

SONDHEIM AND WHEELER'S
**SWEENEY
TODD**

BY AARON C. THOMAS



Sondheim and Wheeler's *Sweeney Todd*

'... we have some shepherd's pie peppered with actual shepherd on top.'

– Mrs Lovett

Sweeney Todd, the gruesome tale of a murderous barber and his pastry chef accomplice, is unquestionably strange subject matter for the musical theatre – but eight Tony awards and enormous successes on Broadway and the West End testify to its enduring popularity with audiences. Written by Hugh Wheeler, with music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, the musical premiered in 1979 and has seen numerous revivals, including Tim Burton's 2007 film version.

Aaron C. Thomas addresses this darkly funny piece with fitting humour, taking on *Sweeney Todd's* chequered history and genre, its treatment of violence and cannibalism, and its sexual politics.

Aaron C. Thomas is Assistant Professor of Theatre History and Literature at the School of Performing Arts, University of Central Florida, USA.

The Fourth Wall

The Fourth Wall series is a growing collection of short books on famous plays. Its compact format perfectly suits the kind of fresh, engaging criticism that brings a play to life.

Each book in this series selects one play or musical as its subject and approaches it from an original angle, seeking to shed light on an old favourite or break new ground on a modern classic. These lively, digestible books are a must for anyone looking for new ideas on the major works of modern theatre.

www.routledge.com/performance/series/4THW

Also available in this series:

Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth* by Kyle Gillette

Harold Pinter's *Party Time* by Graham White

Davies and Penhall's *Sunny Afternoon* by John Fleming

Tim Crouch's *An Oak Tree* by Catherine Love

Sondheim and Lapine's *Into the Woods* by Olaf Jubin

Errol John's *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* by Lynnette Goddard

Coming soon:

Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes* by Sam Kinchin-Smith

Alastair McDowell's *Pomona* by David Ian Rabey

George Buchner's *Woyzeck* by Karoline Gritzner

J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* by Lucie Sutherland

Sondheim and Wheeler's *Sweeney Todd* by Aaron C. Thomas

Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* by Dan Rebellato

August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* by Ladrica Menson-Furr

Rogers and Hammerstein's *The Sound of Music* by Julian Woolford

Schönberg and Boubllil's *Les Misérables* by Sarah Whitfield

Sondheim and Wheeler's *Sweeney Todd*

Aaron C. Thomas

First published 2018
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2018 Aaron C. Thomas

The right of Aaron C. Thomas to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-1-138-67886-6 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-55862-2 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by Out of House Publishing

Contents

| | | |
|---|--------------------------|-----|
| | <i>Acknowledgements</i> | vi |
| | <i>Note</i> | vii |
| 1 | The throat that gleams | 1 |
| 2 | The throat that sings | 11 |
| 3 | The throat that bleeds | 32 |
| 4 | The throat that swallows | 51 |
| | <i>References</i> | 72 |
| | <i>Index</i> | 77 |

Acknowledgements

This is for the friends I've seen and loved in *Sweeney* – Justin Abarca, Elizabeth Triplett, Wahima N. Lino, Ashley Lampson Opstad, Rick Tabor, Caroline Collins, Joseph Ngo, Michael Steger, Michael Fatica and Viveka Bruce. Thanks also to my theatre-going BFF Julie Haverkate, who went with me to see Carolee Carmello and Norm Lewis in *Sweeney* last year. And to my support team while writing this book – Patrick McKelvey, Alexandra Ripp and Ryan M. Davis. Daniel Sack, George Rodosthenous and Ben Piggott all encouraged me to write this volume and have been supportive throughout. Alexandrew Recore and Earl Weaver each read and commented on early chapters. And a special thank you to my friends Jaime Dyson and Meghan Digneit and my students Noah Samotin, Tommy Heller, Jenny Totcky, Kyle Laing and Savannah Rucks, who kindly reviewed the entire manuscript.

Note

All in-text references to *Sweeney Todd* refer to the original 1979 Dodd, Mead & Company edition.

The throat that gleams

The murderous barber Sweeney Todd and his pastry-chef accomplice Mrs Lovett made their first appearances in fiction long before *Sweeney Todd: the Demon Barber of Fleet Street* first appeared on Broadway in 1979. They were not devised by Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler, neither did they originate as melodramatic caricatures on the British stage. Instead, Sweeney Todd of Fleet Street and Mrs Lovett of Bell Yard first appeared in the columned pages of a type of periodical referred to as a ‘penny blood’ (the ‘penny dreadful’ was a later, supposedly more respectable, version of this genre). These short, cheap, easy-to-read publications were aimed at a wide audience of poor and working-class people, and they contained serialized tales, often with criminal subject matter and a vaguely historical setting. The story in which Sweeney first appeared went by the title *The String of Pearls*, and it was published between November of 1846 and March of 1847.¹

The bloods were penned by various hack writers, working not for artistic fulfilment or literary reputation but for wages earned. Despite its negative connotation, *hack writer* doesn’t necessarily have to mean *bad writer*, but