



“FREELY FLOWS THE BLOOD OF THOSE WHO MORALIZE”:  
MORALITY AND VIOLENCE IN THE THEATRICAL, CHARACTER, AND MUSICAL  
ELEMENTS OF SONDHEIM’S *SWEENEY TODD*

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Division

of Music Theory

University of Houston

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Music

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By

Amy Gabrielle Yanaway

August, 2015

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis delves into the background of Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* to provide a good foundation on which to base a musical analysis. The first chapter describes the theatrical genres that have influenced *Sweeney Todd*, namely the nineteenth-century melodrama and the plays of the Theatre of the Grand Guignol in Paris. The second chapter follows the history and evolution of Sweeney's character and motivations through his story's many adaptations. The third and final chapter – the focus of this thesis – reviews a few existing analyses of the music of Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*, but more importantly, offers original Schenkerian-based analyses of two songs that represent turning points in the drama, the “Epiphany” scene and “Johanna – Act II Sequence.” These analyses highlight the psychological progression of Sweeney's character as the musical progresses and discuss whether the music works to support or undermine Sweeney's words and actions.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Finishing this thesis and receiving my Master's degree will be my grandest achievement so far in life, but I would not have been able to do so without the help of many friends and colleagues.

First, I would like to thank my fellow UH academic musicians Alex Lawler and Daniel Vidales, who not only gave invaluable edits, advice, and support throughout my thesis process, but also graciously helped to transmit physical copies of drafts to my committee, since I was working remotely. In addition, my close friends in San Antonio and Houston continually held me accountable to working on my document, even though I had been working full-time and sometimes felt like I had lost the motivation to finish. I owe many thanks to my dear friends Elizabeth Fields and Michael Ramirez; Elizabeth generously provided housing anytime I needed to be in Houston – especially the entire week during the period of my defense and submission – and Michael cared for my cats during this time as well. Of course, this was only one of many ways in which they offered their support to me.

I would also like to extend thanks to the staff of the UH Music Library who have facilitated this process, including Katie Buehner, Paula Truitt, Stephanie Lewin-Lane, and the many helpful student workers. My graduate advisor, Stacia Morgan, reached out to me at one of my lowest points during this process and encouraged me to finish and graduate, always with a smile on her face and a desire at her core to serve however necessary. I am also grateful to Cynthia Clayton, who kindly responded via Facebook to a few questions about her experience in the 2015 Houston Grand Opera production of Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* and has allowed me to use her quotes.

Of course, I am grateful for the members of my committee, Dr. Robert Shimko, Dr. Howard Pollack, and Dr. Timothy Koozin. When I met Dr. Shimko, his exuberant passion for theater was contagious. Even though my field of study is music theory, I have to admit that researching the topic of Grand Guignol was the most fascinating part of this whole process. Dr. Pollack and I share a love of musical theater, so I knew he would be a great colleague to work with in this field, and I would like to thank him for his knowledge and editorial expertise. I would like to thank Dr. Koozin specifically for leading the committee and for encouraging my passions for musical theater and music theory.

Finally, I would like to thank my mother Joyce Elaine Yanaway (1957-2011). While she was not able to be physically here for me during my years in graduate school, or throughout this process, I know she would have been supportive of me through these trying times. As a single mother who solely raised my brother and me since we were small children, she modeled strength, perseverance, motivation, and a calm soul, despite the many difficulties life had in store for her. These specific qualities were precious to me while working on my thesis, and I know that she would be extremely proud of me right now. Love you Ma, I owe you the most!

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## **DEDICATION**

To my dearest friends, who have acted as my supporters, encouragers, and accountability partners, without whom this task at times seemed incredibly insurmountable. And in memory of my loving mom Joyce, who would have been mortified at my choice of thesis topic, but would have supported me nonetheless.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THEATRICAL PRECEDENTS OF *SWEENEY TODD*

This chapter presents a detailed history of the origins and characteristics of the theatrical traditions of the nineteenth-century British melodrama and the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century French Grand Guignol, in order that a comparison can be made between these genres and Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* (1979). In particular, this musical shares with these genres a dual emphasis on morality and violence. This postmodernist use of a combination of multiple theatrical genres to create something new does not come without its complications, however, and Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*, while sharing many plot devices and overall themes with both melodrama and Grand Guignol, departs from the conventions of its theatrical precedents in many ways. The most important source of contention is whether Sweeney Todd's character truly qualifies as a classic melodramatic villain, which in turn creates a deep sense of internal conflict in the audience, not sure whether they should delight or not in Sweeney's ultimate defeat. Tracing the theatrical makeup of Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* and tying it to the genres that have paved the way for its existence is important to any in-depth analysis of the musical because, as the melodrama scholar James Smith writes, "such labels are essential as the first step towards appreciation, for until we understand the vision of experience a dramatist is trying to convey we cannot judge of his success."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James L. Smith, *Melodrama* (Fakenham, Norfolk: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1973), 65.

## Melodrama

The theatrical form called melodrama, of Greek etymology and meaning “music drama,” is a genre of drama accompanied by music that has a long and rich history, dating back to the French Revolution. After a violent ten-month period in 1793 and 1794 called “The Reign of Terror” in France, a period dominated by political crisis and mass public executions, melodrama emerged as a recognizable art form valued for the opportunities it offered for escapism. The clear and inevitable triumph of good over evil in melodramas allowed the masses to vicariously fulfill their desire for moral certainty in such an unpredictable and uncertain environment.

One of France’s most famous early melodramatists, Charles Gilbert de Pixérécourt (1773-1844), developed the genre and often used themes of disguise and blackmail in his melodramas. His treatise on how to write in the melodramatic genre influenced playwrights to come. Charles Nodier, a French author and “defender” of Pixérécourt, noted that melodrama “treat[ed] the extremities of danger and fear that the people confronted under the Revolution [and] assert[ed] that those trials issue within the theatre in a clear moral order, as the melodrama serves a profound moral, even sacred function in a period during which... Christianity was banned from public life.”<sup>2</sup>

Contemporaneous with the French Revolution, England’s Industrial Revolution created a similar environment for its lower classes, who were struggling amid horrible working and living conditions. The rapid urbanization created a greater need for theater and popular entertainment, which led to a growth of the popular arts in England. Specifically,

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<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Cox, “The Death of Tragedy; or, the Birth of Melodrama,” *The Performing Century: Nineteenth-Century Theatre’s History* (2007): 164.

urbanization spurred the construction of larger theaters, which allowed the capacity for larger audiences and the rise of star performers. The construction of railroads during this time period even helped bring theatrical performances to more isolated rural areas.

Although the conditions of the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution in England were fairly different, the underlying desire to escape from the dreariness of reality remained consistent, so it is no surprise that the genre of melodrama spread from its origins in France to England. However, Thomas Holcroft, the British playwright of *A Tale of Mystery* (1802), the first English play to be considered a melodrama, is often thought to have brought a sense of humor to the genre that was not as prevalent in the French melodramas.

Jacky Bratton writes,

Contemporary English audiences, schooled on Shakespeare's mixed modes rather than in the French stage tradition would not have been likely to respond to such a notion if too solemnly expressed; for them, Holcroft has added to Pixérécourt a layer of humour. The affective qualification of comedy – nothing should be taken seriously for too long – immediately became indispensable to the English version of the drama.<sup>3</sup>

Within the melodramatic genre, there were various subcategories: the Gothic melodrama, with its ghosts, nightmarish storms, and castles; the British nautical melodrama, with its patriotic themes from the British naval victories with France; the domestic melodrama, with its themes of drinking, poverty, and gambling; the frontier melodrama, and the crime melodrama.<sup>4</sup> The subjects of these melodramas were sometimes based on non-fiction, often

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<sup>3</sup> Jacky Bratton, "Romantic Melodrama," *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre, 1730-1830* (2007): 120.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 152.

drawing source material from current events reported in newspapers, like recent murders or labor strikes.<sup>5</sup>

Today's society often associates the word *melodrama*, and the theatrical genre it represents, with negative connotations of exaggeration, predictability, and a lack of realism; however, it is naïve to assume that the audiences of the time did not find its hyperbolic nature and plot twists funny. According to Bratton, melodrama was written "not to be taken entirely seriously all the time; the audience is expected to recognise the standard tropes, and to enjoy them on several levels, relishing both the turns of the plot and their own expertise in anticipating those turns."<sup>6</sup> At the recent 2015 Houston Grand Opera production of Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*, the audience perceived a similar lack of gravity. Even during the very unnerving opening scene "The Ballad of Sweeney Todd," the audience chuckled when the chorus sang the lyrics "And what if none of their souls were saved? They went to their maker impeccably shaved." The self-awareness of the audience and the recognition of the subtle elements of black humor present in the subject matter is a commonality of melodrama's and Sondheim's modern spectators.

The plots of melodramas are often suspenseful and have many reversals and turning points, rather than a single point of tension, as found, for example in Aristotelian tragedy. They were morality plays where good and evil were clearly delineated. The fact that virtue almost always won out in these plays makes it clear why it was such a popular genre in societies where justice was often not a reality for most. The cast was composed of stock

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<sup>5</sup> Heidi J. Holder, "Melodrama, Realism and Empire on the British Stage," *Acts of Supremacy: The British Empire and the Stage, 1790-1930* (1991): 139-142.

<sup>6</sup> Jacky Bratton, "The Contending Discourses of Melodrama," *Melodrama: A Stage, Picture, Screen* (1994): 47.

characters, such as the hero, the suffering heroine, the villain, and the comic sidekick to the hero, all of whom tended to have stereotypical roles and characteristics.

