

A LEVEL
Teacher Guide

DRAMA AND THEATRE

H459
For first teaching in 2016

Sweeney Todd – The Demon Barber of Fleet Street – Stephen Sondheim

Version 1



Sweeney Todd – The Demon Barber of Fleet Street

Summary

The story of an East End of London barber with revenge in his heart and murder on his mind is an old one, preceding Victorian England. There are various versions as plays, some with music, but when Stephen Sondheim, famed for *West Side Story*, *Gypsy*, *Company* (and later, *Into the Woods*), saw how playwright Christopher Bond had treated *Sweeney Todd* at Joan Littlewood's Stratford East Theatre in 1973, he was hooked.

Sondheim's version is a 'musical thriller' and is based on the book by Hugh Wheeler and the Bond adaptation. Although it is important to remember that it is fiction, based on legend and some myth, murder was relatively easy to get away with in the 19th century which often fed a widespread fascination with murder (such as Jack the Ripper) and pies in London.

The backstory is of Benjamin Barker, a skilled barber working in an upstairs establishment in Fleet Street. He was happily married to Lucy and they had one child, a daughter, Johanna.

A cruel and evil judge called Turpin took a liking towards Lucy and contrived to send her husband to the Australian penal colonies for life. After 15 years of what he called 'a living hell', Barker escaped and returned to London on a ship where he met up with a sailor, Anthony, who only knew him as Sweeney Todd. This was his new, adopted name and he is described as 'a heavy-set, saturnine man in his forties.'

Almost at once he is accosted by a beggar woman who is also a prostitute. This character appears throughout the play and is rebuffed every time except by Anthony. She has an ironic and tragic role to play at the end.

He revisits his old premises now owned by a Mrs Nellie Lovett, a pie maker who remembers Barker and was sweet on him in the past and happily kept his shaving blades when he was arrested. Nobody has rented the old barber's shop since he left it, so it is available for him to set up business again.

Mrs Lovett realises he is, in fact, Barker and tells him that Lucy, having been raped by Turpin, poisoned herself and that Johanna is now his ward, living under Turpin's roof. Todd's sole purpose in life now is to be avenged on Turpin.

Sitting at a window in the judge's house, Johanna sings to some birds and is spotted by Anthony who falls instantly in love with her; this produces threats from Turpin and his sidekick Beadle Bamford.

To establish himself in business and to set a credible trap for both men, Todd challenges an apparently Italian barber Adolfo Pirelli to a public shaving and tooth-pulling contest in which Pirelli is humiliated and Todd shows himself as a cool, efficient shaver and tooth puller. Barbers would shave men, pull rotten teeth from all ages and in the 17th Century carry out minor operations.

While he waits for Bamford to come for a shave, Todd is visited by Pirelli who reveals he is Irish and, because he has recognised Todd as Barker, he demands half Todd's earnings for silence. Todd strangles him and shoves him in a trunk, with hand sticking out, which is almost discovered by the apprentice lad, Tobias. As Pirelli struggles back to life, Todd slits his throat.

Meanwhile Turpin realises as Johanna is getting older he'll be unable to control her, so decides to marry her. Anthony plans to run off with her before that can happen.

The judge is persuaded to smarten himself to appeal to Johanna so arrives at Todd's shop, and presents a perfect throat as he lies back to be shaved. Todd delays a fraction too long and is disturbed by Anthony.

Realising they must dispose of Pirelli's body (and realising too that Todd will go on killing till he can go at the judge again), Mrs Lovett comes up with the ingenious idea of baking the bodies into pies, partly inspired by her business rival Mrs Mooney who she believes puts dead cats in her pies.

Into the second Act, we see that business is good. The pie shop has a garden full of customers and Todd's barber shop has been improved; he acquires a particular, personally designed barbers' chair. Tobias is now working

for Todd and Lovett.

Johanna has disappeared, which sets Anthony off on a frantic search as Todd embarks on a feast of slaughter of people that nobody would miss. Only the smoke from the oven chimneys all night causes anybody to wonder what is going on.

We see tangible evidence of Mrs Lovett's prosperity and there's an attempt by her to make Todd join her away from the city in a better lifestyle. This falls on deaf ears as Todd's murderous obsession takes hold of him fully.

Johanna is located at Fogg's Asylum where Turpin has incarcerated her. Anthony pretends to be a wigmaker on a suggestion from Todd, and as she is rescued, shoots Fogg with Anthony's gun. Todd now has bait in the form of Johanna to trap Turpin so writes to tell him she'll be at his shop.

