

Interview for THE MUSICAL in Korea

Adrian Osmond on *Sweeney Todd*, November 2007

The first thing that caught my eyes was the enormous “three storeys stage,” which made the characters on the stage look smaller. It gave me the feeling that the stage in Sweeney Todd is somewhat more important than the characters. What is the reason for using the “mechanical/machine-like” stage?

For me, the relationship between set designer and director is paramount, and I loved working with Seung Ho Jeong on *Sweeney Todd*. The best creative partnerships are those when the ideas from both people fuse together into one vision, where you forget whose idea was whose, and certainly that was the case here.

The set is in no way meant to be more important than the characters, but it is meant to provide the framework for their world and their emotional journeys – in other words, it is there to help tell the story. In a large venue like the LG Arts Center, there is always a danger that subtle gestures & feelings get lost, so set, lighting, costume all need to emphasise these and help clarify them for the audience. I think it’s my duty as director to utilise the space that we’re given as best as possible; and while the LG stage isn’t particularly deep, it has a wonderful sense of height that we wanted to use. The set for *Sweeney Todd* uses colours and materials that open the space up and don’t hide the action. In one way this makes the set less imposing, but, as you point out, in another way it makes the characters appear like they are merely part of a larger organism, and that they are not fully in control of their own destinies.

In the original lyrics, there are several references to the mechanism of revenge. The chorus sings about Todd – “Sweeney began the engines turning”, and “like a perfect machine he planned”. Stories involving fate and revenge seem to operate like clockwork. There is no escape from destiny. It’s an unstoppable force, and that’s the case from the beginning of drama with the Greeks through to modern cinema like *Kill Bill*. And there are plenty of bloody revenge stories in Korean cinema too that operate on this same principle. But the machine also demonstrates the helplessness of most people within society – as Todd expresses in “Epiphany”, each person has their “proper

place". And *Sweeney Todd* is a story about an individual challenging the system, challenging the natural order of things. Todd will stop at nothing to achieve his aims. So, really, the set expresses two contrary ideas – Todd as part of a machine, and Todd rebelling against a machine.

At first, Todd only plans to kill two people, both of whom have wronged him and his family terribly. And then this turns into a need to punish the whole world, as he realises that everyone deserves to die. So it seemed important to reveal at the end of the story that the meat grinder is just one part of a massive killing machine that envelops them all. I was also quite influenced by a film from the 1980s, *Tetsuo*, where a man gradually turns into a machine; to an extent this tied in with Todd's relationship with his razors, how these metal blades complete his own body.

Interestingly, Sondheim originally planned to create *Sweeney Todd* as a chamber opera before Harold Prince got involved, so it certainly can work on a smaller scale than this production, but then again it can also get much bigger. I noticed that for the forthcoming film, Tim Burton is working with the designer Dante Ferretti, who is famed for creating massive sets that are several miles long!

The distance between the "first floor" and the "third floor" seemed quite far and Beadle climbs up the ladder and goes out on the third floor. Couldn't he just appear from the third floor in the first place? People see that as a device to show the class difference, but the distance made the blocking complicated from time to time; for example, in the scene when Johanna and Anthony meet for the first time, Johanna appears on the third floor when Anthony first sees her; and the next time she is in the second floor.

Beadle's climbing is intended as a comment on class and social hierarchy, though obviously we don't treat the different floors as belonging exclusively to people from different backgrounds. To have the Beadle appear on the same floor as the Judge from the outset would have taken power away from the presence of Judge Turpin. And it seemed quite comic (to me at least) that the Judge is having his garments changed by a servant while the Beadle struggles up a ladder; and when the Beadle reaches the top and is out of breath, the Judge doesn't even notice and commands the Beadle to follow him immediately. It's interesting, actually, how blind the Judge is to the world

around him. I'm very glad we were able to use such a high stage; it makes Turpin's judgement far more terrifying than if he was on a level with the boy.

