Gripping stuff from WAAPA

MUSICAL

Sweeney Todd
By Stephen Sondheim
WAAPA Geoff Gibbs Theatre
Review: Rosalind Appleby

Sweeney Todd is Stephen Sondheim’s darkest musical and a challenging final production for WAAPA’s third-year music theatre students. The story about the neck-slitting barber from Victorian London’s dingy underbelly provided ample inspiration for director David King and his team.

Costume designer Iona McAuley revelled in the shabbiness while there were floods of red in Tess Reuvers’ gothic lighting. The creative use of a transparent folding screen (set design by Nikita Lewis) partitioned the orchestra from the action, doubled as a backdrop and also created a silhouette of Sweeney Todd’s murders when backlit.

But the gore wasn’t hidden for long, with Todd and his barber’s chair centre stage in Act Two to slit throats. Todd was portrayed sympathetically by the tall Timothy Monley, with shadowy make-up giving his eyes a drugged stupor.

The story spins on a barber who turns to murder to avenge the loss of his wife and daughter, but in this production his character is bleak rather than menacing.

Monley’s singing was strong and coarse, but his slurred diction made him difficult to understand. In fact shabby diction in general and a sluggish start meant it took a while for the show to take off, but with the arrival of Mrs Lovett the melodrama began to take shape.

Katie McKee’s spunky Mrs Lovett soon had everyone caught in her tangle of deceit. She sang with an articulate, beguiling alto voice. A Little Priest had the audience captivated as she and Todd listed the occupations of the unfortunates who had sat in the barber’s chair and ended up in her meat pies. The stringy fiddler, the heavenly tasting priest, the piping hot piccolo player: Sondheim’s puns rolled by.

Supporting cast included the fresh-faced but rather under-pitched Benjamin Giraud as Anthony Hope, the compelling Andrew Baker as Beadle Bamford, Nat Jobe’s solid baritone as the slimy Judge Turpin and the sweet soprano of Tessa Hurst as Johanna. The pathos of Adam Rennie (Tobias Ragg) in Not While I’m Around was a melodious contrast with the dissonant sophistication in the rest of Sondheim’s score.

What started as revenge on the upper classes escalates into deranged violence that destroys almost everyone. It’s gripping theatre.

Sweeney Todd ends on Saturday.
Centre stage: Timothy Monley as Sweeney Todd.