Tobias is very fond of Mrs Lovett and suspicious of Todd but is locked in the cookhouse where, eating pies, he discovers human parts. Beadle arrives unexpectedly to investigate complaints from neighbours of foul stench from the pie shop and is soon dispatched by Todd – his bloody body landing from the room above as a horrified Tobias watches.

The final sections of the play are full of murder, mayhem and madness. The inmates of the asylum arrive having escaped; the beggar woman is trying to report suspicions to Beadle and faces Todd with the first light of recognition. Once the judge is in the chair he too recognises Todd, but this time has his throat slit.

The climax of the play is melodramatic with deaths and revelations. The beggar woman is Lucy, Todd's wife, but before he realises it he has slashed her throat. Tobias, driven mad by the horrors he has witnessed slaughters Todd, which brings a satisfactory ending.

The Epilogue

Immediately following, a song recounting the horrors just witnessed is sung with the beggar woman, the judge, Pirelli, Beadle, Todd and Mrs Lovett returning to join in – 'to seek revenge may lead to hell!'

Note: There is a DVD available of the 2007 movie version of the musical starring Johnny Depp. Teachers should be aware that it is rated 18 and several text and action sequences are slightly different between the film and the play's text.

The author and his influences

It was the Christopher Bond play that inspired Sondheim and the show's book by Hugh Wheeler, but we tend, understandably, to credit Sondheim with the lion's share of creating *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street* and bringing it to the stage.

Stephen Sondheim's long and distinguished career is marked by many signs of success, including the fact that he is both a composer and a lyricist. That is a rare ability and his life has been spent working in the theatre, writing and composing and creating unique dramas with stunning musical arrangements.

People sometimes dismiss the genre of musical theatre as being less than 'pure drama'. There is no greater drama present on stage, for example, than in the collaborative reworking of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* into *West Side Story* (1957), where he was the lyricist.

Later to make Sondheim his protégé and remaining close friends with him, Oscar Hammerstein II, the man behind the lyrics of such classic musicals as *Oklahoma*, *Carousel*, *South Pacific*, *The King and I* and *The Sound of Music*, helped change the face of musical theatre with material no longer built solely around plot.

Sondheim took it further with his grasp of music, themes, characters and presentation to integrate into what became 'concept musicals'. For Sondheim these became treatments of loners and non-conformist outsiders.

In his chapter on Sondheim in the *Cambridge Companion to the Musical* (2002), Jim Lovensheimer states that after *Carousel* (1945), the outsider became increasingly 'the principle figure in a musical, particularly a musical by Sondheim.'

Lovensheimer points out that as a Jew and a gay man, Sondheim has felt the non-conformity of the outsider. It is the outsider's ability to escape 'reality through dreams or dreamlike fantasy' that marks him/her out as he considers Sondheim's scores as 'representations of the outsider.'



He argues that *Sweeney Todd* is 'filled with outsiders' and they are all 'dispossessed persons, outsiders in 19th century London.' He points out that the 'cannibalistic fantasy' of *A Little Priest* with 'its grotesque lyrics' describes how the professions would taste when eaten as 'a light-hearted waltz.'

This together with his undeniable influence from the stage of the entire musical theatre genre explains the principle influences on Stephen Sondheim. In his autobiography '*Finishing the Hat: The Collected Lyrics of Stephen Sondheim (Volume 1) with attendant comments, principles, heresies, grudges, whines and anecdotes*' (2010), Sondheim describes his collaborations with Richard Rogers, Leonard Bernstein and the actress Angela Lansbury among others.

However, it may also be argued that there was some Brechtian influence on him, too, albeit indirectly. The fact that Todd directly addresses the audience in the prologue to say it is a play and that the characters who have been killed rise up to complete the piece, indicate some elements of Brecht's distancing techniques in which actors demonstrated their roles rather than got deeply into them.

Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* (1928) has certain stylistic similarity and a hint of common themes with 'Sweeney Todd'.

Exploring the play

There are extensive sections of introduction which reveal much background and other thinking about this play. There is a simple summary of the plot on page xxxiii of the introduction, but a full read through allows for exploration and understanding of the play's subtleties and plot structure.

Much of the play is not spoken but sung, with words frequently underscored by music that adds a sweeping grand design to the whole construct.

The prologue is a key event as an organist plays funeral music against a front drop curtain showing a beehive design of the English class system, which sets the scene for the show. This is a simple Brechtian technique of displaying a visual representation of a theme that is to help the audience understand the class system that underpins the play (see Key Themes below).