With the first scene between Johanna and Anthony, it seemed important to maintain a distance between the would-be lovers, so that the first time they touch is during "Kiss Me". It's fascinating, by the way, how little time these characters spend in each other's company. In the score, they are meant to touch hands when Anthony approaches with the bird, but I wanted to maintain a separation, keep Johanna in her prison, and therefore increase the sense of unfulfilled desire. But I wanted to bring Johanna tantalisingly closer to Anthony as well, giving him (and the audience) increased hope. Perhaps this action appears overly fussy; but if you look at the stage directions in the score, they are actually more complicated than what we've done!! When Johanna reappears at the window, Anthony is meant to beckon her down; she is meant to hesitate, then disappear, and then come out of the front door – all before he sings again!

Harold Prince was the original director of the show. How much influence did you get from him?

I would find it impossible to direct something if I had fallen in love with someone else's production; I would constantly feel like I was living in the shadow of someone else's artistic triumph. But I found reading Prince's comments about producing *Sweeney Todd* very interesting. There is one sequence in Prince's production that I think is quite brilliant - namely the walk between the Beadle and the Judge, where their journey around the set is facilitated by the chorus and stage hands moving walkways into place. I really admire that – it's a great challenge to have people stroll around a stage for several minutes with a sense of purpose, and I think Prince found a very clever solution for that moment.

But that production is almost thirty years old, so inevitably the aesthetic vision is going to be different from ours. Moreover, DVD isn't a good medium through which to experience a theatrical production. The actors are often shouting, making exaggerated gestures that might work in a large Broadway theatre, but that are at odds with the intimacy required on the small screen. For instance, at the end of "My Friends", in the

Prince production, Todd shouts, “My right arm is complete again!” In our production, it’s an intense whisper. So a big difference between Prince’s vision and the Korean version is that the original production takes the performance out to the audience, but we’re constantly trying to draw the audience closer, to make them lean in.

Our huge set may give the impression that I’m only interested in creating pictures, but I can assure you that we spent many, many long hours in the rehearsal room discussing these characters, working out *why* they say these things, and why they perform these actions. Perhaps elements of our production resemble Prince’s to some people, because both productions draw out some social issues, and Prince’s set used several floors to tell the story, including a lot of staircases. There are some classic images that we kept too, like Todd and Lovett wielding a blade and rolling pin at the end of Act One (which is in the score, after all); but on a detailed level, I think the productions are very different. At the end of the first act, Todd and Lovett looked out at the audience in Prince’s production; but in our version, their eyes are fixed on each other. It may seem like nothing, but to me that’s a big difference.

It’s also worth mentioning that the Judge’s song “Johanna” was cut by Prince; he told Sondheim that it needed to be cut because the show was too long, but actually it seems that Prince found the scene repellent. I think that every major revival has kept it in since.

Sondheim used the Victorian melodramatic form but Harold Prince was more interested in the social background of the era. I think your direction has even more interest in the social implication than Harold Prince did. What do you think is the difference between the Sweeney Todd of Sondheim, Harold Prince and you?

I’ll tell you one difference between our production the original Broadway production: money. (And by that I don’t mean how much each show has cost!!!) If you look at the original production, people rarely pay for anything – in *God That’s Good* they get all those pies for free! Perhaps in a large theatre like the LG Arts Center not everyone will notice, but money changes hands frequently in our production. It’s a mercenary society, the same as society today, whether we live in London, New York, or Seoul. It’s vital to show that the deaths of these (innocent?) people make Lovett rich. That’s

certainly what I'm trying to emphasise at the end of "God That's Good" – the murder upstairs provides the money downstairs. And, again, this is something that continues in our world today – people are expected to work in appalling conditions, or perform appalling acts, in order to make profit for others. So, I guess in ways like that, perhaps our production has more interest in the social implications than Prince did!

Having said that, we felt that there was little point in delving into the exact nature of Victorian London for a production in Seoul; but I would have felt the same way if I had been creating *Sweeney Todd* in Britain. I find there can be a danger in creating productions that are too accurate historically; you can get so bound up in these details that you lose sight of what really matters. The nature of theatre resists this sort of realistic approach – it's better left to cinema. A musical in which people sing most of their dialogue isn't overly realistic to begin with! Obviously, there are details that we've tried to treat "realistically" - the killing of the bird is more shocking because its wings flap; and there are lots of pies that really do get consumed on stage every night!