Melodrama made great use of spectacle, often dramatizing massive explosions, shipwrecks, horse races, and train wrecks. For example, in the melodrama *Pauvrette*, the Irish playwright Dion Boucicault depicted an active avalanche that completely buried the stage to as high as fifteen feet.<sup>7</sup> Booth describes spectacle in the context of Edward Fitzball's *The Earthquake* (1829): "the evil Robber of the Black Mountains is about to put the hero and heroine to death when the timely and eponymous earthquake intervenes, burying the Robber and his followers but leaving the hero and heroine untouched."<sup>8</sup> These onstage disasters were all staged highly realistically. In general, the plot of melodramas was episodically constructed with various situations staged in succession that would not necessarily deal with each other very clearly, but this composition was purposeful. James Smith commented on this distinctive episodic structure of melodrama, saying, "Thus fortified, villainy can continue its persecutions indefinitely," showing that the structure of the plays supported the ability of the villain's antics to go on endlessly and tirelessly, at least from the hero's perspective.

There are numerous ways in which the genre of melodrama and Stephen Sondheim's 1979 production of *Sweeney Todd* are connected; most clearly perhaps is the importance and function of music in relation to the drama. In melodrama, music is used "to point character, underline mood and heighten tension."<sup>9</sup> The drive of the music furthered the strong forward-

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<sup>7</sup> Smith, 29.

<sup>8</sup> Booth, 162.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, 31.

moving plot.<sup>10</sup> Bratton also argues that the music functioned beyond the role of mere accompaniment and was actually participatory in the drama, “shaping the narrative and extending what the characters do and say as well as framing the audience’s responses.”<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, the music of melodramas also commonly made use of leitmotifs, which are short musical motives that carry an association with a certain character, idea, or place throughout the play.<sup>12</sup> Sondheim uses leitmotifs in a similar manner, even vaguely disguising the Beggar Woman’s folk-like leitmotif as Lucy’s lullaby and a minuet at the Judge’s ball where she was present, in order that listeners might make the connection that they are actually the same person. Correspondingly, in *Sweeney Todd*, Sondheim’s use of music to heighten the mood and keep the audience on edge directly connects with the function of the accompanying music in melodramas. The classification of *Sweeney Todd* as a musical lends itself, of course, to a great deal of musical involvement, but its heavy underscoring throughout, even during spoken text, is evidence of a strong connection to melodrama. Sondheim himself said,

[The music] had to be unsettling, scary, and very romantic... Music is what holds it together. That’s why so much of *Sweeney Todd* is sung and underscored – not because I wanted to do an opera, but because I realized that the only way to sustain tension was to use music continually, not to let the heat out, so that even if they’re talking, there’s music going on in the pit.<sup>13</sup>

Another characteristic shared by both melodrama and Sondheim’s musical is the use of stock characters. Smith describes the formula for a classic melodrama as being focused on the two central characters of the hero and his love interest:

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<sup>10</sup> Cox, 175.

<sup>11</sup> Bratton, “Romantic Melodrama,” 120.

<sup>12</sup> Booth, 151.

<sup>13</sup> Craig Zadan, *Sondheim & Co.* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 246-248.

Take an innocent man and a defenceless woman, both of them wholly admirable and free from fault. Present them sympathetically, so that an audience will identify with them and share their hopes. And then set against them every obstacle you can devise. Persecute them with villains, dog them with ill-luck, thrust them into a hostile world which threatens at every moment their instant annihilation. Dramatize these excitements as effectively as the resources of the stage will allow, heighten the suspense with music, relieve it with laughter and tears. And then, when all seems lost, allow your hero and heroine to win. <sup>14</sup>

Anthony is clearly established as the virtuous hero, setting off to rescue Johanna from her captivity, both from the Judge's dwelling and from Fogg's Asylum in Act II. Johanna represents melodrama's typical suffering heroine. She is locked up in a room with almost no freedom, forced to live with the Judge in their sickeningly incestuous adopted father-daughter relationship, and is eventually sent to an asylum in order to be hidden from Anthony's grasp. Both the hero and heroine have flighty personalities, however, and might be interpreted as a parody of the traditional melodramatic heroic couple. In the "Kiss Me" scene, Johanna comically sings to Anthony: "I knew I'd be with you one day, even not knowing who you were." Anthony's cowardice and inability to kill Dr. Fogg in the rescue scene at the asylum – and Johanna's ability to step up and do so herself – also weakens Anthony's potency as the stock heroic character, since he is naïve, incapable of harming a man of questionable ethics, and is merely a pawn in Sweeney's plans to use Johanna as bait.

Mrs. Lovett fulfills the stock character of the comic sidekick, a "pert and lovable soubrette who dances specialities [*sic*] and... indulge[s] in witty crosstalk."<sup>15</sup> Alfred Mollin's article "Mayhem and Morality" specifically addresses Mrs. Lovett's clear amorality, pointing out that she is more interested in money and practical concerns than in the moral implications of her and Sweeney's businesses. Traditionally, this stock character is more morally ambiguous

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<sup>14</sup> Smith, 15.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 33.



than the hero or heroine, which is clearly the case here.<sup>16</sup> She offers comic relief to the musical, especially in the physical – almost slapstick – comedy of “The Worst Pies in London,” in which she pounds her pie dough, as well as the unwelcome cockroaches that are closer than comfort to the pies themselves. This scene follows the very serious and emotional exposition of “No Place Like London.” Another instance of comic relief follows the dark and violent climax of the “Epiphany” scene, where Mrs. Lovett and Sweeney engage in clever word play, dark humor, and even a waltz in the closing scene of Act I, “A Little Priest.”

An example of this comic woman character in the melodramatic repertoire, in order to make a comparison with Mrs. Lovett, is the maidservant Fiametta from Thomas Holcroft’s *A Tale of Mystery* from 1826. As the character Montano begins to regale Fiametta and Bonamo with his story, Fiametta comically continues to interrupt:

FIAMETTA. I won't breathe! A word shan't escape my lips.  
(*They press round Montano.*)

MONTANO. Eight years ago, before I had the honour to know you, returning one evening after visiting my friends, I was leisurely ascending the rock of Arpennaz.

FIAMETTA. So, so! The rock of Arpennaz! You hear! But I'll not say a word.

MONTANO. Two men, wild in their looks, and smeared with blood, passed hastily by me, with every appearance of guilt impressed upon their countenances.

FIAMETTA. The very same! Eight years ago! The rock of Arpennaz! The---

BONAMO. Silence!

FIAMETTA. I'll not say a word. Tell all, sir; I am dumb.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Bratton, “The Contending Discourses of Melodrama,” 38-39.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Holcroft, *A Tale of Mystery* (1826) (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 25.

Fiametta brings comic relief and a sense of levity to this scene in a way reminiscent of Mrs. Lovett's comic and almost breathless interruptions of Sweeney's phrases. For instance, as Sweeney attempts to get through his justification of murder in "A Little Priest" ("The history of the world, my sweet... is who gets eaten, and who gets to eat."), Mrs. Lovett interrupts affectionately, "Oh, Mr. Todd, ooh Mr. Todd, what does it tell?"

Sweeney's wife Lucy takes the role of the fallen woman, who was perhaps too innocent for her own good. Sweeney describes her fall from grace after her rape in the song "No Place Like London," mourning, "And she would fall, so soft, so young, so lost and oh, so beautiful." Mrs. Lovett similarly characterizes Lucy in "Poor Thing" as a "silly little nit," "poor fool," naively "wander[ing] tormented and drink[ing]" at the Judge's ball where she is raped. Also, according to Mrs. Lovett, the party-goers "figured she had to be daft." Knowing the conflict of interest between Lucy and Mrs. Lovett, being that both have – or once had – a romantic interest in Sweeney, Mrs. Lovett's characterization of Lucy is not entirely reliable, but Lucy's downfall does lead to her eventual death at the hand of her own husband.

An interesting example of a villain from the melodramatic literature comes from George Didbin Pitt's 1847 melodrama, *A String of Pearls*, which represents one of the earliest existences of Sweeney's character in literature. In Didbin Pitt's melodrama, which is discussed in greater detail in the second chapter, Sweeney is motivated purely by greed and has no backstory with which the audience can sympathize. After having been made aware that one of his customers has "a considerable sum about [him]," Sweeney distracts the customer by pointing to a painting on the wall, at which point the stage directions indicate: "As Grant rises, Todd has his dagger ready and stabs him in the back then dashes him down the trap –

as the trap closes Tobias enters bursting open the door – Todd standing over the trap aghast, at the same time his knife and hands bloody.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, knowing that his servant Tobias has witnessed this murder, Sweeney exclaims: “Fool, fool, to let my rage and fear thus control me, I must have the boy back again – tis in his power to destroy me. Tis true he saw not much – but blood tells a tale, that will cost blood again – a sea of blood, that the guilty soul is lost in the gory billow.”<sup>19</sup>

Judge Turpin, of Sondheim’s *Sweeney Todd*, takes on this classic villainous role very convincingly in a similar manner to Didbin Pitt’s villain. He sends Sweeney to jail for fifteen years on false charges, tricks Lucy to come to a party and then rapes her, and kidnaps Johanna. He undoubtedly represents the clear-cut evil present in the classic melodramatic villain, “driven by ambition, avarice, anger, jealousy, or lust.”<sup>20</sup> However, there are complications with this classification if one takes into account the Judge’s “Johanna” song, in which he chants “Mea maxima culpa” (“Through my very great fault”) while whipping himself in presumed punishment and asking God for forgiveness. The context provides a little more insight, however; the Judge is viewing Johanna through the keyhole of her bedroom door while singing this, so it may be a mixture of recognition of guilt alongside masochistic sexual enjoyment. This scene is most often cut because of its disturbing nature, but also perhaps because it contributes to the desire for an uncomplicated villain in this melodramatic setting. Judge Turpin also falls short of the stock villain character of melodramas because he is not the dominant force of action. Michael Booth comments,

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<sup>18</sup> Sharon Aronofsky Weltman, “The String of Pearls, or the Fiend of Fleet Street,” *Nineteenth Century Theatre & Film* 38, no. 1 (Summer 2011): 39.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>20</sup> Smith, 20.

