

A pie of a play

Capital Playhouse serves up a tasty treat

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Photo: Glenn Raiha

“Sweeney Todd”: Those darn London street urchins never stop singing.

There was a crime committed in downtown Olympia last weekend. There were two empty seats at Capital Playhouse’s production of “Sweeney Todd,” a tasteful play about a mass murderer who sees a business opportunity in the otherwise useless stack of corpses he has created. I guess you could consider the empty seats a “capital crime,” but the real victims probably don’t know they missed an opportunity to see one of the best shows found in the South Sound in the last decade or so. It was brilliant.

Anchoring the show about the “devil barber of Fleet Street” is Jarrod Emick in the title role. Emick is a Tony Award and Drama Desk winner for the 1994 revival of “Damn Yankees,” and he also has a host of television credits. He has a load of experience. It shows.

His nuanced performance is captivating. A simple eye lift here and a tilt of the head there tell the audience all it needs to know. Just a pick of his teeth sends chills through the aisles like a cold snap blowing through an open window. Wow. Just wow. He owns that stage through his commanding presence and full-body performance. It seems no step or crossed arm or blink happens by mistake; every action is calculated to draw audiences further into the story.

And it is a fun story to be told.

Very loosely based on the 2005 revival of “Sweeney Todd” that featured Michael Cerveris and Patti LuPone, this production takes place in an intimate “asylum” setting with a full orchestra offstage rather than actors playing instruments and more traditional

costuming, props and scenic elements than were utilized in the revival. The one-set staging keeps the story moving with only minimal interruptions to make a bakery shop into an asylum then to a street scene. The use of few props — actors pretending to hold packages or barber towels — forces audiences members to fill in with visions in their minds, which further personalizes the story and draws them in even more.

But to be consistent, I think it would have been more powerful if Capital Playhouse had opted to follow its long-standing practice of having fluid in glasses and food on plates during dinner scenes. This would have been especially impactful during the “pie scene” since that would mean audiences essentially would be seeing cannibals eating fistfuls of human meat pies.

The balance of the cast rose to meet Emick’s performance by delivering stellar performances down the line, and the bar was already pretty high considering the caliber of talent tied to this performance. The cast list is a who’s who in South Sound theater. There’s the always brilliant Jennie May Donnell as the baker turned cannibal chef, Mrs. Lovett, and the stunning songstress Erica Penn as Johanna. And there is up-and-comer Adam Randolph as Pirelli, whose performances I’ve noted for years now. Then there is Jerod Richard Nace, who wonderfully portrays the creepy Beadle Bamford. The list of notables goes on and on.