What's important is to look at how a story can comment on our modern times. So while the set is influenced by the historical context, it isn't primarily intended as a comment on the industrial revolution.

But I do think that some of the social background is needed to make sense of the story. For instance, one problem in the piece is that Lovett initially laughs at Todd's plan to kill the Judge and the Beadle, claiming that he will never be able to get near them. Surely what she means is that, presuming he wishes to kill them in private rather than in the street, the class divide prevents Todd and these people having any point of contact. How you make that clear is a real challenge, and it can only be displayed through the social hierarchy. (I must admit that I don't fully understand why Todd doesn't just strike them down in public. There's never any sense of him planning to continue his life after completing his revenge. And he doesn't seem to be afraid of being punished – he only seems to be afraid of not getting the Judge. But obviously killing them immediately wouldn't make for a great evening of theatre!)

Overall, we've probably treated the piece more seriously than the original production, resisting some of the comedy and aiming for emotional truth. I think we have made some of the humour less farcical than Sondheim may have intended, and we have

made the melodramatic horror more believable. Underneath Lovett's buoyancy, for instance, there is real pain in Ji-Min Hong's performance. Lovett is a desperately unhappy woman who just wants to be loved. And we tried to treat our Beggar Woman as being truly desperate and genuinely hungry. It may be entertaining if you play lots of this story for laughs, but there is a danger that you lose that sense of real shock at what Todd and Lovett are doing. There needs to be genuine, human pain being felt when Todd cradles Lucy's corpse. If that isn't truthful and believable, then for me there's no show.

Theatre can't change the world; but it can change people's lives. It can change the way people think on an individual basis. An audience pays a lot of money to see a show. So it's important to me that we create something that has a lasting impact, and that goes on a journey with each audience member as they continue with their daily lives. In the end, whether right or wrong, almost every decision that I made on this production comes back to that principle.

Other than Judge Turpin's idea of marrying her daughter which is directly shown to the audience, I saw a lot of twisted sexual images through out the show. Pirelli making the foams was connected to masturbation and the Beggar Woman and Johanna just out of the mad house also had explicit sexual codes.

Yes, there's plenty of sexual imagery in this production. I must admit that I didn't think about the sexual imagery much in advance, it all burst out in the rehearsal room! There's a lot of repression in the world of *Sweeney Todd*, so sex is going to appear wherever it can.

Inevitably, any contest between two men is also a contest of sexual prowess, so the size of Pirelli's razor implies that he's not as well endowed as Todd. To me, it seemed important to show that Todd is highly desirable sexually. And yet he never appears to satisfy Lovett; he cannot give her what she wants.

Meanwhile, we have the Beggar Woman who is desperate to have sex with any stranger that will grant it. Obviously, that's there already in the unpleasant words that she sings, and it is awful to think that this woman was once the chaste, loyal Lucy.

That's also where the idea came from for Johanna to behave like her mother after escaping the asylum. Previously, Johanna's behaviour has been quite modest, but the experience in the asylum has altered her. After all, who knows what happened to this pretty girl in that prison, who knows how Fogg abused her? And once you know the full story, it makes it doubly horrific to think that both mother and daughter approach Anthony in this manner.

The relationship that really surprised me was the one between Judge Turpin and Sweeney Todd. These enemies have two seductive duets together in the barber's shop. One of Sondheim's outstanding skills is his ability to pull you in two directions at once, and here he fuses together Todd's desire to kill Turpin with Turpin's desire to bed Todd's daughter. There's something very intimate about the act of shaving as well. And for me, Todd reacts to the Judge's Return in Act Two like the Judge was a lover who had sworn he was never coming back; it's a very strange, dream-like moment, with neither character fully in control of their senses. I don't mean in any way that there's sexual attraction between these two figures – but sex and death have been linked in literature many times, and here there's a powerful connection between the sexual orgasm and the release that Todd gets from all that blood flowing out of the Judge's neck. And then, of course, there's Jung-Hwan's fantastic idea of actually giving Judge Turpin the "kiss of death" before sending his body down the chute. It's one of my favourite moments in the show.