It is the villain who thinks, decides, makes new plans when the old ones go wrong, the villain who acts while the hero and heroine react. The villain is the active principle of melodrama, the hero and heroine, while often extremely vigorous in their exertions, are essentially passive in that this energy is usually a defensive response to a situation created by the villain's wiles.<sup>21</sup>

This classic characterization of the melodramatic villain is then fulfilled by a combination of both the Judge and Sondheim's Sweeney Todd.

This brings an even greater complication to light: one of the foremost characteristics of melodrama that differs from Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* is the fact that Sweeney seems to be a crossover between the traditional hero and villain characters. This is a major impediment in the comparison of the two genres, as well as a great source of interest. The sentimentality of Sweeney's backstory – his being wrongfully jailed and the loss of his family unit as told in “No Place Like London” and “Poor Thing” – is too heartbreaking to write him off as a pure villain, but his terrible actions after Act I make it difficult to justify a classification of hero either.

The existence of such a detailed backstory of Sweeney's troubled character has a direct connection to the eighteenth-century theatrical genre of the sentimental drama, in which no character is truly evil. Rather, bad or wicked behavior is the product of characters being misled. This leads to an attempt at the justification of all wrongdoings within the action. The viewpoint that man is inherently good within the sentimental drama stemmed from middle-class business ethics, where society had to be able to trust their neighbors and colleagues with business deals and specifically the concept of credit. George Lillo, an English playwright of the early eighteenth century, directly deals with the theme of business ethics in his play *The London Merchant* (1731). In this work, an apprentice, George

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<sup>21</sup> Booth, 160.

Barnwell, works for a London merchant named Thorowgood, but Barnwell is quickly seduced by a scheming and avaricious prostitute, Sarah Millwood. Throughout Barnwell and Millwood's tryst, she manipulates him to do questionable things, leading to the stealing of money from Thorowgood and ultimately the robbing and murder of Barnwell's uncle in order to financially support their affair. As Barnwell is being led to the gallows for his crimes, he contritely declares:

If any youth, like you, in future times  
Shall mourn my fate, tho he abhors my crimes;  
Or tender maid, like you, my tale shall hear,  
And to my sorrows give a pitying tear;  
To each such melting eye, and throbbing heart  
Would gracious Heaven this benefit impart –  
Never to know my guilt, nor feel my pain.  
Then must you own, you ought not to complain;  
Since you nor weep, nor shall I die, in vain.<sup>22</sup>

Barnwell's last words clearly show repentance and the desire that others learn from his mistakes and their consequences. Lothar Fietz notes that in the sentimental drama, "The betrayed husband hides from the world behind the protective mask of a misanthrope, but this misanthropy actually only serves to conceal his still intact, altruistic kindness."<sup>23</sup> Even in the final gallows scene, Barnwell exhibits this kind of benevolence by asking that Sarah Millwood be forgiven; this supports the idea that he was merely led astray from his own natural innocence by external temptation, and that he is not a truly evil character.

Sweeney's character is approached in a similar manner throughout Sondheim's musical. He is first presented as a sort of Shakespearean tragic hero who rightly wants to avenge the

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<sup>22</sup> George Lillo, *The London Merchant (1731)* (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 66.

<sup>23</sup> Lothar Fietz, "On the Origins of the English Melodrama in the Tradition of Bourgeois Tragedy and Sentimental Drama," *Melodrama: The Cultural Emergence of a Genre* (1996): 95.

wrongs perpetrated against his family; but as his actions progress to the murder of innocent people – not to mention his disturbing satisfaction in creating unknowing cannibals in Mrs. Lovett’s customers – the justification for his wrongdoings become less plausible.

Throughout the course of the musical, Sweeney represents an evolution from a heroic character, with whom the audience clearly sides, to the mode of the classic melodramatic villain, who is feared and deserves the retribution of death. Loyal until the end, however, Mrs. Lovett responds to Sweeney’s final sung words in the epilogue (“To seek revenge may lead to hell”) by singing “But everyone does it, and seldom as well,” with an attempt at rationalizing evil behavior that is true to the genre of the sentimental drama.

Interestingly, the origin of Sweeney’s character tells a different story. In the nineteenth-century penny dreadfuls, Sweeney represented a true melodramatic villain who was rightfully defeated in the end by virtue. The Christopher Bond play from 1973, on which Sondheim’s *Sweeney Todd* is based, was the first to sentimentalize Sweeney’s character with the addition of a backstory capable of evoking empathy from an audience. This modern-day presentation of Sweeney elicits conflicted feelings from the audience, straying from the melodramatic tradition, which “neither invoke[s] internal conflict nor require[s] the spectator to feel any complexity of response.”<sup>24</sup> Unlike the melodramatic genre, and more conforming to the eighteenth-century English sentimental drama, audiences now seek to understand wickedness and tend to want to believe that it must come from neglect, abuse, mistreatment, and not just from the nature of humanity.

The final way in which melodrama and *Sweeney Todd* diverge is the presence of an *anagnorisis* in *Sweeney Todd*, Aristotle’s term for the plot point in a tragedy where the hero

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<sup>24</sup> Bratton, “Romantic Melodrama,” 117.

realizes something critical, which is antithetical to and unnecessary in the genre of melodrama because the conflict is external rather than internal. Smith states: “It is this total dependence upon external adversaries which finally separates melodrama from all other serious dramatic forms.”<sup>25</sup> The principle conflict in *Sweeney* is internal: when Sweeney is suddenly presented with his last chance to kill the Judge and avenge his family, he swiftly kills the Beggar Woman to remove her from his shop. At first glance, that seems like an external conflict; however, Sweeney later goes down into the basement and, in his moment of *anagnorisis*, he realizes that the Beggar Woman is actually his wife (“Lucy! What have I done?”). The internal conflict that has become apparent to Sweeney is that he has unfortunately, and in a catastrophic moment of irony, killed the person who initially motivated his revenge. In turn, Tobias soon kills Sweeney with his own razor, a necessary moral punishment for his evil deeds. Audiences of the melodramatic tradition would be graced with a happy or – at the very least – a bittersweet ending, but *Sweeney Todd*’s audiences do not experience comfort and satisfaction. Evil is in fact defeated, and morality upheld, through the deaths of both the Judge and Sweeney, but while the Judge’s murder satisfies the need for the villain to be conquered, Sweeney’s tragic death leaves the audience with mixed feelings; his horrifying actions in the second act create the need for punishment, but the audience also empathizes with him for his past.

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<sup>25</sup> Smith, 8.

## Grand Guignol

A second theatrical genre that Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* borrows from is the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century repertory of plays from Paris offered at the Theatre of the Grand Guignol. The name Guignol originates from a character from the French equivalent of the Punch and Judy puppet show for kids, with the added "Grand" prefix because of the adult content in these plays.<sup>26</sup> The French verb *guigner* also means to give someone the "evil eye," while a *guignard* is a misfortunate person.<sup>27</sup>

The Grand Guignol plays were preceded by a movement of naturalistic theater in the late nineteenth century, which included realistic sets and a natural (less histrionic) acting style. André Antoine, a young gas company clerk at the time, became the most high-profile champion of naturalism through his work at the Théâtre Libre beginning in 1887. Here, Antoine specialized in *comedies rosses*, or *rosse* plays, which were short plays that aimed to reveal the seedy underworld of Paris, including themes of crime and addiction. In these *comedies rosses*, immorality was rarely punished, and there was no clear delineation between good and evil, unlike its melodramatic precedents. Oscar Méténier, co-founder of the Théâtre Libre and secretary to the Paris Police Commissioner, provided material from his work experience for the *rosse* plays, which allowed for an authenticity of subject matter and language.

After the financial failures of the Théâtre Libre, Méténier opened the Theatre of the Grand Guignol on April 13, 1897 on 20 rue Chaptal, not too far away from his and Antoine's

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<sup>26</sup> Mel Gordon, *The Grand Guignol: Theatre of Fear and Terror* (New York: Amok Press, 1988), 14.

