

Navigating Dark themes in youth musical theatre: a performance stylistic approach to *Sweeney Todd*

Ioana BLĂNARU¹

Abstract: *This article reflects on the experience of directing Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street at a youth theater in the U.S.A, focusing on the artistic and educational motivations behind staging such a complex musical amid a trend towards more accessible, family-friendly productions. The adaptation aimed to challenge young artists by delving into intricate themes like revenge, morality, and societal issues while maintaining the original vision of the creators.*

Key-words: *Performance stylistics, Ensemble dynamics, Musical theater, Artistic education*

1. Introduction

The inspiration for this article originated from my experience directing *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* at a youth theater in the United States. The decision to stage this musical was driven by the artistic team's desire to push the limits of what young artists can achieve and to explore deeper themes at a time when the theater was leaning toward more *Disney*-style repertoire. Despite the production's demanding nature, the artistic and educational rewards were considered worthwhile for both the young actors and the artistic production team.

Participating in this production provides young actors with a valuable experience that enhances their vocal and acting skills while deepening their understanding of more complex themes and characters. Engaging with roles involving moral dilemmas and intense emotions allows them to explore the nuances of artistic expression and appreciate how music amplifies a story's messages. In this way, *Sweeney Todd* serves as a catalyst for reflection and discussion, encouraging young artists to examine perspectives on social issues, justice and morality. The study examines how the performance's stylistics supported the careful adaptation of these complex themes while ensuring an age-appropriate presentation.

¹ *George Enescu* National University of Arts, Iaşi, blanaru_ioanaeleonora@yahoo.com

2. Contextualizing Sweeney Todd

Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street, which premiered in 1979, stands as a pivotal work in the musical theatre genre. This production weaves together complex themes with a sophisticated musical style, marking the peak of a distinctive evolution in musical theatre. As part of a broader movement during the 1970's and 1980's, *Sweeney Todd* is a good example of the transition from traditional *Book musicals* to *Concept musicals*. This era saw a flourishing of experimental musicals like: *Cabaret* (1966), *Chorus Line* (1975), *Chicago* (1975), *Evita* (1978), *Les Misérables* (1980), *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984) *Dreamgirls* (1981) that challenged audience expectations and artistic boundaries, often addressing complex social issues and morally ambiguous situations.

The classical period in musical theatre, also known as the *Golden Age* (aprox. 1940-1965), was marked by the significant influence of librettist Oscar Hammerstein II (1895-1960) and composer Richard Rodgers (1902-1979). This duo's approach to writing musicals is characterized by the harmonious integration of music text and dance, which led to the development of the format called *Book musicals*. This became the standard for this period of composition. In contrast to the period before the 1940's, when musicals were often considered mere entertainment, *Book musicals* prioritize character and storyline development. Authors Allen Cohen and Steven Rosenhaus describe this style of musical in their book *Writing Musical Theatre: „A book musical has a central story line and a consistent cast of characters. The text of this type of musical is its book or libretto. Traditionally the story is told as a linear narrative in which speech, song and dance alternate smoothly and unobtrusively. The musical numbers usually occur at crucial points in the story-that is, at emotional high points. They are also often found at significant structural points, such as the beginning and the end of each act. The book show has always been the most common type of musical. It includes every one of the most popular and acclaimed shows of Broadway's "golden age", a period that began in 1943 and lasted for about twenty years" (Cohen and Rosenhaus 2006, 10).*

Since the mid-1960s, Broadway has entered a second prolific phase, characterized also by the development of a new style of musical called *Concept musical*. During this period, playwrights, composers and directors began to experiment with the traditional structure of scripts. They often use themes, concepts and metaphors to provide social commentary. Authors Allen Cohen and Steven Rosenhaus explain the difference between these two styles of musicals: „Concept musicals differ from other book musicals in that, as a rule, speech and song do not alternate smoothly. Instead, the differences and the seams between speech and song are emphasized to deliberately create a disjunctive effect. In a concept musical

the songs stand outside the spoken scenes; they comment in some way, often with irony, upon the story that they interrupt. The show as a whole is usually arranged according to some overall concept or metaphor. For instance, because both of the lead characters in *Chicago* are performers whose dream is to headline in vaudeville, the show tells its tawdry story of infidelity, greed and murder in the “Roaring Twenties” as a series of vaudeville acts. Sometimes the narrative of a concept musical is not linear but fragmented or recursive, as in *Company*. Because of their discontinuous nature, concept shows are usually less emotionally involving and less successful with audiences, than traditional book musicals” (Cohen and Rosenhaus 2006, 10).