As the play starts, the music contains the opening notes of the Roman Catholic Church's Mass for the Dead, '*Dies Irae*.' Todd is described as a machine, meaning a killing

machine, which parallels the industrial machinery around. This repeated musical motif structure is typical of much of Sondheim's work, but also of musical theatre in general. It is often the same in film music, where a theme is interpreted and reinterpreted as the story unfolds.

In Act 1 Todd and the young Anthony step off the ship, the younger man with his optimism in the song 'No Place Like London' and the older man with his realistic pessimism. The first Londoner they encounter is the Beggar Woman asking for 'Alms! Alms!' Anthony gives her a few coins, which he will do again later, and is offered 'a little jig jig' with her for a price. He is embarrassed so she turns to Todd and asks, 'Hey, don't I know you, mister?'

She is the first to think she knows him; the irony is that she should know him best of all. She will reappear at several key moments throughout the play culminating in her tragic murder at Todd's hand, the wife he lost, the mother of Johanna. This is a dramatist's device to keep the main story developing, that present revenge is driven by the tragic past.

When we meet Mrs Lovett in her pie shop, we are presented with macabre comedy amongst the grim death and harsh lives. She is a 'vigorous, slatternly woman' and is at once in action helping him eat one of what are in her own words, '*The Worst Pies in London*' with much flicking dust off the materials, crawling insects crushed and some of what we would regard as disgusting, unhygienic cooking practices. Most productions play up the inherent humour in the song.

Sondheim uses grotesque masks of animals and demons, mime and music to show (rather than tell) the critical past moment when Lucy was raped by Turpin. The story, '*Poor Thing*,' is enacted by characters of 15 years ago with Turpin and his assistant Bamford leching while Lucy remains demure.

When Todd swears revenge on Turpin and Bamford, despite having no money or way of earning a living, Lovett produces the case containing his silver-handled razors. She hadn't sold them, but kept them in case he ever came back. This is an act of foresight and love that also begins to interlock them into their criminal life to come.

It is an act of fortuitous coincidence, yet essential in the dramatic narrative that Todd has his blades back. In '*My Friends*,' Todd pours out his heart to them, as a man to his lover. He is a man again – 'my right arm is complete again' – a killing machine, a parallel to the industrial machinery of the location.



Like the good playwright that he is besides being a superb composer, Sondheim changes mood to the sound of songbirds with a bird-seller carrying a 'bizarre construction' of birdcages below Johanna's window with her 'long mane of shining blonde hair.' The caged birds are a reflection of her own caged life in Turpin's house felt through her song, '*Green Finch and Linnet Bird*.'

This is the lyrical backdrop to the naive Anthony falling for the girl immediately, an appearance of the beggar woman/Lucy and for Sondheim to bring us back to the violent realities of the piece with Beadle wringing the neck of the bird Anthony bought Johanna.

The scene in St Dunstan's marketplace where a crowd is gathered round a caravan, painted 'like a Sicilian donkey cart' and bearing the name Adolfo Pirelli, barber and tooth-puller is classic musical theatre full of colour, dramatic action and stage heavy with characters. It also sets up Beadle Bamford for his desire to be pampered by Todd, which will lead finally in his death.

The first murder we see on stage is that of Pirelli, come to blackmail Todd, and he ends up in a trunk, one hand hanging out which is almost seen by the lad, Tobias. This is very much in the melodrama, horror film (and comedy) genres.

One of the features of musical theatre is seen in the moment when Turpin is inches from Todd's razor slitting his throat, but the song 'Pretty Woman' goes on too long and Todd is disturbed and Turpin lives. The device adds to the tension at the end when he finally meets his death.

The first half ends with Mrs Lovett's brainwave - 'ideas just pop into me head' - of solving their need to dispose of what may be several dead bodies by baking and eating them in pies. It shows desperation combined with entrepreneurial spirit, which has come to fruition in a busy, happy customer-filled pie shop as Act Two opens.

The sequence of Anthony looking for the abducted Johanna is set against Todd's slashing throats and Lovett's processing humans into pies and counting her money in a dark paralleling of life and death, love and murder, hope and greed, which Sondheim deploys as a contrasting device.

The second visit to Fogg's Private Asylum for the Mentally Deranged shows that Anthony, the young idealist, is unable to shoot Fogg, even to save Johanna, but she herself does it. Neither Johanna nor Lovett are weak ineffectual women in this drama, yet are subject to the control of men, as society and convention demanded.

