

Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [February 12, 2008](#) issue



Unlikely as it sounds, director Tim Burton missed all the jokes in *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. The origins of the celebrated 1979 musical, written by Stephen Sondheim in collaboration with Hugh Wheeler, lie in the vaudeville-style English music hall tradition and in 19th-century penny dreadfuls. The outrageous puns are still present in the duet “A Little Priest,” in which the pragmatic Mrs. Lovett (Helena Bonham Carter) schemes with her paramour, the homicidal barber Sweeney Todd (Johnny Depp), to rescue her faltering meat-pie shop by using the flesh of his victims as filling. But the actors don’t play them for laughs, any more than Bonham Carter cracks wise during her first number, the Gilbert and Sullivan-style patter song “The Worst Pies in London.” These songs are rendered more or less straight, which makes them deadly dull.

It’s possible that Burton settled for these pallid performances because he knew he didn’t have strong singers. Depp and Bonham Carter sing the tunes creditably and play the nonmusical scenes competently, but they lack the musical confidence to act the songs. Casting this duo was a bad decision for a drama that is character-driven. Todd is an antihero bent on getting vengeance against the corrupt judge (Alan Rickman) who sent him to prison on a trumped-up charge so the judge could force himself on the barber’s innocent wife. It turns out that *Sweeney Todd* doesn’t work

without authentic troubadours sawing away at those challenging Sondheim songs.

In the movie, the pair of young lovers—Jayne Wisener as Todd’s daughter Johanna and Jamie Campbell Bower as the sailor Anthony—outsing the two stars. But their songs are melodic rather than dramatic. The only number in the movie that isn’t insipid is “Not While I’m Around,” poignantly sung by Ed Sanders as Toby, the workhouse boy Mrs. Lovett adopts when Todd dispatches his master, the rival barber Pirelli (Sacha Baron Cohen).

Burton just isn’t canny about musicals (the musical numbers in his *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* were extravagant fiascos). If he were, he probably wouldn’t have cut “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd,” which apart from being the stage show’s most famous piece of music points straight to Sondheim’s other stylistic source—Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill’s *The Threepenny Opera* and its famous song “The Ballad of Mack the Knife.”

The main problem with *Sweeney* is that, unlike *Threepenny*, it doesn’t have much satirical edge or political punch; the social milieu that’s meant to give rise to the metaphor of humankind feasting on itself is insufficiently dramatized. Burton and screenwriter John Logan take the story at face value but get rid of the Brechtian style that gave it the form, if not the substance, of a social critique.

What’s more surprising is that though Burton clearly understands the play as being in the ghoulish, enjoy-the-horror Grand Guignol tradition, he doesn’t have the right equipment for that genre either. This is the goriest *Sweeney Todd* you’re likely to see, but the violence isn’t imaginatively staged and it doesn’t have an ironic kick. The movie doesn’t even look right: the design and cinematography are dark, not garish.

The only actors in the movie for whom one can whip up much enthusiasm are Timothy Spall as Beadle Bamford, the judge’s accomplice, and Cohen as Pirelli. Playing a scam artist with an invented Italian accent, Cohen—best known as the co-writer and star of *Borat*—is delightfully ridiculous; he has one foot planted firmly in the genre of American musical comedy. Spall, a master caricaturist who has proven to be adept at playing Dickens, Molière and Gilbert and Sullivan, manages to evoke the style of all three. What *Sweeney Todd* needs is a cast full of vaudevillians like these two. Somber and self-serious, the film is the opposite of entertaining.