



Swing Your Razor Wide!

The origins of the character Sweeney Todd stretch back as far as the eye can see: a speculative history which frames the original character as an entity closer to some sort of cryptozoological mystery creature than a barber. Nevertheless, Sweeney Todd remains a long-enjoyed face of stage performance and as such his menace lives on through musicals, movies and plays alike.

The demon barber was brought to life before my eyes at the Cottage Theatre on April 9 during a rendition of the 1979 Sondheim-Wheeler musical adaptation. Cottage Grove's bone-chilling performance of *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* didn't just linger in my mind for the next few days; it was all I could think about. With the words "attend the tale of Sweeney Todd" bouncing around in my brain, I was constantly reminded of the precision with which the musical had been directed and performed.

Don Kelley threw down a maniacal performance, offering multiple crowd members (included my bearded self) the most terrifying proposed shave of their lives, while supporting cast members Karen Snyder (Mrs. Lovett), Ken McClintock (the Beadle) and Paul von Rotz (Judge Turpin) saw that the hilarity, horror and heart of the tale never faded. Nick Forrest's performance as Tobias Ragg took the cake for me, though; his singing was delightful, his accent blazed with Cockney enthusiasm, and his ability to create chemistry with each of his colleagues became a show stealer.

The Cottage Theatre's foundation of community volunteerism stands at the core of shows such as this, and upon arriving with this in mind I turned to my fellow spectator and divulged that I was not expecting much from the evening.

I stand entirely corrected. Bravo, Cottage Theatre.

Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street runs from now until May 1 at the Cottage Theater in Cottage Grove; info and tickets at www.cottagetheatre.org – *Andy Valentine*

Soaring on Spirit

Theater fans who attended LCC's Saturday night production of William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* walked in ready to laugh, and the players knew it.

Cognizant of the play's roots in Italian *Commedia dell'Arte*, director Judith Roberts and the Student Productions Association put together a humorous production that soared on the spirit of its players. Yet that enthusiasm too often underscored the production's limited success in its technical aspects, namely set and costume design. And yes, money seemed a significant part of the problem.

The performance took place at LCC's Blue Door Theater, an intimate space even with the actors using the entrances at the rear of the theater.

The most "modernizing" set design choice, a film of falconry and merriment, felt cheap and forced. Lighting decisions were sometimes at odds with other aspects of the performance. Why light Sly so strongly, for instance, as he simply watches the troupe?

Costuming and makeup are central in plays like this, but here their caliber spoke to budgetary constraints. Costuming in particular was a missed mark. The attention to detail absent here was evident in the brand visible on the rubber soles of Lucentio's supposedly 16th century footwear.

In the end, Saturday night was about the acting. The tendency of the actors to play hard to the audience met the production's awareness of itself as a play-within-a-play. Bill Woolum's tinker Christopher Sly was the night's drunken anchor. Julie Moore was fabulous as a wizened Gremio. Robin Rice's angular, petulant Katherine made her transformation from shrew to "gentle" unsettling and believable. Nathan Blakely, however, provided the night's most formidable performance: His Petruchio inhabited a level of arrogance that pushed through each word of every line. Like the play itself, he let us laugh with him as well as at his expense.

The Taming of the Shrew runs April 8 to 23 at LCC; info & tickets at lanec.edu/tickets – *Ulrick Casimir*



The People's Hamlet

Weighty, wordy and thick with expectations, a production of *Hamlet* is open to the judgment of all. Any great actor feels compelled to play the role, every good English teacher spends a month paring apart the lines and slowly picking them out as though each phrase was a meaty walnut of truth.

Thus, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has become holy. Trial By Fire TheatreWorks sets out to smash the relics and revision the classic in their own image.

Co-Artistic Director (and Hamlet) Benjamin Newman's adaptation mercilessly strips the script of words and character. There is no Fortinbras. There is no "speak the speech." Newman's version is pared down to what he sees as the essence of Hamlet: a loner, struggling to act in a world in which he is not accepted.

Director Dani Diaz, a passionate person who has been roaming the earth for fewer than 25 years, says, "I've come to understand *Hamlet* as a play where people are overwhelmed. It's not about a failure to act, but the overwhelming pressure of swimming in a sea of options." In this way, she believes, *Hamlet* speaks to her generation: Young people aren't apathetic about the world, just conflicted with options as they attempt to embark on the massive work of saving it.

Trial By Fire has set the play in no particular time or place, so that the production isn't about staging but human beings, about "beefy, meaty characters that anyone can relate to."

In many ways this is a break from previous T.B.F. work: It's old, it's well known, it's going to clock in at just over two and a half hours. But there will be continuity of their original mission – elevated, collaborative story telling, a commitment to connect with an audience and an understanding that live performance is sacred. According to Co-Artistic Director (and Gertrude) Emily Hart, "When you see a Trial By Fire production, you can't just sit back and relax. You will be challenged."

Hamlet runs April 15 to 30 at Upstart Crow Studio. – *Anna Grace*



JON MEYERS

Artist Defies Death and Dictatorial Frogs

There's something about the Actors Cabaret Eugene Annex that makes you feel like a real theater junkie, as though you are one scene change away from the streets, begging for a few bars of a show tune. There's not a bad seat in the tiny house, and the cozy space fosters a tight connection between the actors and audience. It's the perfect place for growth and experimentation, which is exactly what you'll find in their production of *A New Brain*.

Somewhere between a dream and a rant, *A New Brain* is autobiographical, chronicling composer/lyricist William Finn's life-altering experience with arteriovenous malformation. An unexpected collapse over a plate of ziti sends Gordon Schwinn into the hospital for days of questioning and finally a dangerous operation. Schwinn fears he will die with so much music left inside him, while the well-paying specter of finishing two songs for a dictatorial children's show star, Mr. Bungee the Frog, looms large.

This show feels more like a musical monologue than anything else. With thirty songs in one and a half hours you can do the math, but it all adds up to less of a play and more of a really quick, personal opera. The songs are not as carefully crafted as Finn's other works (*The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, *Falsettos*). Because it details a personal experience, the plot meanders like our lives rather than making a satisfying little arc.

Mark Van Beever directs while tackling the lead role. Stage direction clearly took a backseat to musical direction; the songs are interesting and well sung. Frequently Beever allowed his actors to simply share them with the audience, rather than cover them over with complicated choreography. Melancholy, conflicted Gordon Schwinn is a good role for Beever, although it does not show off his razor sharp comedic timing.

Every other role is part of a fairly tight ensemble. Hannah Rudkin does a great job as an overworked nurse, and Trevor Eichhorn is perfect as the just-a-bit-too perfect Roger. The cast was young and intent on telling the story, making for a very interesting evening in the ACE Annex.

A New Brain runs April 8 to 23 at Actors Cabaret of Eugene Annex; info & tickets at www.actorscabaret.org – *Anna Grace*