

Arts & Entertainment

Cranford Dramatic Club's Sweeney Todd Chillingly Thrills

By SUSAN MYRILL DOUGHERTY
Specially written for The Westfield Leader and The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

CRANFORD—Because of TV and movies, when audiences hear the word “demon” in a title these days, they think of special effects including blood, gore and maybe a vampire or two. Cranford Dramatic Club (CDC) offers Stephen Sondheim’s vision of a demon in the musical *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* that opened last weekend at the playhouse.

Chilling and thrilling, the show is a psychological study of a man’s return from incarceration to society to seek revenge not only for his false imprisonment, but for what happened to his wife and daughter during his 15 year absence.

After surviving a shipwreck, escaped prisoner Benjamin Barker assumes the persona of Sweeney Todd (Alexander M. Oleksij) as he returns to London for his revenge. He’s hoping to reopen his barber shop with the help of a former friend and the owner of a pie shop, Mrs. Lovett (Melissa Timpson), who squirreled away his razors for all these years. There is a devilish partnership. “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd,” the story of the barber presented in song by the small but impressive ensemble of eight strong singers and the remainder of the company, lets us in on a secret: “He shaved the faces of gentlemen who never

thereafter were heard of again.”

There are a number of versions of this Victorian tale, but in most, Todd is a retributive barber who disposes of his victims’ bodies by pulling a secret lever on his barber chair. Those victims, with their throats sliced, fall backward through a trapdoor into the shop’s basement where entrepreneurial Mrs. Lovett, bakes their flesh into meat pies. The tale, in many forms, was supposedly a staple of Victorian melodrama; later it was the subject of a 1959 ballet and, in 1979, became the Tony award-winning Broadway musical by Mr. Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler.

In CDC’s director Alan Van Antwerp’s vision for the musical, the infamous chair is missing. Instead, he has the wounded victims stagger off in zombie-like fashion followed by Mrs. Lovett throwing a bucket of red confetti or red slop to signify that another pie crust is ready for its filling. Blood red lighting by designer Mark Reilly reinforces the point. It’s an interpretation that is unconventional at worst and unique at best. CDC’s version, instead of using the requisite chair, spotlights a coffin in the opening scene. The sets are outlandishly wonderful panels of plastic gauzy sheeting that hang from scaffolding and beckon the audience into a surreal world. The coffin is never off stage but is moved to become an

integral part of almost every scene.

This is not a show for the faint of heart or for those who squirm during a musical’s songs. There are no fewer than 21 songs in the first act alone. So don’t expect much dialogue...like an operetta, exposition and storyline are interwoven in the songs. First time viewers of “*Sweeney Todd*” might want to listen to an audio of some of the songs to get the full force of the clever lyrics. A pronounced cockney accent by a few of the actors can prove difficult for some audience members to grasp who hear the songs for the first time.

But those who are die-hard Sondheim fans need to see this show. It’s one of the most professionally produced and executed productions I have seen (and I’ve seen four different versions and was a cast member in a fifth) of one of Sondheim’s most difficult shows. Intense harmonies and dissonant chords require trained, polished voices. Leads and ensemble alike need to know how to belt, use the head voice, sometimes use falsetto and then blend everything into seamless sound. Director Antwerp and musical director Jack Bender have assembled a tremendous cast that knows and understands music and fulfill Sondheim’s requirements.

Melissa Timpson embraces the role of Mrs. Lovett with her very first notes. Her raucous braggadocio in “The Worst Pies in London” gives way later to her tender, sweet tones found in “Not While I’m Around” and “By the Sea” that counterpoint her affected brashness in “Parlor Songs.” Her bellowing in that latter song seesaws beautifully with the clear, sweet lyric tenor voice of the Beadle (Jay P. Winston) and echoed by the young boy Toby played impishly by Zach Mazouat.

When Ms. Timpson and Mr. Oleksij as Sweeney sing “My Friends” and “A Little Priest,” a perfect balance is struck as far as intensity and energy. Easily one actor could overwhelm the other, but with sound designer Michael Ferentinos monitoring the microphone balance closely, the duets work well. Mr. Oleksij’s Sweeney

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MEAT PIES FOR SALE...Melissa Timpson, left, and Alex Oleksij are currently starring as Mrs. Lovett and Sweeney Todd in the Cranford Dramatic Club’s production of *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*.