3. The role of Stephen Sondheim

A prominent figure in this movement is Stephen Sondheim, whose innovative works have significantly shaped the landscape of concept musicals, challenging traditional storytelling through his unique musical and lyrical styles. He was born in New York and is one of the most influential and important composers and lyricists in modern Broadway history, considered an innovator of the genre. Stephen Sondheim showed remarkable musical aptitude from an early age studying piano and organ. At just 15, he wrote his first musical. He was mentored and influenced by Oscar Hammerstein II. His Broadway career truly began in 1957, when he became the lyricist of the show *West Side Story*, composed by Leonard Bernstein. Another high point in his career happened in 1962, when he wrote both the lyrics and the score for the Broadway show *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. After 1965, Sondheim began producing his own Broadway musicals, devoting himself to writing both lyrics and composing the music. Between 1970 and 1981, Stephen Sondheim along with director Harold Prince created six musicals that redefined the genre in significant ways. Among these productions were: *Company* (1970), *Follies* (1971), *A Little Night Music* (1973), *Pacific Overtures* (1976), *Sweeney Todd* (1979) and *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981).

The author Robert McLaughlin describes the contribution that Stephen Sondheim has made to the musical genre in his book *Stephen Sondheim and the Reinvention of the American Musical*: „These productions introduced a new musical formula and began to explore subjects and characters of greater complexity, going beyond the classical conventions of musical theatre. In addition, they experimented with the form and structure of the musical as a genre, combining a more refined musical approach with more precise lyrics, an approach rarely seen on Broadway at the time. Although initially met with skepticism from critics, these musicals were later praised for their innovations, with many considering *Sweeney Todd* to be the group's masterpiece” (McLaughlin 2016, 1). This iconic work not only illustrates this

new stage in musical theatre but also redefines the boundaries of the genre through a profound dramatic action that tackles themes such as revenge and justice, captivating the audience and prompting deep reflections on the human condition.

4. Themes and Aesthetics of *Sweeney Todd*

The original production of *Sweeney Todd* the musical premiered on Broadway in 1979 at the Uris Theatre, directed by Harold Prince (1928-2019), featuring Len Cariou as Sweeney Todd and Angela Lansbury as Ms. Lovett. Set in 19th-century London during the Industrial Revolution, the story follows the character Benjamin Barker, who returns as *Sweeney Todd* after being wrongfully exiled. Driven by a deep desire for revenge against those who destroyed his family, Sweeney Todd embarks on a dark and twisted journey that leads him to confront not only his personal demons but also the moral complexities of a society that has wronged him.

The character has roots in 14th-century French legends and has inspired numerous adaptations, with Christopher Bond's 1973 reinterpretation serving as the basis for Sondheim's musical.

The musical version, while essentially a melodrama, incorporates many traditional elements of the theatrical genre, reflecting the diverse visions of the artistic team. The composer envisioned this production as a musical thriller, inspired by the Grand Guignol² tradition, as his biographer explains: „While he was in London, Sondheim attended a performance of Christopher Bond's new adaptation of *Sweeney Todd (The Demon Barber of Fleet Street)*. Sondheim had an abiding interest in Grand Guignol and melodramatic horror. "My two favorite horror experiences in my childhood," he was to say, "were reading *Night Must Fall* and eventually acting it in college, and seeing *Hangover Square*, my favorite horror movie" (Citron 2001, 237).

