

Tim Burton's *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*

By David Walsh
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Screenplay by John Logan, based on the musical by Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler

American filmmaker Tim Burton has directed a film based on the 1979 Stephen Sondheim musical *Sweeney Todd*. Sondheim availed himself of a 1973 play by British writer Christopher Bond which, in turn, was loosely adapted from a nineteenth century melodrama about a homicidal (and fictional) barber.

A few questions arise: why did Burton and his collaborators make the film, what were they trying to convey and what accounts for its enthusiastic reception by the critics?

Benjamin Barker (Johnny Depp) returns to London after 15 years' imprisonment in Australia on false charges and an escape by sea. The frame-up had been organized by Judge Turpin (Alan Rickman) and his henchman, Beadle Bamford (Timothy Spall), because of the judge's lust for Barker's wife. The barber, having renamed himself Sweeney Todd, returns to his original shop and his previous landlady, Mrs. Lovett (Helena Bonham Carter), the maker of the "worst pies in London." He believes his wife is dead.

When Todd carries out his first killing, of a rival barber (Sacha Baron Cohen) who threatens to reveal his identity, Mrs. Lovett suggests they turn the dead man's "plump frame" into something edible. A partnership is born.

Meanwhile Todd's young shipmate and rescuer, Anthony Hope (Jamie Campbell Bower), falls in love with Johanna (Jayne Wisener), the barber's daughter and ward of the villainous Judge Turpin.

Having lost an opportunity to do away with Turpin through Anthony's ill-timed entrance, Todd takes out his rage on numerous other gentlemen, providing the 'meat' for Mrs. Lovett's booming pie business. The young lovers conspire to escape together. The piece reaches its extraordinarily bloody denouement.

Burton directs the film with his usual cartoonish bravura. His technical skill and ability to translate his vision of things into film language cannot be doubted. His 'vision of things,' however, is limited. Burton has a feeling for certain marginalized, oppressed personalities (the lead characters in *Edward Scissorhands* and *Ed Wood* in particular) and their struggles with social expectations and standards. His best films argue for non-conformism in various contexts. These ideas and feelings, which are probably deeply felt, have remained at the level of a sense of individual persecution and resentment.

The restricted nature of Burton's viewpoint finds expression in a repetitiveness of imagery. One has the impression of a succession of ghostly pale individuals, with wild hair, whose wide, startled eyes—often emphasized with dark circles under them—take in one nightmarish or absurd event after another, some of them blackly comic, some of them not. Photographs of Burton tend to confirm the autobiographical element in his films. Depp has on several critical occasions served as the director's alter ego.

Burton's approach to *Sweeney Todd* is insufficiently informed by ideas

and relies on too many visual clichés. The camera, as we more or less expect it will, swoops in on a pseudo-"Dickensian" London of dark streets, sinister alleys and rat-infested sewers. Todd and Mrs. Lovett have the favored Burton appearance—sickly pallid faces, dark red smears beneath their eyes. Depp adopts an unchanging and unexpressive scowl meant to convey his character's obsessive sentiments.

Sondheim's music and lyrics are not successful. They alternate between the commonplace ("There was a barber and his wife,/And she was beautiful./A foolish barber and his wife./ She was his reason and his life,/And she was beautiful") and the anti-social ("There's a hole in the world/Like a great black pit/And it's filled with people/Who are filled with shit/And the vermin of the world inhabit it ...").

Bond and Sondheim began with inferior material, which was not dramatically complex, and they didn't do enough to transform it. Not much actually happens in the musical. Turpin twice more or less falls into Todd's hands. Anthony has little difficulty rescuing Johanna from a supposedly impregnable institution. The only real tension felt by the spectator surrounds the repeated slashing of throats, but that simply arises from a natural revulsion.

There are certain clever but slight pieces ("Pirelli's Magic Elixir," "By the Sea"), treacly love songs ("Johanna") and quasi-comic odes to murder and cannibalism ("My Friends," "A Little Priest," "God, That's Good!"). For the most part, frankly, like too many composers of Broadway shows, Sondheim writes pleasant, forgettable ditties in *Sweeney Todd* that are mostly excuses to put to music certain thoughts and feelings that have nothing to do with this particular musical and its supposed concerns ("Green Finch and Linnet Bird," "Wait," "Pretty Women," "Not While I'm Around").

There are genuinely repellent aspects to the work. Special effects permit Burton to reproduce the slitting of throats with a straight razor in a very graphic manner, so too the sickening thud of the bodies as they fall through a chute directly under Todd's barber's chair.

