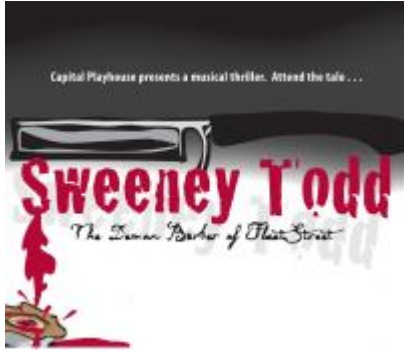


Capital Playhouse's fall thriller cuts close to Broadway



Average rating: ★★★★★ - from 1 reviewer

Capital Playhouse's fall thriller cuts close to Broadway

By Kristin Alexander

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Capital Playhouse sliced open its new season with a horror story and Tony Award winner Jarrod Emick.

Emick's program bio is almost comically humble: "Jarrod is honored to be making his Capital Playhouse debut with the cast of Sweeney Todd."

Can you imagine the directors who, after politely noting his experience on Broadway and London's West End, will react with glee when they see that he worked in Washington's capital? Oh yeah, it's pretty cool that he also won a Tony in 1994 for playing Joe Hardy in *Damn Yankees*.

Whether Emick's Olympia theater credit will boost his career remains to be seen but his appearance on Cap's stage surely gives director Jeff Kingsbury bragging rights. The two met when Emick, then 14 years old, was in *On Golden Pond* at Black Hills Playhouse in South Dakota. Musical director Troy Arnold Fisher worked there, too. Moreover, Emick's first play was directed by the mother of Jennie May Donnell, who played Mrs. Lovett in Cap's 1999 production of *Sweeney* and this one.

"Sondheim is one of America's finest storytellers with his music. This is a milestone for me," Emick said in a news release. His lean, tall frame shakes while his narrow, angular face conveys the *Demon Barber of Fleet Street*'s erratically restrained rage and pain. Donnell counters his melancholy with her delightful spunk and soprano voice and their duets are the pinnacle of the thriller.

It's exciting to see both professional actors and locals on Cap's stage. But by mixing

veterans with younger, less experienced talent, Sweeney feels unbalanced. A notable exception is Sara Flotree, who plays a beggar woman who spontaneously flashes her privates. Flotree's performance is top-notch and her singing sensational.

Sweeney blends humor and horror with a story about revenge, lust and grief. After spending 15 years in a penal colony for a crime he didn't commit, Benjamin Barker returns to London to learn that his wife poisoned herself after being raped by the same judge who imprisoned him. Their daughter is now the judge's ward. Barker changes his name and slashes throats. Murder means tasty business for the bakery downstairs when the victims' carcasses are ground into meat pies.

Half the audience is reported to have left in disgust at intermission when the show opened on Broadway in 1979. A 2004 London revival, which I saw, set the story in an asylum. Far more unusual, though, was the lack of an orchestra – the actors played the score.

Cap's production is loosely based on the revival, successfully incorporating sound on stage; Mrs. Lovett clanks her baking pans in perfect rhythm to music played by a traditional orchestra. The show relies on gestures and the art of suggestion in lieu of actual props or gory fake blood. The asylum aspect, too, is very much present in the actors' pasty, ghoulish faces. Matt Lawrence's lighting and Dennis Kurtz' screeching sound effects complete the eerie feeling.

The rest of Cap's musical season offers a promising array of nostalgia (1940s Radio Hour), satire (Six Women with Brain Death or Expiring Minds Want to Know), biography (Side Show, loosely based on the lives of Siamese twins who became famous stage performers) and classic Broadway (Man of La Mancha, starring Mr. Kingsbury).

Copyright by Kristin Alexander. Kristin Alexander is a Seattle freelance writer and actress. She can be reached at www.freshprose.com.

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