



DAILY BREEZE

Stirring 'Sweeney Todd' closes Golden State Pops season

By Kari Sayers

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"He shaved the faces of gentlemen who thereafter were never heard of again," sang the ensemble in the opening number of Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler's musical thriller "Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street," performed in concert by the Golden State Pops Orchestra at the Warner Grand Theatre in San Pedro on Saturday.

And what an interesting and innovative show this last concert of the season was, with Sondheim's edgy music coupled with some outstanding singing and acting. In true operatic fashion, it ended with a slew of dead characters who "went to their maker impeccably shaved."

A few wisps of fog were blown onto the stage to simulate London in 1876, while lighting in various hues created appropriate moods. The nine main actors/singers, in more or less period costumes, occupied chairs at the front of the stage, waiting for their turns in the spotlight. The 40-member orchestra, under the direction of Steven Allen Fox, filled

up the middle while the well-rehearsed 35-member chorus stood at the back providing a unified sound.

Veteran singer and actor Norman Large, who played the Bishop in "Les Miserables" on Broadway, stood out as the title character with his strong tenor and passionate acting as he raged against his fate, consumed by hatred and revenge.

Also in strong voice was Sarah Horn, who rose to fame after being randomly selected from the audience to sing a duet at the Hollywood Bowl last summer. She took on the role as Mrs. Lovett, who teamed up with the murderous barber in his vengeful plot, with enthusiasm and zest.

Kyle Patterson's velvety tenor was another stand-out as he sang the role of Tobias Ragg, who becomes Mrs. Lovett's assistant and discovers a fingernail in the meat grinder. He realizes what's going on and ends up killing Todd in a fit of madness. Providing a good contrast to the tenors was Phil Meyer's bass-baritone as the lustful Judge Turpin, while Stephen Grabe as the Beadle and sidekick to the judge offered up another gorgeous operatic tenor.

Apart from Large, who has played the role of Sweeney Todd several times, many of the main characters carried their scripts around, causing some distraction.

In their defense, however, it was a long concert with myriad lyrics and lines to memorize for only a single performance. Because the focus was on the singers, the orchestra stayed appropriately in the background this time.

After canceling the last concert because of financial problems, more funding has materialized, and the all-professional Golden State Pops Orchestra is back on track. The 2014-15 season will open with a "composer fan experience" and fundraiser in October. For information, call 310-433-8774 or go to the orchestra's website at www.gspo.com.

Kari Sayers is a Torrance-based freelance writer.