<sup>27</sup> Victor Emeljanow, "Grand Guignol and the Orchestration of Violence," *Violence in Drama* (1991): 152.



original enterprise. The theater seated 285 people and had previously functioned as a convent, a blacksmith's workshop, and an artist's studio. Méténier decided to keep the gothic and church-like architecture, including carved wooden angels, religious murals, and some say a lingering smell of incense and candles.<sup>28</sup> Also contributing to the theater's unique atmosphere was its location in an area of town associated with prostitution, populated by the lower class and bohemians, and its proximity to live entertainment like the Moulin-Rouge and melodrama houses. In fact, the ride to the theater was part of the complete experience of a night at the Grand Guignol theater; the street leading to the dead-end entrance of the theater was long, dark, and deserted. Hand and Wilson describe the environment of this area of Paris, saying: "Pigalle can be seen as a central player in the pre-show game and it is one of the most prolific actors in the Grand-Guignol drama. If an audience is to shudder at the onstage horrors, then the preparations must be made earlier and the sinister and the pregnant atmosphere of the streets of Pigalle was the warm-up act for Paulais and Maxa," who were both important actors of this theater.<sup>29</sup>

In 1898, Méténier sold the theater to a man named Max Maurey, who became the "Father of Grand Guignol." Maurey aimed at making the theater financially successful and disagreed with experimentation for experimentation's sake. Maurey ran the theater for fifteen to sixteen years and was the person who gave the theater its distinct and lasting reputation. His formula for success was to fill a night's performances with a combination of comedies, *rosse* plays, and farces that alternated with the theatre's distinctive horror plays to create the effect

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<sup>28</sup> Richard J. Hand and Michael Wilson, *Grand-Guignol: The French Theatre of Horror* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002): 30.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 29.

of “hot and cold showers.”<sup>30</sup> This effectively had the audience experiencing an emotional rollercoaster, constantly switching from tension to release throughout the night. Maurey collaborated with André de Lorde, the most prolific playwright of this theater and who was later deemed the “Prince of Terror.” According to Mel Gordon, de Lorde’s father was a doctor and exposed him to death and trauma as a child. Thereafter, André de Lorde was both tortured and fascinated by these early experiences, which clearly influenced his theatrical output. The manager of the theater, Paul Ratineau, regarded as “the Third Bandit of Horror” alongside de Lorde and one of the most famous Grand Guignol actors Camille Choisy, was well known for his stage effects. Specifically, Ratineau designed weapons that squirted blood and required sleight of hand, invented novel sound effects, and created different types of stage blood for use according to the appropriate context, all made fresh in a cauldron.<sup>31</sup> Under the leadership of Maurey and de Lorde, the Theatre of the Grand Guignol was one of the most popular tourist attractions in Paris by 1910.<sup>32</sup>

Interestingly, the theater became a popular choice of entertainment for the Nazi troops during World War II, although the elite Gestapo and Nazi officers thought it to be low art.<sup>33</sup> After WWII, people wanted to be able to visualize real horror, as was described in books about the Nazis. The real terrors of the world thus became too much of a competitor, and audiences sometimes laughed at the onstage horrors of the Grand Guignol. Charles Nonon, a manager and part owner of the theater during the 1950s, reflected, “We could never equal Buchenwald. Before the war, everyone felt that what was happening on stage was

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<sup>30</sup> Gordon, 16.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 30.

impossible. Now we know that these things, and worse, are possible in reality.”<sup>34</sup> Authors Richard Hand and Michael Wilson argue against this view, noting that the theater thrived after the horrors of the First World War and blame the downfall more on an inability to compete with cinema.<sup>35</sup> Unfortunately, after a prolonged series of ownership changes that had begun in the late 1920s, the theater closed in 1962.

Despite the theater’s eventual demise, the plays of the Theater of the Grand Guignol thrived for many years with themes of violence, gore, and sex. The writers and actors in this genre placed great importance on shock value, and the audience responded sometimes by fainting or getting physically sick. Gordon explains,

Backstage, the actors themselves calculated their success according to the evening’s faintings. During one de Lorde horror play that ended with a realistic blood transfusion, a record was set: fifteen playgoers had lost consciousness. Between sketches, the cobblestoned alley outside the theatre was frequented by hyperventilating couples and vomiting individuals.<sup>36</sup>

As a publicity stunt, the theater even hired a house doctor and published cartoons depicting the audience being checked out prior to the performance, as a warning of the potential dangers to come.<sup>37</sup> The subject matter of the plays were often taken from the *fait divers*, which were gory accounts of actual crimes that were printed in the news. They were short descriptions and obviously usually did not involve happy endings. It is interesting to note that the *fait divers* as a source of the material for the Grand Guignol plays is strikingly similar to the drawing of melodramatic subjects from current events as well.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>35</sup> Hand and Wilson, 25.

<sup>36</sup> Gordon, 28.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 19.

There is also a connection between melodrama and Grand Guignol as far as the audience involvement; the audience often yelled and hissed at the sight of the villain in both settings. Sometimes, the actors even broke the “fourth wall,” implicating the audience as a guilty participator in the action. For instance, Hand and Wilson describe a video clip that is purported to be from the last ever performance in the Grand Guignol Theater – as recorded in the Italian documentary *Ecco* (1965) – in which the actor, playing the role of Henri Landru, looks at the audience and smiles before murdering his victim. They argue that this look has more meaning than it may seem because:

By a simple acknowledgement of the audience... [they] become accessories to the act and, most crucially, willing witnesses. It is an acknowledgement by the actor that the violence on stage is not an abstract violence that exists in some fantastic realm far away from our everyday lives, but is an action by a de Lordean ‘monstre virtuel,’ which we are all, at any given movement, but a step away from...”<sup>38</sup>

In other words, when the “fourth wall” was broken in these cases, the audience did not have the luxury of being entertained from afar, but had – with a mere look – become a part of the Grand Guignol horrors as well.

Eroticism also played a large role in the Grand Guignol plays. It was involved in all aspects of the genre, including the titles of plays (*Orgy in the Light House*, *Sauce for the Goose*, *The Seductress*, *One Hour of Love*, *An Affair of Morals*) and in its frequent themes of adultery, sadomasochism, and voyeurism. As previously mentioned, the theater itself was located in a part of town associated with sexual deviancy and prostitution, so the allegation that audience members may have been having sex in the private boxes of the theater is not too surprising.<sup>39</sup> Hand and Wilson even compare the Grand Guignol repertoire to

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<sup>38</sup> Hand and Wilson, 36.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 73.

pornography, saying: “The plays are short and the narrative is often very simple with an uncomplicated and unambiguous exposition heading towards a clearly signposted ending.”<sup>40</sup>

It is very clear that the Grand Guignol plays influenced *Sweeney Todd*. The most obvious connection is, of course, the general goriness and the dark and intense tone. Both contain themes of mass murder and revenge, which are specifically present in Sweeney’s “Johanna” scene in which the audience first witnesses Sweeney’s murders of innocent customers, along with the generous use of stage blood, as in the Grand Guignol plays. Cynthia Clayton, the vocalist who played the role of the Beggar Woman/Lucy in the 2015 Houston Grand Opera production, offered great insight on the production’s use of razors and stage blood:

The razors were all real, though dull. There were many more of them than was apparent (extras on hand in various places). The blood was rigged on each actor. We each received our pack via a dresser just prior to our final entrance. They are medical saline bags cut down to perhaps 3/4 of a cup of stage blood (we used the same product as the Harry Potter films, which I believe is branded "Pigs Fly" or similar). There was a tube that led from the bag to the neckline, and a valve at the connection of the tube and bag. Each "victim" had to flip the valve switch, and compress the bag at the exact moment. Sometimes Nathan [the actor playing Sweeney Todd] could angle the blade in such a way as to get a "squirt" effect. You couldn't see the victims doing their work, because they were under a barber cape...except for me. We had separate blood rehearsals to get this set. The opera put down plastic and gave us sweats to wear to try out different effects. In other shows I've done, blood has been rigged in the knife or in the hand (Tosca, Jenufa).<sup>41</sup>

Clayton believes that the large amount of deaths in a row, for example in Sweeney’s “Johanna” song in Act II, necessitate the rigging of the blood packs to the actors’ bodies, instead of being rigged inside the razors, like the twentieth-century weapons of Paul Ratineau’s innovation. This use of gore and violence is something that *Sweeney Todd* inherited from the horror plays of the Grand Guignol tradition.

Themes of oppression and injustice are also common between the two, Sweeney’s

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<sup>40</sup> Gordon, 74.

<sup>41</sup> Cynthia Clayton, email, June 13, 2015.

“Epiphany” scene being the prime example, where he exclaims: “There are two kinds of men, and only two. There’s the one staying put in his proper place and the one with his foot in the other one’s face.” Cannibalism, a theme present in certain Grand Guignol plays, is at the forefront of the drama in the second act and is most graphic when Tobias finds a fingernail while grinding the meat for Mrs. Lovett’s pies. Themes such as eroticism, pedophilia, masturbation, and sadomasochism are present in the relationship between the Judge and Johanna, as evidenced by the Judge’s revolting “Johanna” song, which is often cut for these reasons. Gordon offers great confirmation of the connection between the themes of Grand Guignol and Sondheim’s *Sweeney Todd* by dedicating his book – *The Grand Guignol: Theatre of Fear and Terror* – to Hal Prince, the director of the original Sondheim production, writing, “To Hal Prince, the newest ‘bandit’ of the Grand Guignol.”

*The Laboratory of Hallucinations* (1916), by André de Lorde, is an example of a Grand Guignol play that shares themes of insanity and revenge with Sondheim’s *Sweeney Todd*. Sonia, the wife of Dr. Gorlitz, decides to have an affair with Monsieur de Mora, one of their neighbors. When Dr. Gorlitz learns of his wife’s indiscretions by reading a love letter from Sonia to de Mora, he tells Sonia that he has avenged the affair by operating on de Mora’s brain to “wipe out his intelligence.”<sup>42</sup> In a plot twist reminiscent of melodramas, de Mora overhears this conversation and exacts his own revenge:

DE MORA. Ah! It was you who made me suffer! Who tortured me...

GORLITZ. (*fighting his hold*) Let go of me! ...

DE MORA. I heard... I heard everything...

GORLITZ. (*gasping in his grip*) Let go...

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<sup>42</sup> Gordon, 186.

*(The two men fight savagely, in silence. They turn around the table. With a violent twist, the Doctor manages to push De Mora off, who, just as quickly with a leap, grabs him again and throws him on the operating table. Then, while squeezing his throat with one hand, De Mora seizes a strap on the table with the other and quickly immobilizes the Doctor.)*

DE MORA. I am going to hurt you! With these scissors, with this hammer... I will... *(He takes the scissors and the hammer which are on the small shelf above the operating table, while the Doctor struggles, tied to the table. Taken by a furious fit of madness, De Mora begins to crack open the Doctor's skull with the scissors, while screaming:)* I enlarge the opening! I enlarge the opening! ... I wipe out his intelligence... There is nothing left... There is nothing left but suffering... only suffering!...<sup>43</sup>

This closing scene of *The Laboratory of Hallucinations* is specifically similar to the final scene of *Sweeney Todd*. Although Sweeney was actually successful in his revenge against the Judge, unlike Dr. Gorlitz's spoiled attempt, both Sweeney and Dr. Gorlitz were murdered by their own weapons at the hand of someone avenging evil actions.