The costume of the chorus reminds us of workers in the factory. Also, over the middle of the play, the chorus screw in more and more light bulbs. These directions seem to have more connections with the monstrous industrialization than with the characters. Could you explain more on this?

Yes, the chorus are meant to look like workers inside the machine, and part of the aim is for the performers to lose their individual characteristics in some scenes (particularly the ballads). When we were casting this show, I talked endlessly about the age of the characters (I must have driven everyone mad with this!!). The chorus in *Sweeney Todd* should represent a society of all ages, sexes, abilities & disabilities. And when I was sent pictures of the chorus and saw all these beautiful young faces, I couldn't see how they could accurately communicate this ugly, dirty society! Of course, the more I

worked with this chorus, the more I fell in love with their energy and commitment, and I think they have become one of the strongest elements of this show. But because they were all the same age, it seemed important to emphasise their uniformity.

A chorus serves different purposes in different plays; in an opera like *Peter Grimes* by Benjamin Britten, the chorus is central to the plot and propels the action forward. In other works, the chorus is simply there to create bigger effects. In *Sweeney Todd*, they sing the ballads, and so they provide a framework and a commentary on the action, much like a Greek chorus. In some scenes, they are part of the action, but at other times they step outside, and address the audience directly, not least at the very beginning. In the score, they don't have many individual characteristics, so that's what I responded to – I think we have personalised the chorus as much as the piece demands.

I like creating productions in which the set grows and transforms over the course of a performance. The chorus dismantle Todd's boat at the beginning, and it seemed essential for them to build a climatic image too. So they screw in light bulbs during the ballads, which finally glow through the energy created by the machine and the meat grinder. It's a practical action – they are workers and their work is to screw in the lights – but its also meant as a poetic one too. There's an interesting question that follow on from this: Who is in charge of these workers? Whose orders are they following? Who owns the machine?

The chorus moves the stage around and we can say that this is alienation effect. Brecht wanted to show the audience that they have the power to change the world while showing the stage being rebuilt and deconstructed in the middle of the show. Does the stage direction of this show have the same intention as Brecht?

I read one article with Sondheim when he got very angry at an interviewer for drawing parallels between Brecht and *Sweeney Todd* – so he might take great offence at this! I love creating productions that one minute reassure the audience by saying “It's just a show” and the next minutes say, “This is really happening”. You can really play with this in theatre, encouraging the audience to enjoy the fakery of the stage, but ultimately forcing them to confront themselves and look at their own actions.

I can't claim that what you say about Brecht was my absolute intention; because the chorus characters really are following orders when they move the set around – they don't believe that they have the power to change the world. Each individual in this audience may have control over their own destiny, and therefore have the power to change their own personal world. But whether the audience has the power to change the world at large is another matter. I'm quite realistic about this; the number of people that see a theatre production is tiny in comparison to the number of people that see a movie, so you have to aim to create an impact on an individual basis only. But I like Brecht's belief a lot; it's a beautiful thought.

There is no one who is sane in Sweeney Todd. Anthony seems to be an exception at first sight but he also becomes deeply wounded by the end of the show. I think that is why I was interested by the fact that the song "No Place Like London" appears as the first and last of Anthony's tunes. What is the reason that all the people in Sweeney Todd are wounded and hurt?

I find the word "sane" an interesting choice. Perhaps this is partly a translational or cultural issue, but I would question how we term people sane and insane. (I've heard Sondheim refer to Todd as insane, so you're not alone!) Often in my work, I have to research conditions, illnesses and illegal actions that would only be done by people that are labelled as insane, or at least labelled as mentally unstable. And what always surprises me when I do this research is that I discover just how close our own thought processes are to the thoughts of these people. The logic behind their actions could easily become our logic – we're all much closer to committing awful acts, or behaving in socially unacceptable ways that we might like to admit.

I feel I understand Todd's actions much of the time (if I couldn't understand them, then I couldn't direct the show); and I hope many people in the audience do too. His thirst for revenge is a natural human impulse. How many people, to defend their family, would kill without hesitation? This urge has the same drive as Todd's.

