

Centre Stage's 'Todd' a delightfully

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THEATER REVIEW

I'll admit it. I walked into this show with a prejudice. Sweeney Todd is probably my all-time favorite musical. But while I fully expected to enjoy it, I never thought I'd be completely blown over by it.

Upstate favorites Will Ragland and Mary Freeman star in this superb staging of the Stephen Sondheim masterpiece — arguably the 20th century's greatest musical theatre piece.

A perfect show for the Halloween season, Swee-

ney Todd gives us the murderous tale of the **Demon Barber of Fleet Street**.

Returning to London after 15 years in exile, Sweeney (Ragland) returns to his old neighborhood where he finds his landlady, Mrs. Lovett (Freeman), still trying to sell meat pies, despite the unavailability of meat.

Soon, Sweeney returns to his old barbershop and begins sharpening his shaving razors while he seeks revenge on the judge who falsely imprisoned

him.

Sweeney also ends up helping a young sailor find his true love and assisting Mrs. Lovett in procuring fresh supplies of meat.

Sweeney Todd is a delightfully macabre musical with sparse dialogue, wonderful comic set pieces and some of Sondheim's greatest songwriting. In fact, with such an emphasis on the music, this play can be tricky to pull off.

Fortunately, Centre Stage gives us an amazing cast, full of talented singers who handle the challenging music with aplomb and power.

Will Ragland gives us a subdued, tortured Sweeney who really comes alive in the second act.

Patrick Osteen makes a suitably sincere Anthony who plays well against the lovely Chelsea Rudisill as Johanna. Christian Elser and Jonathan Kilpatrick impress as the sinister Judge Turpin and Beadle Bamford, while Jim Broussard, Brady Smith and Miranda Notus all impress in smaller but no less key roles.

And despite the title, this play really belongs to the character of Mrs. Lovett, and Mary Freeman's

macabre musical

performance here is nothing short of phenomenal.

Her phrasing, her comic timing, the way she allows her whole body to fully inhabit the role — Mary Freeman's Mrs. Lovett could hold her own against any Broadway performer. Even if the rest of the production weren't as strong as it is, Freeman's performance alone would be worth the price of admission.

Guest director David Sims makes great use of the Centre Stage facilities, presenting a large show in a fairly intimate space, giving the audience the feel-

ing of being completely present in the action.

The deceptively simple set, designed by Sims and Kim Granner, works perfectly and Tony Penna's moody lighting effectively heightens the grand theatrical tone of the evening.

Sweeney Todd is a funny, frightening, lyrical and layered musical, and this production nails it on all counts.

Don't miss it.

Sweeney Todd runs through Nov. 5 at Centre Stage, 501 River St. For tickets and information, call 864.233.6733 or visit centrestage.org.