A number of talented people, in addition to Burton, have collaborated on this film. Stephen Sondheim first came to prominence in 1957 with his lyrics for *West Side Story*; two years later, he wrote the words for *Gypsy*. On *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, which opened in 1962, Sondheim produced both words and music. With *Company* (1970), *A Little Night Music* (1973) and *Pacific Overtures* (1976), and later *Sweeney Todd*, the composer-lyricist consolidated his reputation as the leading figure in the American musical theater.

Depp and Bonham Carter are skilled actors; Alan Rickman and Timothy Spall (who has worked with director Mike Leigh on several occasions) are two of Britain's most interesting film performers.

How is it that these various skilled individuals have combined to create such a misguided and even disoriented film?

What *are* the musical's chief concerns? Sondheim asserts that *Sweeney Todd* is "a story about revenge and how revenge eats itself up.... In that sense it's a tragedy in the classic tradition about someone who goes out

for revenge and ends up destroying himself.”

This is not, however, what actually occurs. Todd, in fact, has been eaten up by the time we encounter him; he is already thoroughly destroyed. The musical is one-dimensional as a result. Its unpleasant function is to recount and derive some entertainment out of the barber’s destruction of others.

Additional claims are made for *Sweeney Todd* by the new film’s creators. One of the producers, Walter Parkes, argues that the story “combines our most violent impulses with our most tender. It is from the collision of these qualities that it derives its overwhelming power.” Screenwriter John Logan (*The Aviator*, *Gladiator*, *The Last Samurai*) suggests that at heart *Sweeney Todd* is “a very passionate, dark love story.” Tim Burton observes, “There’s something very sad and haunting and emotional and delusional about that kind of a character [Todd]. That’s why they [Todd and Mrs. Lovett] make such a perfect couple, really. It’s a relationship movie.”

However, few of the relationships in the film are developed in an artistic or compelling way. They are largely excuses for the musical interludes and the gore. We are expected to take on faith, for example, Todd’s undying love for his wife, but we see no real evidence of it. And he’s not moved to any course of action by the fate of his daughter. The latter’s connection with Anthony is as insubstantial as one encounters in the flimsiest Hollywood effort. Todd and Mrs. Lovett threaten to have moments of genuine contact, but very little emerges.

Burton’s *Sweeney Todd* functions like too many of our current cultural products. On the one hand, it offers murder, rape, incest, cannibalism, fountains of blood and various other sensations; and, on the other, it pays tribute officially, so to speak, to a belief in undying love and “relationships.”

Burton perhaps wants to make a piece of *grand guignol*; he speaks of his affection for the Hammer films made in Britain, for the horror films produced by Universal with Boris Karloff, Lon Chaney and Peter Lorre. Of course, none of those films swam in blood like this one, and not merely because of the censor’s presence.

Burton is not naïve enough to make a Hammer film or a Karloff horror production, but neither has he established a sufficient separation between himself and these genres. The film’s mood swings from campy to sentimental to depraved without registering deeply in any of the various modes. The spectator feels that the orgy of bloodletting is the line of least resistance for filmmakers who lack a strong sense of where their work should go.

Unhappily, as is the case too often these days, cheap misanthropy, most of it inherited from Sondheim, fills much of the void. We have already noted the film’s opening lines, “There’s a hole in the world/Like a great black pit,” etc.

Todd later sings, “No, we all deserve to die!/Even you, Mrs. Lovett,/Even I./Because the lives of the wicked should be/Made brief./For the rest of us, death/Will be a relief./We all deserve to die!”

There is not much logic to Todd’s universal loathing. He has been wronged by the actions of a single corrupt judge and his accomplice. Why he should pass judgment on the entire human race is never adequately explained.

Even a serial killer can inspire great art, e.g., Berg’s *Lulu* (in which Jack the Ripper features prominently). However, such a presence must have received a powerful artistic working over, and either convey the horror of the slayings or distance them strongly in some fashion (in comedy) to make a definite point about the human condition. Nothing is more difficult than for one individual to kill another, or more damaging. Too often in the present work, the audience is invited to laugh at the most degrading aspects of murder.

Sweeney Todd’s fashionable bleakness and essential emptiness struck some at the time of its first presentation on Broadway in 1979. Walter

Kerr, longtime theater critic for *Times*, the sufficiently old school to raise questions.

In a comment published March 11, 1979 (“Is ‘Sweeney’ on target?”), Kerr wrote, “Yet with so much to occupy our eyes and ears, and so much to respect, there is an uncomfortable void in the evening, to my mind a most serious one. The story, as told, leaves us restive and unabsorbed. It also leaves us puzzled as to why its creators went to so much trouble to tell it.”