The change in Anthony is an interesting one, because in this production we went against what the music and words imply in his final scene. I couldn't understand how

these two young people could have a happy reunion after everything they had experienced. It would negate their journeys; there would be no sense of development. We know from our own lives that people and relationships constantly alter. And these two have endured so much, both emotionally and physically, that they have changed, and they cannot recapture the innocence of their earlier connection.

Anthony's change is particularly painful; all his hopes and ideals are crushed by the city and its society. He realises how helpless he is. I think that's the truth of it. Everyone is wounded and hurt because of the world they live in. It is often cold, selfish and unforgiving. I really wanted to emphasise that by including moments such as Toby's beating. If it is socially acceptable to imprison your adopted daughter or beat up your apprentice, then it's unsurprising that everyone is wounded deeply. This story is littered with the sense of loss, with the weight of the past.

I heard that you wanted the blood to be pumped out realistically. The play has a strong characteristic as a black comedy and doesn't the blood weaken the characteristic of the show?

Yes, I did want as realistic an effect as possible for the blood. Interestingly, Sondheim requested for more blood to be put on the poster for the original production – there was a lot of gore in what he had written, and he didn't want to hide that. Having your throat cut is an awful death – I think that you drown on your own blood. Emphasising the true horror of these deaths may diminish the comedic effect, but I think it is vital to present an honest portrayal of how these people die. Otherwise it's too easy to dismiss this story, in my opinion. If we simply laugh, then we've not really acknowledged any connection between the fictional world on stage and the real world outside. That was the original impulse behind having the shoes cascade down to the ground: for the audience to recognise that the deaths on stage aren't entertaining – that countless people really have died. Perhaps it's not an appropriate comparison, but in the Nazi death camps the Jews would strip before entering the gas chambers, leaving behind piles of clothes, shoes, and other possessions – and these empty objects were all that remained to represent the lives of the millions who died.

It's true that I have shied away from some of the humour. This is partly because I think that some of the comedy has dated in a way that the drama hasn't, and partly because some of the comedy doesn't translate as well to the Korean culture and language. But I have tried to maintain the black comedy too – for instance in Act II's *Johanna*, each time a bloody customer goes down the chute, a tray of pies immediately pops out of the front – not only displaying the perfection of the machine, but hopefully raising a smile too! I also kept in a comic line that was cut on Broadway – namely Lovett's response to Todd's Epiphany at the end of the song. It's a risky moment, because her words completely undercut the intensity of Todd's performance, but I really like the way it wrenches the audience from the drama to the comedy of the piece. We've also added an extra twist to the sequence with Pirelli's hand, in which Pirelli actually grabs hold of Toby, so it's certainly not a serious evening the whole way through!

What a lot of your questions highlight is the richness of Sondheim's work. Directors face the same issue with Shakespeare, and many other great writers. There is so much in this piece that you have to make choices about what you want to emphasise; and when you make one thing clear, you inevitably lose something else in the process. Nonetheless, I hope we have retained a lot of the black comedy while treating *Sweeney Todd* as a serious tale that has something to say.

I was impressed with the scene where the chorus act both as the corpses and the mad people (which also seemed like a dance) when Johanna ran out of the mad house. What was your intention on this scene?

By this point in the story, events are moving faster, and people's plans are threatening to spin out of control. It makes me think about Iago's line from one of the final scenes of Shakespeare's *Othello*: "This is the night that either makes me, or fordoes me quite." In other words, everything is building to a climax, but neither Todd – nor anyone else – is in charge of where it's going. Serial killers often seem to get caught for similar reasons; the murders become more frequent, they get sloppy, mistakes are made... and it's the same situation here. In this particular sequence, "City on Fire", the inmates from the asylum are now loose in the city – which goes back to your earlier question of whether there is anyone left who is sane. I wanted to create a sense of chaos – bodies littering the ground, a mound of shoes scattered across the stage, and characters like

the Beggar Woman appearing out of nowhere. Realities and locations are blurring – nothing is clear any more. It's a feverish state that prepares the way for the stillness of the final climactic scenes.