The final scenes of the play are filled with discovery and mistake, as is often the case in thrillers and mysteries; Tobias is locked into a ghastly room of gruesome carnage; the truth is revealed and the increasing madness of Todd leads to the unexpected murder of his wife and the expected death of his partner, Mrs Lovett. These are typical of the murder genre where the truth will out and there is drawing together of the loose ends, if not redemption.

Describing the play

It is helpful to try to categorise this play. Sondheim called it 'a musical thriller' and 'Grand Guignol'.

GrandGuignol.com says that the term, established in Paris in the late 1890s, describes 'any dramatic entertainment that deals with macabre subject matter and features "over-the-top" graphic violence.'

They say that a Grand Guignol evening might comprise a few short plays including crime dramas and 'bawdy sex farces' with a horror play featuring 'eye-gouging, throat-slashing, acid-throwing, or some other equally grisly climax.'

Sweeney Todd meets that description. It is also undoubtedly melodramatic during much of it, so it may be partially a melodrama. It has also elements of Shakespearean and Jacobean tragedy – think of Shakespeare's revenge drama *Titus Andronicus* with its high body count and two victims being baked in pies and served to their father.

Sweeney Todd could be styled a real tragedy, a moral warning that to hold such deep seated revenge can only lead to harm, death, twisted lives and damaged relationships.

It may be viewed as a farce, or even by some as 'the other side of farce.' Its over the top exaggeration leaves any sense of reality behind to present gruesome events that can only be handled if treated in a humorous way.

Certainly It is black comedy or dark humour. It is also perhaps high comedy, a comic musical, a romantic musical, a send-up or parody or operetta if not pure opera. Mrs Lovett, particularly in '*The Worst Pies in London*', is making fun of her situation. The false Italian Pirelli is also a comic character who can and should be camped up with extravagant excess.



It may be some of all those things; but that adds to the significance of it as a major contribution to musical theatre, albeit a show without any dancing beyond the masked ball rape scene and Todd and Lovett's dance to the oven.

Main characters

Sweeney Todd

We naturally apply a 21st century approach to an 18th century serial killer, the central character and focus of the play. We understand from Freud that people have suppressed desires and fears that channel our behaviour and that our subconscious minds may contain secrets, dreams and emotions in an often damaging way.

The dark bitterness, anger and hatred caused by the backstory about his wife and daughter and the corrupt and immoral Judge Turpin and the long period of banishment and imprisonment are the creative forces that drive the man. Therefore it is a small step to accepting that Todd is at least a case for psychoanalysis. Whether such a depth is required in a character in a strong play is debateable and would form a discussion between any actor and director.

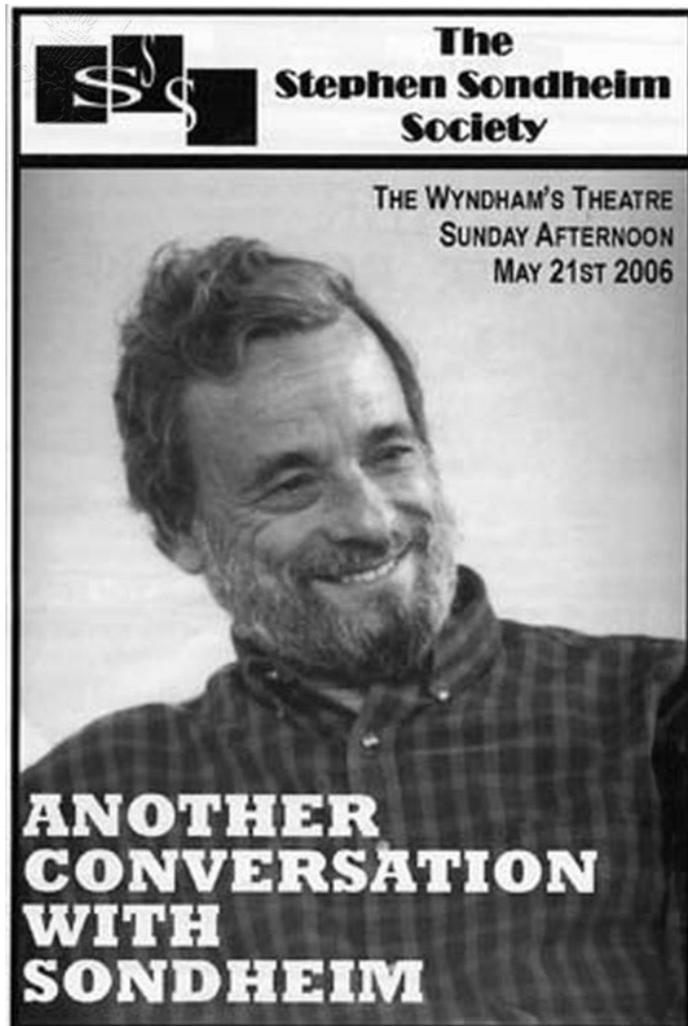
It has been suggested by Jennifer Donnelly in [PersonalityPsycho2011](#) that Todd's ego is driven by the primitive motivations of sex, food and aggression:

Sex – he wants Lucy back to sleep with her alone; food – he provides the meat for the pies that Mrs Lovett cooks and aggression – his passion for violent dispatching of people and pushing some into ovens.