An even more striking connection of the theme of madness can be drawn between a scene from de Lorde's *The System of Dr. Goudron and Prof. Plume* (1903) and the "City on Fire!" scene at Fogg's Asylum in *Sweeney Todd*. In de Lorde's play, the characters Henri and Jean are journalists who visit Dr. Goudron at an asylum to investigate his claim that he has been able to cure insanity. As the environment grows more and more distressed in the asylum, Henri and Jean realize that Dr. Goudron is, in fact, one of the patients of the institution who has been pretending to be a doctor, and that the other inmates have also escaped. The Dr. Goudron imposter assures them:

GOUDRON. *(sneering)* Don't be afraid, don't be afraid... *(looking under the door)* Easy, now! He's come in. Don't frighten him. The door must be locked. *(He locks it and puts the key in his pocket.)* Now we have him. We have the thunder! *(He points to Jean)* Grab him! We've got him... help me! *(Plume, Robert and Goudron rush at Jean.)* He can no longer escape us!

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 188.

JEAN. (*fighting back, stretched out on the desk where they have thrown him*) Help! Let me go!

(*They struggle.*)

HENRI. (*fighting against Mme. Joyeuse and Mlle. Eugenie, who have jumped on him and are scratching him as they scream.*) Will you let him go, you bastards!

GOUDRON. (*jumping on the table and indicating Jean's head*) Wait... Give me a knife so I can dig around his eye...

(*He takes the letter opener from the desk.*)

PLUME. Yes, tear out his eye.

JEAN. (*still struggling on the table*) Help me! Henri...

PLUME. The blood is flowing. Ha, ha! (*He starts to laugh.*)

HENRI. (*still fighting off the women*) Miserable lunatics! Ahh!<sup>44</sup>

Johanna and Anthony face a similar frenetic situation when Anthony visits Fogg's Asylum, pretending to be a wigmaker in order to rescue Johanna. Anthony yells,

ANTHONY. (*Drawing his pistol*) Unhand her!

MR. FOGG. Why you - -! (*Clutching the scissors, he moves resolutely toward Anthony. Anthony backs away a few steps, but Fogg keeps coming*)

ANTHONY. Stop, Mr. Fogg, or I'll fire.

MR. FOGG. Fire, and I will stop.

ANTHONY. (*Losing his nerve*) I cannot shoot. (*Anthony drops the gun which Johanna catches in mid-air. Fogg moves toward Anthony, raising the scissors. Johanna, holding the gun with both hands, shoots Fogg. The whistle shrieks. Johanna drops the gun and together she and Anthony run out. Compelled by the energy released by Fogg's death, the lunatics tear down the wall and rush out of the asylum, spilling with euphoric excitement onto the street.*)<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 136-137.

<sup>45</sup> Stephen Sondheim, *Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street: A Musical Thriller* (New York: Revelation Music Pub. Corp. & Rilting Music, 1981): 321-323.



In this way, Anthony and Johanna's escape scene from Fogg's Asylum, and the madness that ensues, certainly recreates the Grand Guignol aesthetic for modern audiences.

*Sweeney Todd* and Grand Guignol also have aspects in common beyond shared themes. For instance, both lack a happy ending, which is more authentic to the sources of the *fait divers*. André de Lorde's *At the Telephone* (1902) specifically shares with *Sweeney Todd* a heartbreaking ending. The main character in this Grand Guignol play, André Marex, takes his family to a house in the country, but must leave them to go to work. When he begins to get worried calls from his wife about noises coming from outside, he thinks she must be paranoid. However, the final scene ends with Marex speaking on the phone with his wife, gradually becoming more panicked as he realizes that his family is in actual danger:

MAREX. Be quiet, my pet, I beg you, dear little Pierre. Yes, put out the lamp. Tell Nanette — directly — that will drive them away, perhaps — I don't know — I — I — Ah, my God! Now under the window shutters — you think — several people — and also behind the door! They're slipping something underneath — Ah! — call! Shout! — frighten them! — scream — call — cry 'Help!' — it's ghastly! Yes, you're right. Don't scream. Run away and take the child. Yes, run away — run through the kitchen. Run! Ah! (*Utters a piercing cry.*) Oh! Who was that who screamed! Martha! Martha! Was that you? Answer! Answer! I say! What are they doing? What are they doing to you? Ah! — they're being killed! They're being strangled — ah! — Help! — Murder! Help!

(*Leaving the telephone and rushing out like a madman, while MONSIEUR and MADAME RIVOIRE try to restrain him.*) Help! — Murder! — Murder! — Help! (*Continues to scream as the curtain falls.*)<sup>46</sup>

This ending shares obvious elements of tragedy, horror, suffering, and helplessness with the ending of Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*, offering no relief or resolution for the audience.

*Sweeney Todd* also borrows the idea of “hot and cold showers.” In the context of the Grand Guignol, Gordon presents the program from the night of February 8<sup>th</sup>, 1929 that

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<sup>46</sup> André de Lorde, *At the Telephone* from *One-Act Plays for Stage and Study*, ed. Walter Prichard Eaton (New York: S. French, 1925): 400-401.

begins with *One Night of Edgar Poe* (a horror play), followed by *Harmony* (a comedy), *Destination Unknown* (a horror play), and ends with *The Moroccan Breakfast* (a comedy).<sup>47</sup>

This alternation of horror and comedy is reflected in the comic relief of Mrs. Lovett's numbers that follow the intense or violent scenes of Sweeney, as a similar way of creating tension and release in the audience.

Another shared characteristic is the breaking of the fourth wall, of which there are a few instances in Sondheim's musical. First, in the opening scene of "The Ballad of Sweeney Todd," as a sort of prologue to the action of the musical, Sweeney sings: "What happened then... well, that's the play, and he wouldn't want us to give it away." In the "Epiphany" scene, as Sweeney rages because of his first spoiled attempt at killing the Judge, the stage directions in the libretto indicate for Sweeney to direct his singing and his razor-slashing to the audience, yelling, "All right! You sir, how about a shave? Come and visit your good friend Sweeney!" Just as terrifying, or perhaps even more so, is the reprise of "The Ballad of Sweeney Todd" in the final scene where the chorus frighteningly sings and points out into the audience: "No one can help, nothing can hide you. Isn't that Sweeney there beside you?"

Although Sondheim's musical and Grand Guignol are clearly related, there are aspects that they do not share, such as the use of music and the treatment of morality. There is no evidence of an orchestra ever being used in the Theater of the Grand Guignol.<sup>48</sup> Music was sometimes used diegetically within the plays, but this is quite different from the function of music in melodrama and *Sweeney Todd*. Also, morality is not necessarily rewarded in Grand Guignol plays, as evidenced in the implied ending of *At the Telephone*, that the cruel murders

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<sup>47</sup> Gordon, 30.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 65.

of Marex's family will not be vindicated and the murderers will go unpunished. In Sondheim's musical, all evil is punished and all innocence (except for the fall of Lucy) is rewarded, which shows more of a strong connection to melodrama. The ghosts of the Judge and the Beadle in the finale reprise epitomize the moral of the musical, as they sing in a duet with each other, "Freely flows the blood of those who moralize."

Finally, there is no real audience pity for the characters of the Grand Guignol. Richard Rubinstein, the producer of Stephen King's *Pet Semetary*, offers another possible explanation for the eventual failure of the Grand Guignol, which can speak to the effectiveness of the sentimentality of Sweeney's story: "We've all become much more sophisticated in what we've grown accustomed to on the screen. If the audience cares about the characters, then they will care when they get into trouble." Victor Emeljanow, in whose article Rubinstein is quoted, follows this quote with his own observation: "In other words, we need to feel the sensation of pity first before we are subjected (in Rubinstein's words) to 'one scene that really scares people – that really makes them feel that not only is the killer beyond normal rational actions, but the film maker is too.'"<sup>49</sup> While the audience of the Grand Guignol may have been horrified at the victims' plights, the lack of character development failed to evoke pity, the focus instead being on just that – the horror.

Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* is one in a long lineage of stage works to dramatize these types of terrors, satisfying André de Lorde's idea of "the need for shudders which is a part of our nature."<sup>50</sup> Certainly, Sondheim's "musical thriller" owes much to its precedents of melodrama and the Grand Guignol. Specifically it shares with nineteenth-century

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<sup>49</sup> Emeljanow, 162.

<sup>50</sup> Gordon, 117.

melodrama the importance of music as being integral to the drama, a use of similar stock characters, and the triumph of virtue. From the Grand Guignol plays, *Sweeney Todd* borrows the dark themes of gore, violence, revenge, and cannibalism, as well as theatrical techniques such as the breaking of the “fourth wall” and the effect of “hot and cold showers” by alternating serious and comic scenes. It is interesting to trace the theatrical ancestry of the ideas of darkness, suspense, and horror, for as de Lorde wrote: “Fear has always existed, and each century has stamped upon its literature the mark of the fears that tormented it, but the primitive caveman and the contemporary businessman have not shuddered for the same reasons. The sources of fear have varied, but not fear itself, which is eternal and immutable.”<sup>51</sup> Whereas the history of the theatrical elements of *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* have here been discussed, the following thesis chapter will delve into the origins and history of the complex character of Sweeney himself.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 113.

