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SVCT's "Sweeney Todd" is a fanciful, funny Victorian soap opera that's sure to delight

<https://morganhilllife.com/2023/04/30/sweeney-todd-review/>

With astonishing voices Morales and Castillo carry the lyrics and build their quirky characters just short of going completely over the top



Vivienne Castillo as "Mrs. Lovett" and Guillermo Morales as "Sweeney Todd" perform in the South Valley Civic Theatre's version of the operatic musical. Photo by Elizabeth Mandel

This review will be published in the May 10, 2023 issue of Gilroy Life

By Camille Bounds

With “Sweeney Todd,” the South Valley Civic Theatre takes on one of the most complex musical melodramas in Broadway history – and they score a big, blood-splattered hit.

The show opened April 28 to well-deserved praise from the audience at the Morgan Hill Playhouse. The bizarre and compelling story of the “Demon Barber of Fleet Street” contains a plethora of challenging tunes by the legendary composer Stephan Sondheim. The show’s darkly disturbing book was written by Hugh Wheeler. The SVCT orchestra and performers bring to this tawdry classic of Victorian London life a malicious, humorous tweak that will shock the squeamish and tickle the funny bone of gore-seekers.

The story of a vengeful barber and his accomplice, the pie-maker Mrs. Lovett, is a twisted tale demanding a careful balance of horror, comedy, and tragedy. And SVCT delivers!

The story is as convoluted as the most tangled soap opera. Sweeney Todd (played with sinister flair by Guillermo Morales) returns to London after escaping prison in Australia for a crime he did not commit. He has only one thing on his mind: cold revenge against the corrupt Judge Turpin (Scott Whisler) as well as the Beadle Bamford (Michael Grimm), a man who framed Todd, had his way with the former barber’s wife, driving her mad, and stole his daughter, Johanna (Lucy Nino), to raise as his own. If this isn’t enough Todd teams up with the astoundingly demented Mrs. Lovett (Vivienne Castillo), a down-and-out baker of “the worst pies in London.” Together they cook up a hilariously macabre revenge scheme that fulfills both their needs.



Photo by Elizabeth Mandel

As the diabolical duo, Morales and Castillo carry their quirky characters just short of going completely over the top. They have astonishingly professional level voices that masterfully handle the operatic musical's complex lyrics. A sharp, talented cast ably gives the production a touch of reality.

The success of SVCT's production relies on the excellent quality of all the performers, including the street people extras. Their ability to convey the emotions and complexities of the Dickensian characters is paramount.

Overall, SVCT's performance of "Sweeney Todd" delivers a high level of professionalism and attention to detail with direction by Megan Griffin. She uses every nook and cranny on stage in interesting, well-blended ways. Her directing is tight and keeps everything moving at a just on-the-edge pacing, making the show a thrilling and unforgettable ride.

I want to especially note the excellent lighting design by Michael Combs, well-thought out set design by Megan Griffin and her mother, Michelle Griffin, and the amazing, authentic costumes for a cast of more than 25 performers also brought together by Michelle. Also, praise goes to the clear, fine sound by Brian Bourke of an 11-piece orchestra conducted by music director Mark Wong.

Comedy, tribulation, love and insanity reign in this well done production of "Sweeney Todd." Its ominous and gory story, might not be everybody's cup of tea — and it surely isn't everybody's meat pie. But if you have the daring for a fun and fabulous musical show, SVCT makes sure this blood-splattered production abounds with entertainment value.



Photo by Elizabeth Mandel

South Valley Civic Theatre takes on ‘Sweeney Todd’

<https://gilroydispatch.com/south-valley-civic-theatre-sweeney-todd/>



Guillermo Morales (Sweeney Todd) and Vivienne Castillo (Mrs. Lovett) star in South Valley Civic Theatre’s “Sweeney Todd,” opening April 28 at the Morgan Hill Community Playhouse. Photo: Chris Foster

By: [Erik Chalhoub](#)

April 19, 2023

Vivienne Castillo has what seems to be an impossible task: portraying the “most nefarious, evil person on earth” in a “charming” manner, she said.

Castillo is referring to Mrs. Lovett, the murderous woman who makes meat pies from the victims of her business partner.

Audiences will have to see for themselves how Castillo pulls it off when South Valley Civic Theatre brings its adaptation of “Sweeney Todd” to the Morgan Hill Community Playhouse, opening April 28 and running select days through May 20.