Donnelly points out that his superego shows 'great morals for protection and caring' from his love of Lucy and Johanna, which is also shown in his befriending of Anthony and taking Tobias in.

There is a tension between these opposite intentions and they stay in balance, of sorts (given his willingness to kill indiscriminately), until the end when Todd unknowingly kills Lucy and at once blames Lovett before destroying her in his rage.

It is possible to analyse Todd in the light of many different theories, but the degree of his madness and obsession is, in the end, a dramatic judgement between actor and director.



Mrs Lovett

In the same way we could apply a psychological approach to Mrs Lovett. Is it love alone that drives her to become Todd's willing accomplice? Or are there dark shades in her subconscious that Todd releases?

We know she is a widow of 17 years since her Albert passed on. We know she has a romantic streak and seems genuinely excited to contemplate a life of blissful retirement by the sea with a serial killer.

We also know that she kept Barker's silver razor blades hidden and safe all the years of his banishment and that she has a quick eye for turning a profit.

So, her motivation is as complex as his. She's fond of the boy Tobias, but only up to the point where he threatens the Todd relationship.

She clearly loves money and never loses an opportunity to acquire more of it. She is not a Scrooge-like miserly gatherer of cash, as she's happy to spend on a nice back parlour with new wallpaper and a second-hand harmonium.

Judge Turpin

Is the judge is a stereotypical baddie with no heart, the pantomime villain? Or is there a tender undercurrent in his remorse at sending Barker to prison and raping Lucy before she took poison leading to his caring for Johanna?

If there is, it is clearly all undone when we see his locking her in his house, abusing her sexually albeit from a distance and putting her in the asylum.

Key themes

Revenge

This lies at the heart of the whole story driving Todd throughout. It is directed at one man primarily, Judge Turpin, with an ancillary need for vengeance against Beadle Bamford. That the power of this consuming revenge causes the death of several others along the way is unfortunate; that it causes the death of Lucy (the beggar woman) is a tragedy.

Obsession

The desire for revenge becomes an all-consuming obsession. At every moment Todd is waiting (for Bamford and/or Turpin to arrive) and is constantly working things to achieve his purpose of murdering them. Nothing else matters.

The Pirelli story is solely to enable Todd to establish a reputation as a barber which in turn is only to entice Bamford and Turpin to him. The vulnerability of shaving a man's throat with his head back is part of the obsession.

Additionally, Todd is obsessed with Johanna, his daughter. Once he knows who and where she is, he dreams, thinks of her as he does his other business.

Class structure

With the beehive diagram of the English class system at the outset, there is a clear understanding that it plays a part in the play. Turpin represents authority and upper class; Todd represents the working class; the Beggar Woman is the lowest of all, a beggar and a prostitute. Lovett is also of the working class but has entrepreneurial skills that might make her middle class today.

In the terms of this play, it is a more straightforward struggle between the upper and lower classes.

Power

This works in the same way as class. Turpin and Bamford possess and exercise (abuse) supreme authority – the literal power of life and death over all others, as shown by the scene where Turpin condemns a child to death and his adoption of the baby Johanna on his own law.

Todd has power with his razors in his hand and exercises it ruthlessly when he chooses.

Fogg represents authority too, but is shot. The Beggar Woman has no power at all and is only known as Lucy when it is too late. Anthony is relatively powerless but as a man has some over Johanna, his wife to be.

Impotence

Hal Prince thought that the ensemble (chorus and cast) offered a unifying emotion (page xi in Introduction) that was impotence.

Turpin is not impotent or at least wasn't when he was younger and raped Lucy. His scene secretly observing Johanna in her room could represent impotence now he is older.

Todd is impotent and fulfils his desires that have all been subjugated to his obsessions through his killing others. Mrs Lovett suggests a marriage but he shows no interest.

Rage

The extreme violence of the murders, particularly the two attempts to extinguish both Pirelli and Turpin, are recurring themes. This is violence in a violent age when life was often both brutally hard and horrifically short.

