

Sweeney Todd



SHOW OF THE WEEK

ATTEND THE TALE
Edelman, McCartney
and company see red.

Toward the end of *Sweeney Todd*'s first act, the titular barber cheerfully whistles as he prepares to slit the throat of the wicked Judge Turpin (Kevin Gudahl). "You're in a merry mood today, Mr. Todd," Turpin says. His remark coincidentally comments on the strangely calm characterization of Gregg Edelman's Sweeney, a choice that lessens the intensity of Rachel Rockwell's otherwise stunning production of Stephen Sondheim's musical classic.

Edelman is a talented performer, but he's miscast as Sweeney Todd, lacking the internal inferno needed to make the character's horrific actions convincing. There's a lightness to Edelman that fails to capture the crushing weight of Sweeney's exile and the loss of his family, and when he trades the burden of his past for a murderous

★★★★★

Drury Lane Theatre Oakbrook Terrace (see Resident companies). Book by Hugh Wheeler. Music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. Dir. Rachel Rockwell. With Gregg Edelman, Liz McCartney. 2hrs 40mins; one intermission.

future, Sweeney doesn't come across as enough of a threat.

When sharing scenes with Liz McCartney's robust, fully realized Mrs. Lovett, Edelman fades into the background. Hopelessly, psychopathically romantic, Mrs. Lovett will do anything to earn the love of her demonic partner, and McCartney's uncanny ability to switch gears from gentle sincerity to brash ferocity gives the character an emotional dimensionality that Sweeney lacks.

As young lovers Anthony and Johanna, William Travis Taylor and Emily Rohm give remarkable performances; their chemistry is amplified by the technical prowess and emotional depth of their consecutive Act I solos. While Rockwell's choice to cast 13-year-old Jonah Rawitz as street urchin Toby strengthens Mrs. Lovett's motherly relationship with the character, the developments of the second act prove a challenge for the young actor.

Rockwell's streamlined staging puts the focus on the complex score, with a sparse set that allows the music to create the setting. From the chilling organ notes that open the show to the final "Fleet Street" pause, Sondheim's score is exquisitely played and sung, and the overall quality of the production overshadows its few flaws.—*Oliver Sava*

Strangers & Romance

★★★★★

Strangeloop Theatre (see Fringe & storefront). By Barbara Lhota. Dir. Doug Long. With Timothy C. Amos, Stacie Barra, Tony Ketcham, Misti Patrella. 1hr 40mins; one intermission.

August boasts concurrent productions of work by Chicago-based playwright Barbara Lhota (see *The Double*, page 106). Strangeloop Theatre's contribution to this minifestival is the decade-old duo of one-acts *Strangers & Romance*, which tells two brisk stories featuring a man and a woman who conquer the past of troubled relationships in desolate locales on a Boston Christmas Eve in 1985.

Though ably crafted and well-intentioned, the script doesn't offer anything more than what feels like a writer's exercise: Take two people, trap them in a room, get them talking, eke out a back story, resolve. Though quirks and details abound—everyone's name starts with an *M*, the specificity of the Boston and mid-'80s setting—these feel more like private texture for the author than clues to be interpreted by an audience. And the comedy sprinkled throughout serves mainly to make the plays, already short and relatively light, just easier to watch.

The production is direct and workmanlike, with a utilitarian design and a pace that clips to conclusion. While the second act feels more polished and displays the handsome



STRANGERS THINGS HAVE HAPPENED
Patrella and Ketcham cozy up.

comic timing of Timothy C. Amos as Mick, a drunk in a church after one of the worst days imaginable, the first act comes closer to displaying the darkness the plays seem to reach for.—*Benno Nelson*

A Walk in the Woods

★★★★★

TimeLine Theatre Company (see Resident companies). By Lee Blessing. Dir. Nick Bowling. With Janet Ulrich Brooks, David Parkes. 2hrs; one intermission.

"If mankind hated war, there would be millions of us and only two soldiers," says the feisty Soviet arms negotiator to her formal U.S. counterpart. The quippy remark, unassailable but naggingly reductive, is characteristic of Lee Blessing's 1986 two-hander. The play was inspired by real events: In 1982, American Paul Nitze and Russian Yuli A. Kvitsinsky left the official negotiating table in Geneva, Switzerland, for "a walk in the woods" where the two hammered out a sweeping proposal far beyond what was authorized by their respective governments.

Like the figures they were inspired by, the two characters in this fictionalized encounter are male. But with Blessing's blessing, Bowling's production casts the Soviet negotiator as a woman; given Brooks's masterful performance, it's hard to imagine it any other way. Her Anya Botvinnik (née Andrei) makes feminine wiles a major part of her negotiating package, subtly cajoling and flirting with Parkes's stuffy John Honeyman.

Both performances are skillful and nuanced, with Parkes's Honeyman warming to Anya's digressions even as he grows disillusioned with his assignment and the unlikelihood of a real nuclear-disarmament deal. But Blessing's play remains both simplistic and static, with the two characters endlessly circling a park bench. Jacqueline Firkins's seasonal costumes and Mike Tutaj's vegetative video projections try futilely to infuse the play with some motion. One wonders if it had more import when the Cold War was still present tense.—*Kris Vire*



BENCH PRESS Parkes and Brooks take their work outside.

Theater