## CHAPTER TWO

### AN EXPLORATION OF “THE TALE OF SWEENEY TODD”

#### Origins in the Penny Dreadful

The very first appearance of the tale of Sweeney Todd in literature of any sort was in *The String of Pearls: A Romance*, a novel that published chapters at a time in weekly serial publications, which were known as penny dreadfuls because of their inexpensive cost, poor quality of writing, and shocking, often bloody storylines. These publications contained cheaply produced and rapidly written stories that were often marketed to the lower classes and were meant to quickly hook readers with horror, thrills, and romance. The productive publisher Edward Lloyd originally published Sweeney’s story in *The People’s Periodical and Family Library* in eighteen parts between November 1846 and March 1847.<sup>52</sup> Lloyd was well known in the publishing field for his penny dreadful publications, a business that flourished around his office on Fleet Street, coincidentally the legendary dwelling of Sweeney Todd.

Edward Lloyd had gotten a disreputable start in the publication and writing business a decade earlier by producing knockoffs of famous Charles Dickens novels, such as *Oliver Twiss* in 1838-9.<sup>53</sup> He continued this quest for wealth in the publication of the story of Sweeney Todd. By producing literature at such a low cost, Edward Lloyd attracted a new class of readership. Although some might have considered this literature low quality, its publication provided readily accessible and affordable reading material to the lower classes.

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<sup>52</sup> Robert L. Mack, introduction to *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, Thomas Peckett Prest (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), ix.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, ix.

The authorship of *The String of Pearls: A Romance* is debated. The work is often credited to Thomas Peckett Prest, but it is possible that Prest may have only completed the story after another author, George Macfarren, had lost his eyesight while working on the serials and could no longer continue writing. Robert L. Mack argues that the idea of multiple authors would help to explain why some strands of the storyline from the first few chapters are ultimately left unfinished. It was not uncommon to have different authors work on a single serial, especially since the continuity and quality of such publications were not of particular concern.<sup>54</sup> Due to the uncertainty surrounding the authorship, it is no wonder that this penny dreadful is more commonly associated with its publisher Edward Lloyd than with any particular writer.

As its subtitle indicates, the story was originally conceived as a romance, namely that between Johanna Oakley and Mark Ingestrie. Mack notes that the characters of Sweeney and Mrs. Lovett are figurative cannibals, similar to the unwittingly cannibalistic townsfolk, because they “suitably consume the narrative substance” that was supposed to focus on Johanna and Mark’s romance, and have become the most interesting characters of the story.<sup>55</sup> In fact, the story of Sweeney and Mrs. Lovett remains the most unchanged despite the various versions throughout the years, including their relationship in the Sondheim musical adaptation. Because of the interesting subject matter, there have been some recent attempts at pinning down Sweeney Todd as an actual historical figure, most notably by British author Peter Haining.<sup>56</sup> Mack argues that this is fueled by the desire of readers to justify the terrible

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, xvi.

<sup>55</sup> Mack, xiii.

<sup>56</sup> Peter Haining, *Sweeney Todd: The Real Story of the Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (London: Robson, 2007).

actions of the barber through an understanding of his past traumas and by witnessing his gradual progression into a mass murderer. Mack insists, however, that no definitive proof exists that Sweeney was a real person, insisting that the character originated in folklore and not through actual events.<sup>57</sup> Regardless of the fictional nature of its characters, the story plays on very real fears of leaving the safety of one's familial environment and being swallowed up by urban life. The tale of Sweeney simply takes this rural legend from a figurative devouring of humanity to its literal consumption of Mrs. Lovett's human meat pies.

The original penny dreadful varies greatly from Sondheim's version, including in its plot and specific characters. Most notably, in the original, the character of Johanna Oakley, the daughter of a wealthy tradesman, has no relation to Sweeney Todd. She is in love with a man named Mark Ingestrie (and renamed Anthony in some subsequent versions), who left her to gain fortune, promising to return after two years. The novel opens two years after Mark has left; he has not returned and is presumed lost at sea, and Lieutenant Thornhill has arrived in town in order to present Johanna with a pearl necklace that Mark once owned (hence the novel's title). Before Thornhill delivers the string of pearls to Johanna, however, it is rumored that he had stopped in for a shave in Sweeney's shop so as to look more presentable. It is implied that Sweeney murdered the Lieutenant simply out of desire for the pearl necklace, and the remaining plot centers on Johanna's and a character named Colonel Jeffrey's investigation of Thornhill's disappearance. Mark eventually escapes from the basement of Mrs. Lovett's pie shop, where he had been imprisoned and forced to cook Mrs. Lovett's human meat pies. He reveals the secrets of the pies' ingredients, the remains of

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<sup>57</sup> Mack, xx-xxi.

Sweeney's victims are found, Sweeney poisons Mrs. Lovett before he himself is hanged, and Mark and Johanna live happily ever after.<sup>58</sup>

The most interesting development to trace throughout the various versions of the legend is the motivation for Sweeney's murders. In the Prest serial, Sweeney is a cold-blooded murderer, having no motivation to kill besides the wealth that he and Mrs. Lovett accrue from his deeds. In subsequent versions, this motivation is handled differently; in fact, more than a hundred years later, Sondheim struggled with attempts to better justify Sweeney's murders of innocent people by giving him a more sympathetic backstory. The treatment of Sweeney's motivations to kill arguably elevates one art form over the other, the penny dreadful being simply a cheap thrill of a murderous madman, while certain twentieth-century adaptations of the novel offer a very powerful story of the transformation of a wronged man into a mass murderer.

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<sup>58</sup> Thomas Peckett Prest, *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, ed. Robert L. Mack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).



### Sweeney Todd in the Melodramatic Tradition

The Sweeney Todd story caught on in popularity fairly quickly, resulting in the creation of numerous nineteenth-century dramatic adaptations. Because the melodrama was particularly popular with British audiences in the nineteenth century and knowing the plot and characteristics of the Lloyd/Prest serial, Sweeney's translation into the medium of theater seemed only a natural extension and progression, accentuating the thrilling and dramatic aspects of the penny dreadfuls. Sweeney's tale was adapted into many stage plays, but the most renowned of these melodramas based directly on the original penny dreadful was George Didbin Pitt's *String of Pearls* (alternatively *The Fiend of Fleet Street*), which premiered on March 1, 1847, at the Britannia Theatre in London's East End. As noted before, the last chapter of the penny dreadful was released in late March of 1847; thus, Didbin Pitt had been expediently adapting the story for the stage concurrently with Lloyd's serial publications each week and, in fact, premiered his stage work before the story's own conclusion was published. Didbin Pitt further helped popularize the story by giving Sweeney a catch phrase, which was also included in advertisements; audiences walked away from the theater remembering Sweeney's exclamation, "I'll polish him off!"<sup>59</sup>

Most importantly, melodramas such as these typically resulted in the triumph of good over evil. Although the ending understandably differs from the novel's plot, both plots resolve with Sweeney's being brought to justice with the help of multiple people; the serial ends simply with the hanging of Sweeney, while the play concludes as Sweeney is shot, exclaiming as he dies that he is tormented by the souls of his victims as he presumably descends into Hell, showing at least some recognition of his terrible deeds in addition to a

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<sup>59</sup> Mack, xxxi.

little repentance. Similar to the tone of the novel, these translations of the Sweeney Todd story into melodramatic conventions, particularly George Didbin Pitt's *String of Pearls*, were horror plays, giving Sweeney no motivation to kill besides insanity and greed, stealing from his victims to gain wealth. In reading the actual 1847 play, one can clearly imagine the audience hissing at the villain and warning the unknowing victims, as was typical in the melodramatic tradition.

A few characteristics unique to the Didbin Pitt play are still associated with the legend of Sweeney Todd. Certain minor plot elements, like Johanna being locked up in Dr. Fogg's madhouse (instead of Toby, as in the penny dreadful), can be found in many instances of the story, right through to Sondheim's musical adaptation. The musical underscoring of the play, as was expected of melodramas, even included the city singing exultations of Mrs. Lovett's pies to open the second act, which is very similar to the Sondheim's "God, That's Good!" scene at the beginning of Act II. Also noteworthy is the fact that Didbin Pitt was the first to have Sweeney murder his victims with a "sharp object" before sliding them down a chute with his trick chair.<sup>60</sup> Previously, he had relied on the fall from the chair to kill his victims; the stabbing with a knife was later changed to the infamous slitting of throats with a barber's razor.

Although George Didbin Pitt's *String of Pearls* was a part of the melodramatic tradition, Mack argues that the play skirted between melodrama and farce, the latter of which was not present in the penny dreadful publication.<sup>61</sup> Sondheim certainly retained some of the play's farcical tone; Len Cariou, the original Sweeney Todd of Sondheim's musical, speaks of the

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<sup>60</sup> Sharon Aronofsky Weltman, "Introduction: George Didbin Pitt's 1847 *Sweeney Todd*," *Nineteenth Century Theatre & Film* 38, no. 1 (Summer 2011): 10.

<sup>61</sup> Mack, xxiii.

cast's acting techniques, saying "We played it absolutely seriously; and what we were all most proud of was that we walked a fine line between melodrama and farce without dipping over into the farce area."<sup>62</sup> Cariou's comment reveals one way in which Sondheim maintains a clear connection with the historical treatment of the character of Sweeney Todd.

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<sup>62</sup> Foster Hirsch, *Harold Prince and the American Musical Theatre* (New York: Applause Theatre and Cinema Books, 2005), 124.

