Written by Thom White
Monday, 25 April 2011 06:00

When the cast for the Harrison Hilltop Theatre's *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* was revealed several weeks ago, I'll admit I was concerned. While I'd previously admired the work of most of the actors, I wasn't sure they were up to the tasks of the roles they'd been awarded – chiefly Tom Walljasper, cast as the titular barber. While Walljasper excels at comedic roles, I worried that, with his smirking, tongue-in-cheek style of delivery, he wouldn't be able to carry the dramatic weight of Stephen Sondheim's killer character. But after seeing Thursday's opening-night performance, I'm pleased to admit that I was wrong. *Very* wrong; Walljasper's ability to handle the role was apparent with the first lyric he sang, which carried with it a dark, sinister, intense appeal.

Co-directors Jason Platt's and Tristan Layne Tapscott's overall effort, however, took at least half an hour to grow on me. In hindsight, I realize the size of the performance space (or lack thereof) inhibited the scale of their creation. Yet at the time, my disconnect with the musical – about a barber set on revenge against the lustful judge who jailed him years ago – was mostly due to the minimal amount of movement in Platt's and Tapscott's work. While some of the blame did lie with a few of the actors (some of whom seemed uncertain about their motivations behind standing in a certain spot other than being *told* to stand there), most of it lay with the theatre's stage limitations. In visual and emotional terms, Platt and Tapscott have created something grander than the space in which it's being played – a show that deserves more room to not only allow the actors more movement, but help differentiate the different settings in which they perform. (The intentionally shabby set design places Joanna's window, Mrs. Lovett's pie shop, and the shop's cellar only a few steps apart from each other, although Todd's barber shop is on a raised platform with a full staircase leading up to it.)

That being said, the directors do fine work within the space they're given; while a larger performance area would allow the play to reach its full potential, given the restrictions, it's still quite good. In fact, the Hilltop's effort is only the second *Sweeney Todd* staging of the several I've seen (including the film version) that, I think, effectively captures this masterpiece's ominousness and the characters' descent into insanity, and that has a lot to do with C.J. Langdon's turn as the sweet, slow-witted Tobias. Langdon, with whom I was impressed in the Hilltop's *Frost/Nixon*, is remarkable yet again. Although he has a boyish face, Langdon really captures the childish naïveté and innocence of his character with his puppy-eyed glances, and while he has some problems with pitch, his sharp comic delivery makes them easy to overlook. The true strength of Langdon's portrayal, however, is showcased in how he slowly darkens Tobias' purity, with that darkness overwhelming it by the musical's penultimate scene (one I won't detail, for fear that

someone reading this actually
hasn't
seen Sondheim's show yet).

It was Rachelle Walljasper's Mrs. Lovett, though, that I found most surprising, as her characterization is completely different from that of any other meat-pie-maker I've seen or heard. There's usually at least a *hint* of evil, or self-serving, capitalistic desire, in Mrs. Lovett, but Walljasper plays the part with neither; everything that her Mrs. Lovett suggests to Todd (renting a room, turning his victims into pies) seems to serve one purpose: to get closer to him so she can enjoy his company. The performer's greatest moments are her physical portrayals of surprised delight whenever her character thinks that Todd is giving her attention of a more-than-friendly nature; with Todd's every touch, Walljasper offers a sincere, doe-eyed look of hopeful wonder that just melted my heart.

In other roles, Joe Maubach provides laugh-out-loud-worthy comic relief (and the show's most pitch-perfect vocal performance) with his Pirelli, and Mark Ruebling brings a slightly eccentric nature to his Judge Turpin and shades him beyond mere evil, making him more realistically human. Angela Elliott's physical portrayal (her facial and full-body tics especially) are most impressive in her role as the insane Beggar Woman, while Matt Mercer delightfully shades his Beadle Bamford, turning the unscrupulous character into an amusing, likable man who also happens to be ... well, unscrupulous. Krianna Walljasper (Tom's and Rachelle's daughter) clearly has a long stage career ahead of her, with her pleasing singing voice, pitch, comic timing, and stage presence – all of which she's acquired while still in elementary school!

And I would be remiss not to mention lighting designer Joe Simpson's work. With his frequent use of back-lighting forming foreboding silhouettes, and his visual schemes creating heavily shadowed spaces, Simpson's efforts add a notably menacing air to Harrison Hilltop's impressive, if spatially limited, production.

For tickets and information, call (563) 449-6371 or visit HarrisonHilltop.com .