Death

Everybody dies but in this play all go savagely from the casual assassination of strangers in the barber's chair to the little boy on the gallows; the shooting of Fogg to the vengeful deaths of Pirelli, Bamford, Lucy, Lovett to Todd himself.

Contradictions and contrasts

The often romantic lyricism of the music juxtaposed with the brutality set up a series of contrasts throughout. The more violent the action, the more appealing the music, perhaps?

Some have felt that there is a contradiction in an American composer dealing with an essentially British story, but it is instead a happy melding of cultures to produce the gripping story and music.

Loneliness

Todd is a solitary man who usually gives away little, as we see at the beginning with Anthony. When anyone hints they might know or recognise him, they are a threat to him, although Mrs Lovett is the exception.

He lovingly calls his knives his friends and the new chair another friend. He seems to look people in the eye only when he loves them or is about to kill them.

Blood

There is a lot of blood, some spurting, all soaking into clothes. It represents the vulnerability of human beings, the visible sign that he/she has been hurt and/or killed and recurs throughout in a realistic and intrusive visual way.

Music

Music is a theme in the sense that it is the scenery of the play underpinning words and action, whether songs are sung or spoken. It serves the same purpose on stage as film music does, to create an atmosphere which is integral to the message and enjoyment of the art form.

Love

Is it a love story? Clearly Todd loved Lucy and Johanna and now loves their memories. Mrs Lovett appears to love Todd, to a point, while loving money.

Does Turpin love Lucy? Do he and Bamford love anybody but themselves? No.

Do Anthony and Johanna truly love each other so quickly and deeply – yes, they do.

Does the Beggar Woman/Lucy love anybody now? She is probably too far gone with her appalling life to love anyone - she merely survives.

Does Tobias love anyone? He is fond of Mrs Lovett and he may well love her as a substitute mother, hence his protection of her and willingness to kill Todd at the end.

Good versus evil

On one level it is a morality tale, where not only does revenge create more revenge in a vicious spiral, evil does not triumph in the end. Only Lucy is the innocent victim, apart from the customers who die with lives we don't know about.

Performance characteristics and staging requirements of the text

- It is a musical and if it is sung or not, the score requires a high level of musical competence. If there is a band, where it is placed is important – in a pit, to the side, on a gantry or behind the back curtain? To have a small band as part of the action, with musicians dressed in costume, adds credence to the ensemble effect of a production.
 - The original director was Harold 'Hal' Prince. His comments on directing and Angela Lansbury's (the first Mrs Lovett) on page xx – xxiii in the Introduction should be read carefully.
 - The stage needs two levels and that may be a difficulty in production. There is a staircase in full view which is part of the design. The need to interconnect the two floors with a chute is a fairly crucial aspect of the visual element – a person killed in the chair needs to drop and appear below.
 - The barber's chair may need to be contrived so it actually drops a body down or must appear so. This prop is the centre of the barber's shop.
 - There is a school of thought that argues for intimate staging for this show. Of course it could be done on any traditional, proscenium arch, traverse or thrust stage; it could be done in-the-round. The show could be staged as a promenade performance with the audience and actors moving between the two levels in separate locations.
- However it is staged, the proximity of the audience to the action, particularly the blood and death, should serve to heighten dramatic tension.
- Blood is required in large quantities unless presented symbolically, with a backdrop, projections or using lights and gels with suitably effective sound effects and music. The difficulties of achieving spurts of blood from the neck are obvious on stage, whereas less complex on film.
- Stage suppliers can provide blood and devices worn round the neck; there's a rather impractical way to make fake blood on YouTube <http://personalitypsych2011.wikispaces.com/Sweeney+Todd>



- In terms of style, depending on whether it is to be melodrama, straight comedy or gothic horror, costumes will add to the credibility of characters and colour to the often dark settings. If the 19th century time setting is chosen, then a frockcoat style for the men and floor length skirts and dresses for the women will add authenticity. Hats were usually worn by the men, and after one death Todd throws a hat down after the body.

It has to be said that it could be interpreted in a different period and a different country without altering the fundamental dramatic power of the piece.

- Props – the oven(s) and pies and baking utensils, the meat grinder, bench and the silver-handled razor knives are essential, unless they also are mimed. The personal prop of Pirelli's purse must look suitably adorned and exaggerated.

Common misconceptions or difficulties students may have

- If students have seen the 2007 film or DVD, they may not realise that the play script version has some key differences of scene order and text from the movie, which could be confusing in tackling questions and maintaining understanding of the play.