“Sweeney Todd,” one of the most celebrated dark musicals that has won numerous awards and been performed worldwide over the past five decades, follows the titular character who seeks vengeance against a judge who sent him in exile for 15 years. The Victorian-era barber eventually meets up with Mrs. Lovett, and the two join forces at her pie shop where Todd’s victims are on the menu.

Megan Griffin, director of the SVCT version of the musical, said she was excited to take the helm of the production as a fan of “Sweeney Todd.”

“It’s definitely a thriller intended for mature audiences,” she said. “The audience will be on the edge of their seats the whole time. There are a lot of surprises. I wanted it to have the feel of hearing a scary ghost story around the campfire.”

She added that, as extreme the actions of the characters may be, there is something relatable within them. Everyone has their compassionate human side and their darker monster side, Griffin said, noting that “Sweeney Todd” is a cautionary tale that warns against letting revenge be all-consuming.

Castillo said she’s loved “Sweeney Todd” since she was 13. While riding in a school bus one day, she heard a girl behind her singing a song about cannibalism and other dark subjects.

Sparking her curiosity, Castillo learned the tune was from “Sweeney Todd,” adding that at the time, she was unaware that theater performances could take on such disturbing material.

Now, the musical is “deeply ingrained in my DNA.”

“It’s not like anything that Morgan Hill has ever seen before,” Castillo said. “It touches on some awful subjects. It talks about murder; it talks about cannibalism. But it’s one of the darkest, funniest shows and has been for the last 50 years.”

Guillermo Morales, who performs as Sweeney Todd, said those subjects are exactly why many people are turned off by the musical. But he’s hoping to change minds with the local performance, saying the musical is more than just about murder, but rather focuses on healing and humor with an incredible soundtrack by Stephen Sondheim.

“I really want to get people to enjoy this show,” he said. “We’ve got a great cast, and I’ve got a really good feeling for this character. I want people to see it early and come see it again.”

Morales, who despite having a lifelong love of theater and performed in many shows, has been cast in his first lead role.

“I’ve never gotten an opportunity to do something like this before,” he said. “It’s humbling and intimidating at the same time, but I’m so excited for the opportunity and really eager to put something great forward.”

Griffin said the cast and crew have been rehearsing since February, with everyone having bonded and ready to showcase their work to audiences.

“It’s got everything,” she said. “It’s got comedy, it’s got drama, it’s got terror. It’s blood and guts. It’s got everything you could want.”

“Sweeney Todd” runs select days from April 28 to May 20 at the Morgan Hill Community Playhouse, 17090 Monterey Road. For information and tickets, visit svct.org/2023_sweeney.

Entertainment: ‘Sweeney Todd’ brings dark, gritty Victorian London to South Valley

Cast of 23 takes audiences on musical journey of love, loss and vengeance

<https://morganhilllife.com/2023/04/12/svct-sweeney-todd/>

Published in the April 19-May 2, 2023 issue of Morgan Hill Life



Guillermo Morales as “Sweeney Todd” and Vivienne Castillo as “Mrs. Lovett” in South Valley Civic Theatre’s production of “Sweeney Todd.” The Stephen Sondheim spell-binding musical opens April 28. Photo by Chris Foster

By Marty Cheek

Watch out for a notorious barber and his partner in crime seeking bloody vengeance against their enemies in Victorian-era London.

The dark and gripping tale of “Sweeney Todd” comes to life on stage as South Valley Civic Theatre unleashes their latest production April 28 for a four weekend run at the Morgan Hill Community Playhouse. An ensemble cast of 23 transports audiences on a thrilling journey of love, loss, and retribution in Stephen Sondheim’s spell-binding musical.

The show’s director, Megan Griffin, expressed her excitement about the chance to bring to South Valley audiences the macabre story, which she sees as a dark comedy with horror elements.



Vivienne Castillo as Mrs. Lovett. Photo by Chris Foster

“I love the show and I really wanted to work on it,” she said. “I feel like it has really meaty content, and I don’t think most shows have as much in that way.”

Sondheim wrote the show in an operatic style that is accented by the gusto and emotions of the music and lyrics. Seeing the show as a thriller, Griffin leans into that genre in her direction with the use of lighting effects on a gritty Victorian set that contribute to building an anxious feeling in the audience.