Director Harold Prince envisioned the musical as a study of class struggle and dehumanization, a bleak effect of the industrial revolution: „Much earlier Sondheim approached Hal Prince to join the enterprise. It was a role reversal, for this was the first time Sondheim had initiated a project, but Prince was not persuaded that this gory melodrama was for him. [I thought it was a little on the campy side,] he told Carol Ilson for her biography, *Prince*, [about serving meat pies at intermission and hissing the villain]. But as he delved deeper he realized that Sweeney and Mrs. Lovett were driven by revenge. [Today your ensemble must populate the piece with a shared experience], he added. Our way to shared revenge became the incursion of

² *Le Grand Guignol*, a small theatre in Montmartre, Paris, specialized in a dramatic genre that included large doses of violence, macabre and terrifying scenes of madness, suicide, revenge, suspense, sensational revelations, suffering and tricks. (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Grand%20Guignol>)

the industrial age on the human spirit. For that Eugene Lee designed a factory to house our musical, and our cast - *all* our cast - became victims of the class system” (Citron 2001, 239). Therefore, Hal Prince brought a Brechtian approach to the story, emphasizing the need for the cast to embody a shared experience that resonates with the audience. Librettist Hugh Wheeler, saw the play as a tragedy because the dramatic action follows the decline of the protagonist, Benjamin Barker, who, under the pseudonym Sweeney Todd, becomes consumed by the desire for revenge. As Stephen Citron writes: „With the size of the production decided on and Hugh Wheeler's adapting Bond's play, Sondheim could start work on the score. [Even Bond's version was that absolutely unreal, old melodrama where you boo the villain,] Wheeler was to say. [We wanted to make it as nearly as we could into a tragedy. I wrote it as a play, but I encouraged Steve to cannibalize it and make it nearly all music]” (Citron 2001, 245). Furthermore, the production features aspects of Jacobean drama (revenge play), black comedy, burlesque, British Music Hall, dumb show³, farce, satire and tragicomedy, creating a complex and varied work that engage the audience on multiple levels.

4.1. Key musical ingredients

In his book *Finishing the Hat*, Stephen Sondheim explains the influences that inspired his music: „when in London I chanced to see Christopher Bond's version of the nineteenth-century British potboiler Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street. Although it was played primarily as a comedy, with pub songs interspersed between scenes, it immediately struck me as material for a musical horror story, one which would not be sung through but which would be held together by ceaseless underscoring that would keep an audience in suspense and maybe even scare the hell out of them. It would, in fact, be my tribute to Bernard Herrmann and Hangover Square... I was determined that the piece would be constructed mainly of song forms: something between a musical and a ballad opera, like Carmen, only with less recitative, if any” (Sondheim 2010, 331-332).

In *Sweeney Todd*, Sondheim utilizes three key musical elements to heighten the drama: *underscoring*, *Dies Irae* and *Hermann's chord*. Musicologist Richard Taruskin describes *underscoring* as follows: „It was Max Steiner who pioneered the techniques of „underscoring” or putting continuous, leitmotif-laden music behind the dialogue in a talking picture, and this is what enabled the mutation of opera into cinema in method as well as style”. Sondheim draws on this concept in *Finishing the Hat*, describing *Sweeney Todd* as „essentially a film for the stage” (Sondheim 2010,

³ Dumb Show-A piece of mimed action. Used in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to summarize and comment on the main plot.

332). Sondheim employs underscoring to create an immersive atmosphere, allowing the music to enhance the emotional weight of the narrative. By integrating this cinematic technique into musical theatre, he transforms the audience's experience, making the dark themes of *Sweeney Todd* more palpable and engaging, much like the emotional impact achieved in film. One example of underscoring in *Sweeney Todd* occurs during the transitions between scenes, where the background music heightens suspense, especially when the dramatic action intensifies or when major character revelations unfold (Figure 1).

No. 12B PIRELLI DEATH UNDERSCORE

TOBIAS: Ow, he ain't here. TODD: Signor Pirelli has been called away. TOBIAS: Where did he go? TODD: He didn't say. You'd better run after him. TOBIAS: Oh no, sir, knowing him, sir,

66 Allegretto (♩ = 100)
mp

without orders to the contrary, I'd best wait for him here. (He crosses to the chest and sits down on it, perilously near Pirelli's hand, which he doesn't notice. Todd at this moment does, however. Suddenly he is all nervous smiles) TODD: So, Mrs. Lovett gave you a pie, did she, my lad? TOBIAS: Oh yes, sir. She's a real kind lady.

68 poco accel.