The 2-disc collector's edition of the DVD carries a useful bonus feature, 'Grand Guignol: A Theatrical Tradition.'

- The script does not provide the music, so the songs must be treated as blank verse, a spoken form of acting no different from normal dialogue, yet with a poetry and frequent rhyming that help the actors to develop their characters, including the overlapping dialogue in the duets.
- It is regarded as an ensemble piece, although it revolves around Todd. Each part helps to make the whole. The chorus who become the asylum inmates and the pie shop customers are as much part of the company as a single performer. They must be borne in mind when considering directing and staging.

- It is important to keep in mind that Todd was a legendary figure woven into the fabric of folklore, just as Robin Hood is. While there are criminals reported in London and other cities including Paris committing similarly barbaric murder for a variety of reasons, this story began probably a hundred or more years earlier and grew in the telling with some 'reports' alleging he killed 160 people..

The Sondheim version is but one. It is not historical fact of Britain's biggest serial killer; it is a piece of musical drama.

- In some versions it is possible to add the theme of redemption into a list of the parts of the show. He is hanged in most versions, and in one TV production asked for shaving equipment the night before he faced his Maker and slit his own throat.

However, in this one, Todd never asks for forgiveness, never sees that his vengeance is not of God and is not redeemed on his deathbed.

How to approach questions in the exam

The exam paper will ask questions about directorial decisions for staging this text. Students will be assessed through their knowledge and understanding of how theatre is created on stage. They will be asked to annotate an extract and, for example, direct its comic or horrific effect, depending on the extract.

A question perhaps on how particular technology or staging techniques could be integrated into a contemporary performance could be asked.

Students will need specific and accurate applications of technical/specialist vocabulary together with well justified directorial realisations of the play in performance.

They will need in-depth knowledge of the complete text and be able to provide directorial suggestions for set design, costume, visual aspects as well as performance skills.



Activities

Exploring the minor characters

1. Beadle Bamford

a) In groups create three tableaux that show Beadle in the short scene after he and Turpin have noticed Anthony getting close to Johanna (p26–27) adopting different stances and attitudes.

b) Create captions without using lines from the play.

Extension: Hotseat the Beadle to find out why he behaves as he does and what he feels about Johanna, Turpin, Anthony and the bird in the cage.

2. Anthony and Johanna

a) In groups create a speed-dating scene in which they meet for the first time and in 4 minutes share their life experiences.

b) In groups stage an imaginary conversation if Anthony had actually been able to ask Turpin for Johanna's hand in marriage.

Extension: Devise a scene after the play is over, Anthony and Johanna are married and they are remembering the horrific events of the final scene.

3) The Beggar Woman

a) Solo, improvise a monologue with actions spoken by the Beggar Woman after she has seen Todd on his return to London.

b) In pairs improvise a scene where the Beggar Woman tries to convince a sceptical bystander who has enjoyed the pies of the horrors of the pie shop.

Extension: Devise a sympathetic police report into the tragic life and death of Lucy from when Judge Turpin first saw her up to her death.

4) Adolfo Pirelli

a) In pairs, improvise a scene where Tobias is being trained by Pirelli to be his assistant in all that is required of him.

b) In pairs, interpret the scene between Pirelli and Todd (p55–57) as if between two Mafioso or gangsters.

Extension: Take the scene from Pirelli's entrance (p37) up to end of p44 and using the actual lines present it as clowning type comedy and again as with a different foreign accent to make the most of the comedy.

Exploring the major characters

5) Todd and Lovett

a) In pairs imagine they had been married and retired to the seaside and improvise an evening after dinner.

b) In pairs, from p115 top to top of p120, play the script as if Todd is genuinely taken with Mrs Lovett and his distraction/obsession is less important than it is.

c) Repeat with Todd's distractions very overpowering and he is agitated and aggressive towards her.