### **The Christopher Bond Play**

More than a hundred years after the Didbin Pitt melodrama, a period in which the Sweeney folklore continued in various stories, plays, films, popular songs, radio plays, and even a ballet, British playwright Christopher Bond's version of the tale, *Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, was premiered at London's Stratford East Theatre in 1973. Bond's play was considered to be the most authoritative and realistic version of Sweeney's story, separating itself from its predecessors by greatly altering the main characters' motives and giving sentimental backstories. In creating a romance for Sweeney himself and making Johanna his own daughter, Sweeney then had much more to lose and a reason to avenge his losses. In fact, in contrast to the unexplained madness of Sweeney's character in previous versions, the director's notes of the Bond play instruct Sweeney to be played "as sanely as possible... emphasizing the horror of the situation."<sup>63</sup> Bond's 1973 production also incorporated street songs alongside the scenes as incidental music, but it does not seem that this music had as important a role as the music in melodramas.

Bond's play allows for a fair amount of justification for when Sweeney begins to turn his revenge on innocent victims,, as Sweeney is merely repaying humanity for the way it has been complicit in the tragedies throughout his life; however, Sondheim still doubted the strength and believability of Sweeney's transformation in this scene of Bond's play. In Meryle Secrest's biography of Sondheim, Christopher Bond divulges a few of his influences, including Dumas, Tourneur, and Shakespeare, as well as some of his own personal experiences; in particular, he "adapted the wit and wisdom of Brenda, who ran the greengrocer's shop opposite my house, for Mrs. Lovett's ruminations on life, death and the

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<sup>63</sup> Mack, xxiv.

state of her sex life.”<sup>64</sup> Because Sondheim’s version is directly based on the Bond play and follows it very closely, not much else needs to be said about the play in its own right.

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<sup>64</sup> Meryle Secrest, *Stephen Sondheim: A Life* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 289.

### Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*

The workings of the eventual 1979 musical adaptation by Stephen Sondheim originated when Sondheim went to see the Christopher Bond play in London in 1973. Although he was expecting a play in the Grand Guignol tradition, Sondheim was fascinated by the play. He knew that he wanted to set the play to music, saying, "It struck me as a piece that sings."<sup>65</sup> Although the producers Richard Barr and Charles Woodward had already been looking to bring the play to Broadway by setting it to "barroom songs," Bond agreed to sell Sondheim the rights to the play based on Sondheim's reputation, although a few awkward personal interactions between the two of them, including Bond's supposed "condescension" and his drunkenness at the musical's opening night party, left Sondheim disenchanted and unimpressed.<sup>66</sup>

Sondheim brought in librettist Hugh Wheeler, who was skeptical about the quality of Bond's work, to adapt the play into a workable libretto, including making cuts to fit an acceptable running time. Wheeler's challenge was to elevate the tone of the libretto from the melodramatic tradition and into a tragedy, which he accomplished by further reducing the romance of Johanna and Anthony to a subplot that functions to advance the main plot of the title character. For example, in the Bond play, the script ends with Johanna and Anthony agreeing to marry while casually standing over the bodies of Sweeney and Lucy. Wheeler's drama instead comes full circle by ending with the tragic image of Sweeney and Lucy together in their death, leaving the resolution of Johanna and Anthony to the audience's imagination. Wheeler discussed the specific challenges of creating this libretto as an

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<sup>65</sup> Craig Zadan, *Sondheim & Co.* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 244.

<sup>66</sup> Secrest, 290-1.

adaptation of the Bond play, saying, “the hardest thing of all was how to take these two really disgusting people and write them in such a way that the audience can rather love them.”<sup>67</sup>

While Sondheim and Wheeler seemed to be on the same page, Sondheim had to persuade a very reluctant Hal Prince to direct the show. Prince was entirely uninterested in this particular subject matter and only agreed to direct the show if he could make it about something bigger than revenge. Inspired by the distinction of the style of dialogue between the upper and lower classes in Bond’s play, Prince wanted to make *Sweeney Todd* about the demoralizing effects of the Industrial Revolution on society and its worsening of class differences. This in fact draws on the same fears of the penny dreadful audience, of being swallowed up by urban life. Prince explains,

It seemed to me to be relentlessly about revenge, and I couldn’t, then or now, afford to be interested in revenge. As a director I needed to see metaphor. To find some way of justifying the revenge. When I began to think of Sweeney’s revenge as being against the class system that Judge Turpin represents I began to find a way to get inside the material: if Sweeney is victimized by the class system so is everyone else in the show. In a larger way I felt that by placing the action in its late nineteenth-century context we could say that from the day the Industrial Revolution entered our lives, the conveyor belt pulled us further and further from harmony, from humanity, from nature.<sup>68</sup>

Prince worked in collaboration with set designer Eugene Lee to represent his vision on stage. By incorporating dreary factory elements, including the shrill sound of a factory whistle that signifies a murder, a stage backdrop with a painting of the class system hierarchy displayed during the organ prelude, and more subtly the mechanistic nature of Sweeney’s chair, Prince and Lee created a set that was supposed to feel “part prison, part factory, part cathedral.”<sup>69</sup> In fact, the design was partly based on a cellblock room from the Kilmainham

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 292.

<sup>68</sup> Hirsch, 120.

<sup>69</sup> Secrest, 296.

Jail that Prince had previously visited in Dublin.<sup>70</sup> These ideas were subsequently criticized for their loose ends and lack of complete development.<sup>71</sup> For example, while visually stimulating, the suspended walking bridge in the back of the stage does not come from or go to any particular place and simply seems like an attempt to continue the mechanical themes of ladders and stairways. Also, the entire set, including Sweeney and Mrs. Lovett's shop modules and even the outdoor scenes, is framed by a dilapidated tiled glass ceiling which, although reminiscent of a dismal factory environment, does not make realistic sense in terms of the setting of the action. Although the critics' concerns are fairly justified, the aim of the design was never to be realistic, but rather to contribute to a certain atmosphere that reflected Prince's concepts.

Ultimately however, Prince's intended tone of the musical became a source of disagreement between Sondheim and the producer. Sondheim's statement that "the show was always meant to be fun, like a horror movie, and [that he] never looked for 'higher meanings'" could not be farther from Prince's interpretation of the story. Author Foster Hirsch criticized Prince's role in the show, saying, "Prince's ambivalence about *Sweeney Todd*, both at the time and in retrospect, can be seen as implicit recognition that the show derives from intellectualized statement rather than felt truth."<sup>72</sup> Despite the fact that Prince disliked the story, hated working on the project, and dreaded rehearsals, his work as the producer greatly contributed to the show's success.

For Sondheim, the Christopher Bond play offered many aspects upon which he could build, mainly in the enduring elements of melodrama that had survived into the twentieth

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<sup>70</sup> Hirsch, 120.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 129.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 130.



century. There are certainly typical melodramatic moments in the plot of the musical where the audience is “in on violence to come (while the characters on stage are unaware) and [is] occasionally moved to yell remarks such as ‘*Don’t* open the door’ at evidently clueless players.”<sup>73</sup> Also, Sondheim describes *Sweeney Todd*’s heavy and almost constant musical underscoring, a characteristic of melodramas, as being “*infused* with music, to keep the audience in a state of tension, to make them forget they’re in a theater and to prevent them from separating themselves from the action.”<sup>74</sup> The music was the medium through which Sondheim intended to thrill his audiences, so he shied away from the melodramatic tradition a bit by titling the show a “musical thriller” rather than a “musical melodrama.” This close relationship of the music with the action and the audience’s emotions represents the opposite of Brechtian estrangement; in fact, one of the only instances of “breaking of the fourth wall,” and thus the self-awareness of the audience in terms of the musical, occurs in the “Epiphany” scene when Sweeney’s rage at having missed the opportunity to kill the Judge has compelled him to turn his wrath not only onto his world, but onto ours as well, slashing his razor wildly while pointing at members of the audience whom he would like to “shave.”

This scene represents a disturbing and emotional intensity uncommon in the genre of the Broadway musical, embodying a deep psychological progression of Sweeney’s character from wanting revenge on one man to seeking vengeance on all of humanity. In the same vein, Sondheim is known for the depth of his characters, explaining, “A playwright when he writes a scene always gives some sub-text, or it’s a very shallow scene. Well, that happens

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<sup>73</sup> Geoffrey Block, *Enchanted Evenings: The Broadway Musical from Show Boat to Sondheim and Lloyd Webber* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 350.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 354.

with lyrics. They may be very good, but if they're just on the surface, if there's not pull, there's a kind of deadness on the stage."<sup>75</sup> Stephen Schiff is one critic who believes that Sondheim was the first composers to bring subtext to the musical theater tradition, arguing that his work departs from the flat characterization of melodramas, and perhaps the "corny-as-Kansas world view" of earlier "happily ever after" type of musicals.<sup>76</sup>

The "Epiphany" scene in particular presented a major challenge to Sondheim, who thought that the character needed a stronger justification for the turn of his knife on all of mankind than what was offered in the Bond text. He believed that Sweeney's transformation was the weakest point in the play, being far too sudden and simplistic. In the Bond play, after having missed his chance to kill the Judge, Sweeney exclaims, "A second chance may come. It must, it shall! Until it does, I'll pass the time in practice on less honoured throats... The work's its own reward. For now I find I have a taste for blood, and all the world's my meat."<sup>77</sup> The librettist Hugh Wheeler proposed a possible justification for Sweeney's change; although Sondheim rejected this idea, Sweeney's thirst for the power and control over each victim's life and death suggests elements of self-deification, "usurp[ing] the role traditionally ascribed to the Biblical Deity on the Last Judgment" and offering cohesive support for the Sondheim's use of the *Dies irae* melody throughout many of the show's songs.<sup>78</sup> The care with which Sondheim takes in the depth of his characterizations is further evident in that it took him a full month to write the "Epiphany" scene in order to create a

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 342-3.