TOBIAS: I'd say, sir. (Patting his stomach)
An aching void. (Once again his hand is on the edge of the chest, moving toward Pirelli's hand. Slowly now, we see the fingers

Fig. 1. Pirelli's Death Underscore

Another notable instance happens at the end of Act 1, during the "Little Priest" duet (Figure 2), where the lively, waltz-infused music contrasts sharply with the disturbing theme of cannibalism in the lyrics. This juxtaposition amplifies the macabre humor, effectively highlighting the show's dark comedy.

The use *Dies Irae* is another important musical element in this score (Figure 3). A definition of this musical theme can be found in the musical dictionary *The Facts on File Dictionary of Music*, written by Christine Ammer: „Dies irae (de-ˈa-s e-rˈe) Latin: “day of wrath.” A section of the Roman Catholic Requiem Mass (the Mass for the dead) whose text and music date from the thirteenth century.

Musical score for 'Little Priest underscoring'. The score includes vocal lines for M.L. and T., and piano accompaniment. It features lyrics such as 'Mrs. Lovett goes to the counter' and 'TODD: These are desperate times, Mrs. Lovett, and desperate measures are called for.'

Fig. 2. *Little Priest underscoring*

Although early composers of Requiem Masses used the original monophonic (with a single voice-part) music for this section as a SEQUENCE, later composers, among them Mozart and Verdi, set the words to more dramatic music of their own. The original music has also been used to suggest the idea of death in some secular (nonreligious) compositions, as by Saint-Saëns in his *Danse macabre* (“Dance of Death”) and by Berlioz in his *Symphonie fantastique* (“Fantastic Symphony”) (Ammer 2004, 104).

Di - es i - rae, di - es il - la, Sol - vet saec - lum
in fa - vil - la, Tes - te Da - vid cum Si - bil - la.

Fig. 3. *Dies irae*

Dies Irae symbolizes death and judgement in musical language and evokes a sense of foreboding and drama. In *Sweeney Todd*, which explores themes of murder and mortality, its presence foreshadows the unfolding events. This motif recurs throughout the musical, intricately interwoven with various elements associated with death.

CHORUS (*marcato*):

59 *ff*

S. A. Swing your ra - zor wide, Swee - ney,

T. *ff* Swing your ra - zor wide, Swee - ney,

B. *div. ff* Swing your ra - zor wide, Swee - ney,

ff subito L.H.

63 body into the grave. A woman pours black ashes into the hole from a tin canister marked "Flour".

Fig. 4. *The Ballad of Sweeney Todd*

The *Herrmann chord* or *Hitchcock chord* is a minor/major seventh chord, or a minor triad with a major 7th. This chord is associated with composer Bernard Herrmann, known for his scores for Alfred Hitchcock films: „The specific chord Sondheim utilizes is a quintessential Herrmann sonority: is the first harmony in the composer's two most famous film scores *Vertigo* and *Psycho* and prominent in many others. Sondheim became obsessed with this „Herrmann chord”, which has also been labeled the „Sweeney chord” or the „Hitchcock chord” (McGill 2012, 292).

5. Performance Stylistics employed

The show's stylistic approach plays a crucial role in adapting this type of thematic content for young performers and audiences. *Sweeney Todd* is a grim show, but essentially is a moral story about the futility of revenge which uses symbolism, metaphor, and abstraction in conveying difficult themes like crime, death cannibalism, moral decay. By utilizing symbolic elements, the authors represent complex ideas in a creative and accessible way, facilitating understanding of underlying messages without a direct approach. For example, metaphors can serve as powerful tools for simplifying complex emotions, while abstraction allows for the portrayal of serious subjects through non-literal interpretations. Furthermore, different genres come with established conventions and expectations. In *Sweeney Todd*, these elements are seamlessly integrated into the dramatic framework, maintaining an engaging narrative that invites reflection without explicit exposure to its more mature content. Understanding all these elements can help both the

artistic team and educators guide young artists in navigating complex narratives more effectively, making it more accessible at the same time.