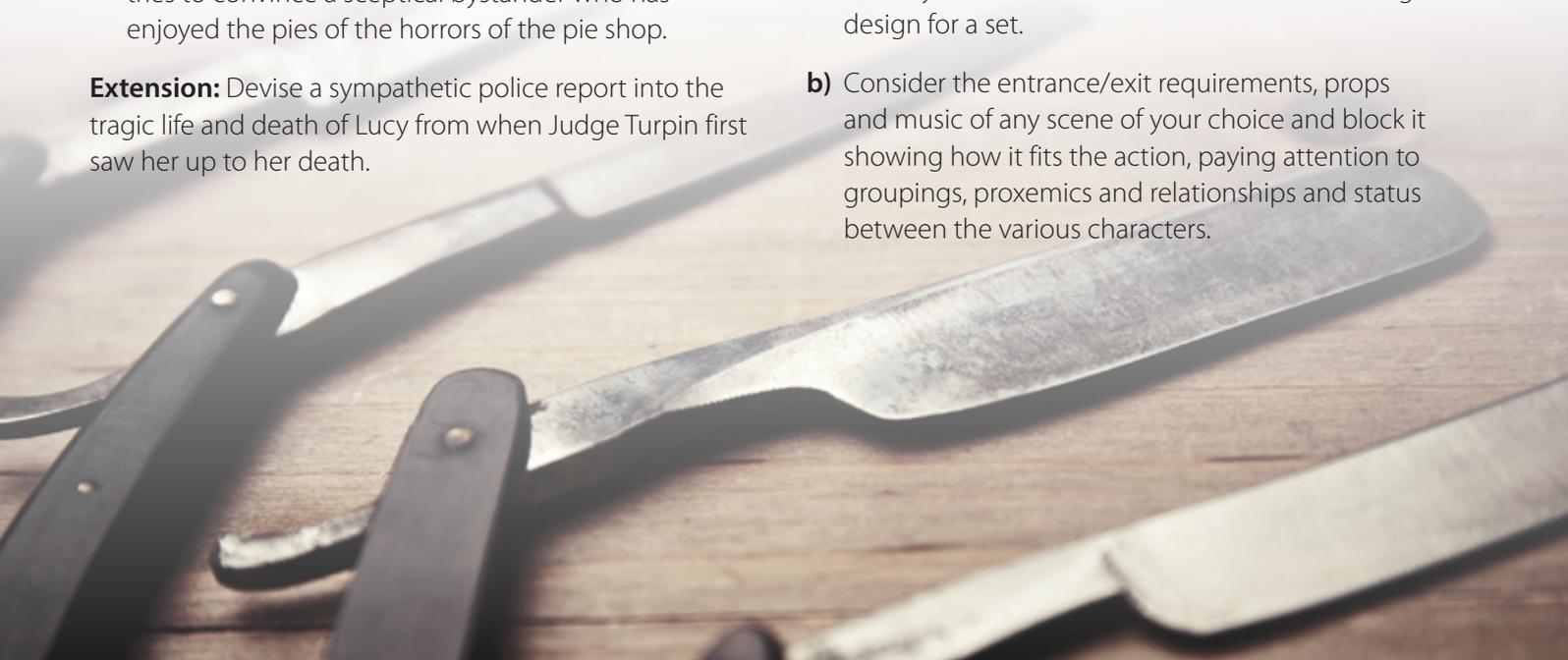
Extension: Whole class discussion of the nature of the Todd-Lovett relationship from the point of each in turn and citing evidence from the play.

Staging the play

6) Stage designs

a) In pairs make a list of the staging requirements in a venue you are familiar with and sketch out a rough design for a set.

b) Consider the entrance/exit requirements, props and music of any scene of your choice and block it showing how it fits the action, paying attention to groupings, proxemics and relationships and status between the various characters.





Extension: Make a list of the transitions between each scene and note what lights, effects, props movements and actors are needed to affect each one in turn.

7) The crowd scenes

- a) Whole class take the asylum scene and decides on one character for each so there is minimal overlap – backstory, why in asylum, what happened, what went wrong, how long there, how damaged are you?
- b) Improvise an asylum scene in which the characters are given free reign when a visitor comes in and rescues one of them.

Extension: Perform the Fogg in the Asylum scene or when they have escaped and are running after Anthony and Johanna and see how far defined characters in the crowd have helped develop the scene from an acting, director's and audience perspective. Pay particular attention to blocking each character and to the vocal performance of each. Are some lines and movements in unison or cannon? Are some fragments actually solos?

Alternatively, try the approach on the opening of Act 2 when the pie shop is booming and everyone wants more pies; or when the chorus are the crowd at the shaving contest.

8) Focused moments

In small groups choose a focussed moment and take it in turns to direct each other in a rendition of it. How do the characters come across? How do they move, sit and stand? What vocal constraints do they have? What are their proxemics to each other and audience? What gestures might they employ? What effect should they leave on the audience?

Scenes could include:

- a) Beadle during the shaving contest when he is not central but is in full view throughout.
- b) Tobias and Mrs Lovett where the boy professes he will look after her and he fears Mr Todd.
- c) When Todd has Turpin in the chair for the first time.
- d) When Todd has killed Lucy and before he dies.



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