After noting Todd’s conclusion that “all men are vermin” who should be exterminated, Kerr continued, “we are forced to ask ourselves: what is this musical about?” Kerr observed that certain lines seemed to suggest “the beginnings of a Brechtian parable ... Todd’s particular industry is justified because all men engage in it. But the analogy doesn’t work; we haven’t really been watching others behave in this fashion, haven’t concerned ourselves with a social structure erected upon it.” Entirely true.

There is, in fact, no basis for claiming that *Sweeney Todd*’s “major dramatic, if not musical, precursor is Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera*,” as one of our current critics does.

The Threepenny Opera (1928) is a great satire, a scathing critique of bourgeois law and morality in particular. Its lead character, Macheath, a thief and murderer, wears kid gloves and counts the chief of police among his closest friends. Another leading figure, Jonathan Jeremiah Peachum, operates a network of professional beggars who prey on human sympathy. Peachum’s crime, Brecht explained, “consists in his conception of the world ... yet he is only following the ‘trend of the times’ when he regards misery as a commodity.”

Brecht and his collaborators, Elisabeth Hauptmann and others, in particular scorn appeals to morality and virtue under conditions where economic life remains irrational. Not the wickedness of humankind but the conditions in which it is forced to live account for evil deeds. As Peachum sings, “To be a good man—what a nice idea!/But there’s the little problem of subsistence.” Macheath, in one of the piece’s most famous numbers, adds his voice, “Now all you gentlemen who wish to lead us/Who teach us to desist from mortal sin/Your prior obligation is to feed us:/When we’ve had lunch, your preaching can begin.”

The ‘Brechtian element’ in *Sweeney Todd* is incidental, undeveloped and, as Kerr noted, “pretentious.” The bits of superficial radicalism associated with the character of Judge Turpin are unconvincing.

Furthermore, of course, Weill’s score for *The Threepenny Opera* is a masterpiece. It is one of the greatest examples of modern, popular music produced with urgency, beauty and humor.

Sweeney Todd’s enthusiastic reception by most of the critics is a troubling phenomenon. One of the strongest responses was registered by the current *New York Times* film critic, A.O. Scott, who tells us that the film “is as dark and terrifying as any motion picture in recent memory, not excluding the bloody installments in the ‘Saw’ franchise.... It is cruel in its effects and radical in its misanthropy, expressing a breathtakingly, rigorously pessimistic view of human nature. It is also something close to a masterpiece, a work of extreme—I am tempted to say evil—genius.”

He adds later: “It may seem strange that I am praising a work of such unremitting savagery. I confess that I’m a little startled myself, but it’s been a long time since a movie gave me nightmares. And the unsettling power of ‘Sweeney Todd’ comes above all from its bracing refusal of any sentimental consolation, from Mr. Burton’s willingness to push the most dreadful implications of Mr. Sondheim’s story to their blackest conclusions.”

Scott’s reference to his being “startled” by his own praise for “a work of such unremitting savagery” is an honest one. He is the only critic to make that admission. The problem is that he didn’t go farther and examine his response.

What accounts for the distance between the reactions of Kerr and Scott? Leaving everything else aside, above all, social and historical changes.

America has become an extraordinarily brutal society over the past quarter-century, whose origins lie in the starkness of its social divisions. Official violence is a fact of everyday life: state-sanctioned executions, police killings and beatings, the imprisonment of enormous numbers, the vindictive prosecution of children and the mentally damaged, the witch-hunt of “illegal aliens,” the endless erosion of Constitutional rights and build-up of authoritarian rule, the crudity and stupidity of its political leaders in both major parties.

Overseas, the American ruling elite has embarked on a policy of continual neocolonial warfare, for the accomplishment of which it claims the right to imprison and torture anyone it likes. Somewhere in the world each and every day the US military or intelligence apparatus is killing or abusing human beings.

Burton’s *Sweeney Todd* is only imaginable under those degraded conditions. Bound up with the growing social polarization and brutality of life in the US has been a lurch to the right by the liberal intelligentsia, its increasing willingness to accept torture and other crimes, which it sees as somehow vital to the preservation of its wealth and comfort. Cruel imagery in games and films and music has the result of inuring sections of the population to human suffering.

The film’s final scene especially, with its horrifying sense of helplessness in the face of unspeakable atrocities, must speak to the feelings of many who are simply overwhelmed by the present reality of apparently unending global violence.

Burton, and Scott, in that sense, accurately enough “reflect their times,” but the task of the serious artist or critic is not merely to reflect, but to make sense of, and, if need be, *vehemently oppose* prevailing currents and moods. An insufficiently critical attitude toward events and cultural developments means that the artist (or critic) starts out in his or her work with all manner of unstated assumptions; by this means, he or she remains subordinated, in the end, to the prevailing orthodoxy.

In this fashion the makers of *Sweeney Todd*, as well as the critics, become part of the very phenomenon that most likely disturbs and appalls them.

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