Incredible Kitchens Highlight HTIS Hearth & Home Tour

By CHRISTIE STORMS
Specially written for The Westfield Leader and The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

WESTFIELD — More than 400 visitors toured eight of the area’s local residences during the Holy Trinity Interparochial School (HTIS) Hearth & Home Kitchen Tour last Saturday. Surrounded by the latest and greatest in kitchen design and fabrication, guests were invited to sample hors d’oeuvres and sweet treats provided by local merchants.

The tour featured five Westfield homes, two in Mountainside and one in Fanwood. Many architects and designers were present to provide information and answer questions.

“This was our fifth Hearth & Home Kitchen Tour,” said Robyn Kelly, tour chairperson. “Our hope for this day was that everyone would have a fabulous experience, appreciate the variety of kitchens presented, learn from the experienced professionals, and delight in the delicious food tastings...It was a great success!”

Upon entering the stately New England-style colonial on Chapel Hill in Mountainside, visitors marveled at the custom marble floor tiles designed to compliment the leaded-glass transom surrounding the front door. The newer home featured layer upon layer of custom crown moldings, stunning built-ins and classic details as well as a unique two-story, cherry-paneled library with its own spiral staircase.

Architect Barbara Vincentsen said she designed the residence to “reflect the family” and how they would live in its spaces. This included an enormous kitchen that accommodates two cooks and can be accessed from the center hallway, mudroom,

family room or butler’s pantry.

Peter Goggi from Tea Association and Dan Place from Mulberry House warmed up guests with soothing tea and scones from the multi-level cherry wood and granite island.

Also in Mountainside, the more contemporary Coles Avenue residence featured an expansive kitchen with an induction cooktop, steam oven and stunning views of the Watchung Mountains.

Local artist Bob Yurochko, a former chairperson of the Westfield Art Association who created many of the homeowner’s pieces, chatted with guests about his still life and landscape paintings.

From the peninsula comprised of Santa Cecilia granite, pastry chef John Sauchelli of Maritime Parc served a sensational Sticky Toffee Pudding on unique biodegradable wooden plates.

The renovated saltbox house on Paterson Road in Fanwood featured an eclectic mix of textiles and textures. Shades of black, white and grey, along with a pop of pink, expertly united the spaces leading to the open kitchen and enviable 9-by-6-foot island topped with honed Italian marble.

Peter Brooks of Peter Brooks Stone Works explained the 2-inch thick, solid slab has no seams and has been treated to prevent staining for up to 15 years.

Lisa Natale of Michele’s on Pros-

pect invited guests to sample savory guacamole on homemade tortilla chips, while Lindsey Rizkalla of Just a Bite offered a variety of yummy cookies.

In Westfield, the Bradford Avenue Cape Cod home blended classic architecture with mod flair. Vivid use of color including bursts of purple in the predominantly white and grey kitchen further emphasized the style along with German cabinetry and sleek surfaces.

C. J. Reycraft of Amuse presented delectable foie gras mousse with fresh white truffle and banyuls jelly.

On Madison Avenue, a newly built colonial was recently renovated to exude the warm stylings of the homeowner’s Mexican heritage. From sponge-painted walls and mosaic artwork to the handcrafted Arts and Crafts-style cabinetry in the kitchen, meticulous attention to detail was evident at every turn.

Jane Schoenfeld and Maggie Cooks served up luscious butternut squash and spinach lasagna, while Jim Balcom of Crownpoint Cabinetry and Janet Lawrence of KCH Contracting spoke with guests about the renovation process.

Visitors arriving at the Harrison Avenue home saw an unusual sight out front: a mobile brick oven where Chaz and Charles Eicke of Big Cheese Wood-Fired Pizza were preparing homemade pizzas for guests

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Christie Storms for The Westfield Leader and The Times
YUMMY TOUR...John Sauchelli, Pastry Chef of Maritime Parc served sticky toffee pudding to guests during Saturday’s Hearth & Home tour.



Christie Storms for The Westfield Leader and The Times
OUTDOOR DINING...Visitors toured a home on Prospect Street which featured a soaring stone fireplace near the dining area on the patio as well as multiple seating areas leading up to a swimming pool during Saturday’s Hearth & Home tour.

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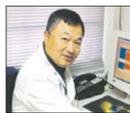
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