-like Italian tenor needs scaling back in this version and Wisconsin's Emily Rohm as Johanna is the biggest offender.





Liz McCartney (red hair/purple dress) and the ensemble of Drury Lane Theatre's "Sweeney Todd".

Photo credit: Brett Beiner

Chicago's William Travis Taylor as Anthony Hope, on the other hand, *steals* the cake with his vocal rendition of the performance's most heart-warming love ballad: "Johanna".

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Though the play's logistically challenging because the script requires constant locale changes, its violence is tasteful. Blood splattering isn't done the way TV's "Dexter" does it with actual blood. Here, it's all about lights, color and sound. What's most scary about this show is its music and sound.

While we can appreciate truly climatic terror and we understand that loud noises help to make a moment complete, this show's shrieking noises during its death scenes were ear-piercingly painful. Turn those decibels down, sound guy Garth Helm.

Parents should seriously consider whether or not to bring their children. If this performance had a movie-like rating, it'd rank somewhere between "PG-13" and "R". While the language is sophisticated and the bloody good times are theatrical in nature rather than actually gory, what's clearly happening is made most haunting not by what you see but mostly by what you hear.

*Drury Lane Theatre presents Stephen Sondheim's Tony Award-winning masterpiece "Sweeney Todd," which runs from Aug. 11 through Oct. 9, 2011 at Drury Lane Theatre in Oakbrook Terrace, Ill. Tickets range from \$35 to \$46 with lunch and dinner theater packages ranging from \$49.75 to \$68. Student tickets start at \$20 and senior citizen tickets start at \$29. [Visit here for more information.](#)* [18]

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