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BWW Feature: ANATOMIAE OCCULTI's 'Sweeney Todd' Development Presentation



By Wesley Doucette

In the Signature Theatre's studio rehearsal space on October 17th 2016, the Anatomiae Occulti dance theater company presented roughly half an hour of the troupe's dance infused "Sweeney Todd" with choreography by Adam Barruch. As this was a development presentation, I will not be detailing an appraisal of the work as a completed whole. Instead, certain highlights will be mentioned as well as an assessment of where choreographer Adam Barruch might be looking toward this project's future iterations.

Beginning with the "Ballad of Sweeney Todd" and moving forward to "Epiphany," dance was used in place of props and sets, and placed upon Sondheim's text. An epic-style elemental rendering of musical theater has been de rigueur on Broadway, thanks in part to stifled budgets, and in part to answering new forms of

performance such as social media. This shift was made tangible first, perhaps, with John Doyle's own "Sweeney Todd" revival a decade ago and continues to last year's Deaf Western presentation of "Spring Awakening." An epic reading, which admits to story telling devices and abstracts its staging for the theater, has become not only palatable but a welcome challenge for Broadway audiences. It heightens not only the resolve of audience imagination but persists in the welcome assertion of an audience member's placement in a live theatre, as opposed to a 3D film. Adam Barruch clearly hopes to bring his "Sweeney Todd" to this pantheon, creating something that admires Sondheim's work but stands on its own as culinary movement.

"Sweeney Todd" has strong cohesion with Barruch's movement style. It's fluid, malleably plasticine, and text like with a sharp focus on hand and arm placement. If your mind goes to

Bharatanatyam (a popular Indian dance tradition focused upon articulate hand placement,) you're not too far off, at least when the movement is in an arranged marriage with text. However, when the work lifts off Sondheim's lyrics and enters a world of silhouetted abstract staging and Meyerhold meets Charlie Chaplin characterizations, the utility of dance in the piece surpasses any redundancies of context and adds new color to the play.

Highlight performances include Margie Gillis' beggar woman, who is beautifully rendered in body by the dancer through a butoh like freeform of convulsions. Jodi McFadden's vital grotesque touch to the amorous Mrs. Lovett and Adam Barruch's flamboyant Signor Pirelli show the possibility of choreography as the vehicle of character rendering, rather than a culinary abstraction that treats the work of Sondheim as scaffolding for Barruch's choreography. Lastly, a great deal of credit must be given to music director Cris Frisco for his navigating of both the infamously complex Sondheim composition and the percussive movement and shift initiations of the dancers.

In addition, the vocal work of Jami Leonard who dubbed over the beggar woman and entered the piece as Joanna, is an excellent ambassador for the operatic tradition within the production.

With canvas and painting clearly considered, what remains on the journey of this piece is the framework. "Sweeney," unlike the expressionist "Spring Awakening," never leaves the ground intellectually requiring this new medium for its story to be told. Even John Doyle's productions, which while not containing contemporary movement were certainly Epic abstractions, had a unifying conceit. Whether it be "Sweeney"'s mental institution or "Company"'s musicians as an allegory for marriage, these pieces proposed a purpose which egged the staging to a utility beyond an exercise in style. Something certainly feels true in "Worst Pies in London." The questions are, "What is that truth?" and "How does it extend to the rest of the piece?" I look forward to Mr. Barruch finding this in the project as he continues in its development.