5.1. Adaptation of complex themes for young artists

The adaptation process was primarily led by the authors, who modified the libretto to create a school edition intended for young artists. In their description of the libretto, the authors explain: „Sweeney Todd possesses some challenges for young artists. The music is complex, with vocal ranges that stretch the professional artists, also the shows contain adult subject matters. The authors in conjunction with Music Theatre International adapted the show to meet the specific needs of the educational theatre market and also maintained the essence of the author’s original vision. There had been careful edits made to the libretto and score, some transpositions of the vocal parts to ensure that the score is better suited for voices” (Sondheim and Wheeler 2003, 2).

Musically, adjustments were made to the tonalities, including the transposition of specific vocal parts, particularly for the lead roles of Sweeney and Johanna. Several songs and interludes were removed to reduce the overall length by about 15 minutes. In text changes were made also; some offensive language was substituted with alternative phrases (Fig. 5), especially the lines of *Beggar Woman*, who contains some sexually suggestive references, thereby making the material more appropriate for younger artists.

Furthermore, the elimination of certain solo performances, like the Judge's song Johanna, who might be consider offensive, along with a reduction in the length of Pirelli's solo, allowed ensemble moments to take center stage. This underscores the significance of collaboration and teamwork, placing greater focus on ensemble pieces and group dynamics.

TODD
Must you glare at me, woman? Off with you, off, I say!

BEGGAR WOMAN
(Smiling vacantly)
THEN 'OW WOULD YOU LIKE TO SPLIT ME MUFF, MISTER?
WE'LL GO JIG JIG
A LITTLE—

ALTERNATE LYRICS
THEN 'OW WOULD YOU LIKE A LITTLE KISS, DEAR?
I'LL BE YOUR GIRLFRIEND—
YOU WON'T DO—

Fig. 5. Alternate lyrics

5.2. Collaborative mentorship and education in the Arts

Scott McMillan notes in his book *The Musical as Drama*, „legitimate" drama differs from musical theatre in that while ensemble moments are possible, they are not essential. Musical theatre, as an inherently collaborative art form, often reflects the teamwork involved in production, transferring that dynamic to the coordination of large groups within the play. However, „straight" plays can still focus on themes of individualism, which musicals often do not have the time to explore (McMillan 2006, 89). This highlights the importance of collaboration not just in performance, but also in the educational experience of young artists, especially when working on a musical.

Stephen Sondheim exemplifies this approach in his work, particularly with *Sweeney Todd*. Sondheim has dedicated considerable effort to collaborating with young performers, founding the *Dramatists Guild's Young Playwrights Festival* in 1982 and becoming the first Cameron Mackintosh Professor of Theatre at Oxford in 1990. He emphasized that working with a diverse group of young writers helps create a bridge between different styles and disciplines, which is essential when presenting complex themes to young artists and audience. As Sondheim remarked, „Collaboration with a diverse group of young writers helps create a bridge between different styles and disciplines, which is essential when presenting complex themes to young audiences". Throughout his teaching, Sondheim aimed to encourage open discourse, stating, „So in twenty-four hours, I made them trust me and each other enough that they could evaluate each other freely, because I didn't want to be the one saying... 'I think you should do this or that'. I believe in the Socratic method of asking questions more than making statements... making suggestions so they wouldn't feel competitive. One of the problems in musical theatre is competition. I didn't want them to feel tense" (Citron 2001, 399).

5.3. Vocal and music interpretation

For the adolescent cast, we focused on guiding their interpretation to highlight the emotional core of the songs without overwhelming them. Given the complexity, the musical performance was not exceptional, yet it was a commendable effort considering the challenges presented by Sondheim's score. Musical direction was guided by research into the horror and thriller elements of the score, particularly Sondheim's use of the *Herrmann chord*. This chord, known for its dissonant and eerie qualities, requires a nuanced understanding of harmony, necessitating careful instruction for young performers.

Additionally, the presence of *ostinatos* can create rhythmic challenges, as young artists may struggle to maintain synchronization while navigating these

patterns. The doubling of parts, also poses a challenge, requiring a strong sense of pitch and blend that younger singers are still developing. This knowledge informed the overall atmosphere of the musical, even as the execution was simplified to accommodate the abilities of the young performers.

A careful approach was also necessary during the ensemble pieces "Pirelli's Miracle Elixir" and "God That's Good", particularly during the *overlapping* moments between *Toby* and the ensemble. These sections require a strong understanding of both melody and rhythm, as they can be demanding for young performers. Ensuring clarity in these interactions is essential to maintain cohesion of the musical moment (Figure 6).