“It’s a revenge story and kind of a cautionary tale. I won’t give any spoilers about it,” Griffin said. “But I feel our audience is ready for it. It’s definitely an ‘out-there’ story line. The music is excellent. A lot of the story is very impactful.”

Guillermo Morales plays the titular character of “Sweeney Todd,” the ill-famed demon barber of Fleet Street” who returns home to London after 15 years of exile, seeking vengeance against the corrupt judge who ruined his life. Vivienne Castillo portrays “Mrs. Lovett,” a

resourceful proprietress of a failing pie shop, above which Todd opens his new barber shop.

Griffin and co-producers Michelle Griffin and Joy Reynolds were entranced by both actors during their auditions and callbacks. The three are especially impressed with the dynamic chemistry the actors bring to the stage.

This is the first show with SVCT for both Morales and Castillo, who bring in their stagecraft the human side as well as the monster side of the lead characters, Megan said.

“The story is very out there and the characters are very out there,” she said. “I feel they were both willing to go out there as well. It can be heavy material — and they’re doing an excellent job of it.”

The show promises to be an intense experience for the audience, with special effects and ghoulish lighting contributing to the tale told with plenty of dark humor, Megan said. The lyrics provide a depth of emotion not often seen in other musicals traditionally performed by community theater groups. However, the director is confident the audience is ready for the mature level of the show and is excited to see how they react.



Guillermo as Sweeney Todd. Photo by Chris Foster

“I feel like a lot of the music contributes to making it feel like a thriller — and the way the book is written, too,” she said. “I really view the show as a thriller.”

For Morales, the opportunity to play the lead role of “Sweeney” is a dream come true. He has been in theater for as long as he can remember but has never before had the opportunity to play such a villainous character. He wants to make sure the audience is engrossed in the cautionary revenge story and gets lost in the dark plot full of shocking deeds done to murder victims.

“It’s a story that makes people question how they feel about things. The way that it’s told is so opposite to how normal expectations are,” Morales said. “We only follow the character of ‘Sweeney’ so we only have that character to connect with. Even

though he's doing all these horrific things, ideally his performance is such that people cheer for him and go along with the fun of the story."

With few productions of this dark musical in the Bay Area, Morales is excited to bring this unique show to South Valley audiences. He described "Sweeney Todd" as beyond the usual Broadway musical, with demanding vocals requiring an operatic sound. He has been working hard with the vocal director to perfect his sound and enunciation, as well as his London accent.

The musical also includes modern social commentary on capitalism, exploring those in authority abusing their power and those without power looking to gain some kind of identity and make some impact on the world in their own way, Morales said.

Vivienne Castillo, an award-winning opera singer, discovered her love for the show in high school after hearing a friend sing Sondheim's lyrics about killing and eating people. She was immediately intrigued and wanted to learn more about the show. With a desire to one day perform the role of "Mrs. Lovett," she began taking singing lessons with professional opera divas. She feels she has been preparing for this role since she was a teenager.

"I love Mrs. Lovett," she said. "Mrs. Lovett has been an iconic character for me since I was probably about 13 or 14 years old."

Castillo described the Fleet Street baker as an "eccentric" woman who is motivated by her number one drive: money. She hopes that her portrayal of "Mrs. Lovett" will captivate audiences and allow them to see the woman's diabolical depth.

"She's a character who is the comic relief of the show," she said. "She's so unstable. She's evil."

Michelle Griffin described "Sweeney Todd" as a favorite among actors seeking a juicy musical role.

"It is one of the few musicals that dives deeply into character development, it dives deeply into acting, and it's very challenging vocally," she said. "It's a whole advanced course in putting on musical theater. It's a show a lot of actors have on their bucket list."

Michelle stressed the production is not a standard community theater show. With its intricate plot and challenging vocals revealing sophisticated story-telling lyrics, it requires a team effort to bring the show to life.

"They call it Stephen Sondheim's opera because it's mostly done through singing. There are some acting words, but it's mostly singing," Michelle explained. "It's difficult because you have to create a mood with the sets and lighting. It's a whole challenging thing."

For those who have never seen "Sweeney Todd," she recommends coming to the show with an open mind.

"You'll be introduced to a different kind of musical theater," she said. "It's a beautiful production, and I think people will be impressed with the level of talent we have here at South Valley Civic Theatre."