The final scene where the machine starts to work seemed to portray the inhumane machine of civilization (showing that this tragedy is not only an individual story of Sweeney Todd). The lower layer controls the upper layer of the society - quite familiar with the Marxist view of seeing the society. Does this somehow show your view of the world?

One of my favourite moments during this whole process was watching the light play on the audience's faces as they stared up at all those gears springing into action and moving round and round. I'm glad that you feel that is not just Sweeney Todd's tragedy; the machine envelops them all. I think a lot of people feel impotent in this world, like they are being driven by a huge uncaring machine, from the moment the alarm clock wakes them up in the morning to the moment that their watch tells them that it's time to go to bed. And in Britain there's an increase in voter apathy, because many people don't believe that their voice makes a difference, or that their vote will really change anything.

I'm not sure what my view of the world is; it changes all the time. And really, my view of the world is irrelevant. I'm not trying to impose my opinion of society on the audience, or make any great statement; I'm trying to tell this story as best as I can. I've focused on trying to make the narrative clear. For instance, in Act Two Todd gives Anthony a gun, so I kept wondering, "Why does Todd have a gun? Where did it come from?" It seemed a surprising element to introduce so late in the story. And when we had the idea that it was Pirelli's gun, then the moment made sense. In a similar way, the machine is there to clarify the story, to clarify what I think the story is about, not necessarily what I think of the world. If the production makes a powerful emotional connection with the audience, then I believe the thoughts will follow afterwards; but the thoughts and interpretation aren't up to me – that's up to each person that watches.

Some people interpret the hanging of the clothes and washing of the hands in the last scene as alienation effect. I personally think there is more layered meaning into it. What will it be?

In the opening ballad, the chorus put on their coats, partly as a symbol for taking on their roles. In the final ballad, they take their coats off to signify that this is the end of the tale; and the washing of the hands has a similar meaning behind it. But of course there are other layers. We've tried to inject religious symbolism into these scenes, including the mast on Todd's ship which doubles as a crucifix. And for me the coats and the light bulbs also represent souls, spirits, hovering above us all. But in the end, these images and actions mean what you think they mean – if I had intended to communicate an exact meaning, I would have tried to make that as clear as possible. Sometimes people have interpreted my work in ways that I have found surprising, but they have been fascinating interpretations. So I don't want to be too reductive here and close down the thoughts of the audience. Whatever else, the final image is there to move the audience emotionally, not to distance them from the action with alienation techniques. In many ways, the final scene remains the one that I am most proud of in this production.

I saw the washing of the hands as the ritual of redemption. Thinking that the sins are caused by the society and the historical timing, washing of the hands gave an impression that it gave the ones who are murdered by Sweeney an indulgence. However, Sweeney and Lovett don't wash their hands. Why is that?

Yes, this moment is intended to be a ritual of redemption, both for the performers and for the audience – though not necessarily for the characters. It's a ritual of purity, of washing away sins, and (like Pontius Pilate in the Bible) it is an attempt to wash away any blame, to absolve them of guilt. Theatre is based on ritual, on a religious template, and this sense of ritual was very important to me.

One reason why Todd and Lovett don't wash their hands is purely practical – they sing their phrases much later than everyone else! So it wouldn't make sense for them to join the line. But there is something else going on in that final scene: the sense that Sweeney Todd is rising from the grave. The other performers are finishing the story, but Todd is returning. There's a sense that he will always be with us, always be a presence in our society. For me, historical timing doesn't cause these sins alone: many elements of this story could happen today. Similar stories, similar characters, similar

impulses towards mass murder and genocide remain in our world – we can't dismiss them so easily as to blame them on that time, or on that particular social climate.

For a while I couldn't work out what Lovett's purpose was in the final ballad – she sings her phrase so near to its end. Why didn't Sondheim have her sing earlier with the other characters? But then I realised that she should bring on Todd's coat, an action that makes her a vital part of the final ritual. So while the chorus take off their own coats, the people who he killed lift Todd to his feet. And then Lovett places Todd's coat on his shoulders, which brings his spirit back to life. Todd turns to face the audience, and it is as if he is returning to the first ballad, ready to tell his tale again.