The image shows a musical score for a scene with overlapping vocal parts. The score is in G major and 4/4 time. It features overlapping vocal lines for Tobias, 1st Woman, 2nd Woman, 1st Man, 2nd Man, and 3rd Man, along with a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: Tobias: 'Ow a-bout a sam-ple?'; 1st Woman: 'Have you ev-er smelled a clean-er (To 2nd Man)'; 2nd Woman: 'Is-n't it a'; 1st Man: 'Pen-ny buys a bot-tle, might as well... (To 2nd Woman)'; 2nd Man: 'Wot-cher think?'; 3rd Man: 'Wot-cher think?'. The piano accompaniment consists of chords and a simple bass line.

Fig. 6. *Overlapping moments*

While working with the ensemble, the repetition of musical themes, such as the main theme from „The Ballad of Sweeney Todd“, created confusion. For this reason, it was essential to explain from a dramaturgically point of view why the musical theme is repeated. It was important to emphasize that each repetition is not identical, both musically and dramaturgically, but actually adds new elements that contribute to the evolution of the dramatic action, while maintaining the thriller feeling throughout the play.

An example is the fact that the show begins with the musical moment „The Ballad of Sweeney Todd“, in which the ensemble addresses the audience directly. This musical passage functions as both an introduction and a significant musical thematic guide of the show. It is performed by the ensemble, symbolizing the collective perspective of the characters and the community surrounding *Sweeney Todd* as well as the moral implications main character. When the chorus sings the ballad a second time, in section *10b*, the focus shifts to the judge. This repetition deepens the narrative by highlighting the judge's role as the antagonist and embodiment of corrupt authority (Figure 7).

#10b – Ballad of Sweeney Todd**MEMBERS OF THE COMPANY**

SWEENEY PONDERED AND SWEENEY PLANNED,
 LIKE A PERFECT MACHINE 'E PLANNED,
 BARBING THE HOOK, BAITING THE TRAP,
 SETTING IT OUT FOR THE BEADLE TO SNAP.

SLYLY COURTED 'IM, SWEENEY DID,
 SET A SORT OF A SCENE, 'E DID,
 LAYING THE TRAIL, SHOWING THE TRACES,
 LETTING IT LEAD TO HIGHER PLACES ...

SWEENEY PONDERED AND SWEENEY PLANNED,
 LIKE A PERFECT MACHINE 'E PLANNED,
 SLYLY COURTED 'IM, SWEENEY DID,
 LAYING THE TRAIL, SHOWING THE TRACES,
 LETTING IT LEAD TO HIGHER PLACES
 'E DID, DID SWEENEY –

OPTIONAL CUT – This scene was cut from the original New York production during previews for reasons of time. It is included here as an optional scene because the authors feel it helps particularize JUDGE TURPIN.

If you are not performing #11 – “Johanna,” turn to page 47.

Fig. 7. *Ballad of Sweeney Todd*

5.4. Physical acting and Choreography

Movement was stylized to suggest violence and death rather than depict them explicitly. The use of abstract gestures and non-literal choreography helped the young actors convey dark themes without being burdened by them or looking forced. For example, the only scene in the show that truly contains a choreographic moment happens in act I, the scene of Lucy's assault (rape). Her story is abstracted through choreography and flashbacks and is presented as a „dumb show” that juxtaposes the horrifying action with waltz music evoking a sense of celebration and joy. In a youth theater we placed even greater emphasis on these stylistic choices, choreography and symbolism, using movements that suggested a more mocking atmosphere rather than a sexual one. The only suggestion of the assault was the ensemble painting Lucy's face with black makeup. We felt that this representation highlighted the cruelty of the crowd and effectively underscored the tragedy of Lucy's situation.

I also established a convention for all the murders in the show that involved not depicting the actual act of throat-cutting or using fake blood, as I feared it might come across as ridiculous rather than scary. Therefore, I resorted to suggestion through light for blood and I utilized a rotating chair, allowing the audience to see Sweeney making the cutting gesture while the victim faced away from them. This way, the person in the chair would immediately disappear through a trap door, creating an effective and chilling moment without resorting to graphic violence. This approach not only maintained the tension but also left much to the audience's imagination, enhancing the overall impact of the scene.

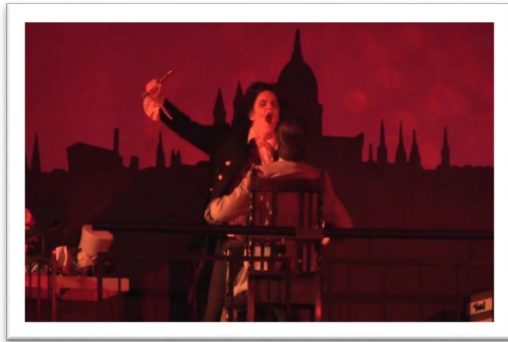


Fig. 8. *The killing the Judge*



Fig. 9. *The killing of Pirelli*

It was also important to clearly illustrate the distinction between the ensemble, which functions as a Greek chorus (Fig. 10) (Act 1: „The Ballad of Sweeney Todd”, „My Friends” Reprise, „The Ballad of Sweeney Todd”, 10b, “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd” #19, Act 2 Quintet, „The Letter”, „Fog's Asylum”, „City on Fire”, „Judge's Return” finale, final scene part III) and the musical moments when the ensemble becomes an integral part of the story (e.g., „Pirelli's Miracle Elixir” (Fig. 11), „The Contest”, „God That's Good”). I chose to express this distinction through acting, scenic movement and light, by using a statuary, almost frozen quality for the chorus in the Ballads versus a more dynamic, fluid movement for the ensemble in other parts of the storyline.



Fig. 10. *“Ballad of Sweeney Todd” finale – ensemble as Greek Choir*



Fig. 11. *"Pirelli's Miracle Elixir" – ensemble as part of the storyline*

Toby's character, in particular, was explored deeply, as he represents a dramatic arc that leads to justice at the conclusion of the story. I emphasized his importance in the final scene by having him remain on stage alone, addressing the audience directly (Figure 12) – a final nod to Brechtian alienation. This direct address, along with the stylized, scenic movement, softened the violence while maintaining thematic intensity.



Fig. 12. *Toby, finale*

5.5. Costumes, set and lighting design

We aimed for the set and lighting design to work in harmony, crafting a cohesive visual narrative that seamlessly integrated elements of Expressionism and Brechtian minimalism. This combination allowed us to evoke the emotional intensity characteristic of Expressionism, using bold colors and striking contrasts to heighten the dramatic moments. Simultaneously, we employed Brechtian minimalism to strip away superfluous details, encouraging the audience to engage critically with the themes and characters. The set featured a slightly tilted platform with an attached silhouette of London, evoking a continuous sense of looming danger and imbalance. The lighting design prominently utilized a cyclorama (Figure 13), which became a pivotal element in suggesting the characters' inner turmoil and enhancing the chorus's interventions. By employing strong colors like red, purple, and blue behind the simple bleak, dark set, the lighting conveyed the characters' emotions or reflected the time of day, sometimes even enhancing the comic elements of the text. This visual impact significantly enriched the overall production. With Mrs. Lovett's costumes, we sought to highlight the Brechtian elements that I believe define her character.

In the first act, her attire was deliberately crafted to emphasize her greed and fraudulent nature, featuring a ragged dress which conveyed her lower social status and unscrupulous business practices. As the story progresses into the second act, we transitioned to a more sophisticated costume for Mrs. Lovett, reflecting her ascent in society following the reopening of the pie shop. This transformation was marked by richer fabrics and more tailored designs, symbolizing not only her newfound success but also the superficial allure of social mobility. In this context, her elegant attire also serves as a visual irony, masking the darker realities of her actions and the underlying themes of exploitation and corruption that Brecht often explored in his works.



Fig. 13. “Epiphany” – conveying mental break down through color using the cyclorama

6. Conclusion

Ultimately, *Sweeney Todd* serves as a platform for young performers to engage with complex moral questions, enriching their artistic development and fostering critical thinking regarding moral values, social norms, and more complex inner feelings. The article highlights the potential of challenging material in Youth Theater to cultivate deeper understanding and appreciation of the arts.

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