<sup>76</sup> Stephen Schiff, "Deconstructing Sondheim," *The Sondheim Review* 17, no. 3 (Spring 2011): 22.

<sup>77</sup> Christopher G. Bond, *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (London: S. French, 1974), 21.

<sup>78</sup> Alfred Mollin, "Mayhem and Morality in Sweeney Todd," *American Music* 9, no. 4 (1991): 407.

scene powerful and tenable enough to portray Sweeney's transformation into a mass murderer, one that continues to surpass any of the character's motivation for violence throughout the story's history thus far.

### **Tim Burton's *Sweeney Todd***

Being a film buff, Sondheim was open to, but not overly optimistic about, the prospect of film adaptations of his own work. In his opinion, the film industry had had a long history of failures in the translation of musicals to the big screen.<sup>79</sup> At the time, Sondheim was aware that director Tim Burton, who had fallen in love with the musical after seeing it in London in 1981, had an interest in adapting *Sweeney Todd*. However, Sondheim was ultimately quite content with the result of Burton's 2007 film adaptation, distinguishing it from most previous film adaptations of other musicals, by saying that "this really is an attempt to take the material of the stage musical and completely transform it into a movie" and that it was the "most satisfying version of a stage piece I've ever seen."<sup>80</sup>

Sondheim's close collaboration with Burton allowed for a very faithful translation into film. In fact, Sondheim worked under a contractual agreement that any cuts or modifications of the score would have to be approved by him. Unfortunately, in order to limit the film to an acceptable length, they were forced to cut any songs that did not move the plot forward, like the Beadle's "Parlor Songs" or the hilarious "Kiss Me" quartet. Ultimately, these cuts further focus the story on Sweeney and Mrs. Lovett, reducing the importance of the other characters and subplots; for instance, the "Kiss Me" scene of the musical creates the featherbrained and comedic ditziness of Johanna that is somewhat missing from the movie. The main chorus song, "Ballad of Sweeney Todd," which helps to frame the musical and further characterize Sweeney as someone of whom to be afraid, was replaced with an orchestral underscoring, perhaps because movie-goers (as opposed to theater-goers) might be

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<sup>79</sup> Mark Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music: Minor Details and Major Decisions* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 143-144.

<sup>80</sup> Block, 364-5.

less hospitable and more skeptical of a movie that opens with a group of singing townspeople.

Critics praised Burton's *Sweeney Todd* for a few reasons, including its cinematography and its recording process. For instance, Burton took advantage of the film medium by utilizing cinematic opportunities with flashbacks in songs such as "Poor Thing," and projections of scenes or images that are only suggested by Sondheim's lyrics in songs like "A Little Priest" and "By the Sea." The traditional recording process for movie musicals was to have the actors record their vocals while watching the video of the already taped scene. Burton instead reversed the process for a more natural result similar to modern music videos, having the actors record their audio first and then lip sync to the soundtrack, including the full orchestral backing.<sup>81</sup>

As expected of the film industry, the casting aimed more for popular movie stars who could decently sing over talented singers who could also act. Neither Johnny Depp nor Helena Bonham Carter had had much previous professional vocal experience and had to be heavily coached through the recording process. Johnny Depp manages to growl his way through the songs, although his acting does capture the darkness of Sweeney's character. Helena Bonham Carter, the wife of Tim Burton, gives a very serious portrayal of Mrs. Lovett, unfortunately failing to capture the quirky, charming, comedic, and harried nature of Angela Lansbury's original characterization and performance. While the film was a respectful translation from the stage, the casting of non-singing actors represents a great missed opportunity for the lushness of Sondheim's score, which is highlighted by the poignant performances of Len Cariou and Angela Lansbury from the 1979 original

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 364.

Broadway cast and of George Hearn and Lansbury from the 1982 filmed stage version.

Despite its shortcomings, the film ushered in a new generation of Sweeney-lovers and Sondheim fans, offering exposure to those who were previously unfamiliar with either the story or the music, including myself.

The story of Sweeney Todd and Mrs. Lovett has a rich history dating back more than 150 years, beginning with the penny dreadful of Lloyd and Prest from 1847, the melodramas of the nineteenth century, including that of George Didbin Pitt, followed by the Christopher Bond play of 1973, on which the 1979 Stephen Sondheim musical *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* is most closely based. Tim Burton's 2007 film rendition of the musical represents the most recent telling of the "tale of Sweeney Todd," but the story might well find yet other tellings in the years to come.

**CHAPTER THREE**  
**A SCHENKERIAN EXAMINATION OF DRAMATIC TURNING POINTS IN**  
**SONDHEIM'S *SWEENEY TODD***

In researching the analytical literature written about the music of Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*, there seem to be a few main approaches, mainly an analysis of themes and leitmotifs and how they are reused and developed, the use of set theory, and character analysis. Although a set theory approach illuminates unifying harmonic elements throughout the musical that might otherwise be difficult to describe in terms of functional tonality, the analyses of the characters' musical motives and the motivation behind their actions provided by a thematic and a character analysis approach are more accurately in accordance with Sondheim's emphasis on developing his characters in depth. A close reading of voice leading and motivic structure in the music reveals how Sondheim vividly represents anxieties and conflicting emotions that propel characters toward ironically juxtaposed actions of love and pathological violence. This chapter of theoretical analyses pulls together the knowledge of the evolution of Sweeney's character from his origins, in order that my analyses exist within a fully informed and well-rounded context of Sweeney's character and story. Bringing together aspects of Schenkerian methodology, motivic analysis, and dramatic character study, my analyses reveal the relationship between various musical elements and how they work to support or undermine the words and actions of Sweeney Todd at some of the most powerful moments in the musical.

### Stephen Banfield's (And Other Related) Thematic Analysis

One of the few published analyses of *Sweeney Todd* is that of Stephen Banfield. His book, *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals*, is one of the most comprehensive sources to outline the work's melodic motives and trace their development and interrelatedness. Although not all of the motives throughout the musical are accounted for, Banfield lists fifteen important themes, including a chart that clearly outlines the location of each theme.<sup>82</sup> He goes even further to notate each of the melodies on their own staff so that the exact motives are clear to the reader.<sup>83</sup> With the aid of these charts, Banfield shows how most of the themes are closely related to each other. For example, Lucy's theme and her daughter Johanna's "Green Finch" theme both consist of descending tetrachords, shown in Example 3.1 and 3.2, which is appropriate because of their mother-daughter relationship and because the descent of these pitches mirrors the fact that both of these characters have both been struck with misfortune.<sup>84</sup> However, Johanna's innocence and purity is represented by a diatonic tetrachord, as opposed to her mother's chromatic tetrachord that parallels the chromaticism in the Beggar Woman's "Alms" melody in Example 3.3 as Johanna's mother goes insane and becomes a vagrant. The Judge's "Johanna" theme, notated in Example 3.4, is related to Lucy's theme by inversion, now rising in contour to indicate his physical excitement for his young ward Johanna, whom he kidnapped from Sweeney and Lucy years before.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Stephen Banfield, *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 288-289.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 295-296.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 297.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 297.



Example 3.1: Banfield's "Lucy" theme



Example 3.2: Banfield's "Green Finch" theme



Example 3.3: Banfield's "Alms" theme



Example 3.4: Banfield's "Johanna (Judge)" theme



Many sources have noted that Sondheim quotes the *Dies irae* throughout *Sweeney Todd*, but Banfield points out that many of the work's other motives are in fact derived from this melody, or at least are closely related in contour. In fact, he relates thirteen motives directly to the descending tetrachord in the first phrase of the *Dies irae*.<sup>86</sup> Examples 3.5 and 3.6 show that the first phrase of the *Dies irae* can be analyzed as scale degrees  $\hat{3} \hat{2} \hat{3} \hat{1} \hat{2} \hat{7} \hat{1}$ , the last five of which are exactly the same as the last five notes of the first phrase of "The Ballad of

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 299.

Sweeney Todd.”<sup>87</sup> He also argues that the inversion of the *Dies irae* appears in the accompaniment of this number, but it is not an exact inversion and is actually more of an approximate inversion of contour. In any case, the relation of these motives to the chant is only clear in the first few examples Banfield cites. Although the actual relation of all of these motives back to the *Dies irae* can seem obscure, Banfield’s melodic analysis is an appropriate approach since the melodies seem to be derived from each other and often come back later to unify the work.

Example 3.5: First phrase of *Dies irae*



Example 3.6: First phrase of “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd”



Joseph Swain also takes this analytical approach, but focuses on just a few motives. Rather than assigning names to motives that are literal representations of something, such as Banfield’s “Bells” theme, Swain emphasizes the use of leitmotifs connected to a specific thought or emotion that carries the same meaning throughout the piece. For instance, the ostinato from “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd,” outlined in Example 3.7, reappears in the accompaniment of many musical numbers and brings with it associations of Sweeney’s

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 298.

### Example 3.7: Swain's “Ostinato” motive



### Example 3.8: Swain’s “Obsession” motive



<sup>88</sup> Joseph P. Swain, *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2002), 366.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 375.

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as the Beggar Woman's crude melody being used in a sophisticated string quartet when Lucy appears at the Judge's party to hint at Lucy's eventual fate; Swain does not offer a similar sort of interpretation of each individual leitmotif within the musical.

### Craig McGill's Set-Theoretic Analysis

Craig McGill also analyzes melodies and harmonies in *Sweeney Todd*, but he uses a pitch class set theory approach, focusing on one recurring sonority rather than offering analyses of the many motives. He extensively traces the various appearances of the set (0148) throughout the score, arguing that this specific set is much more pervasive than other theorists may have realized in their analyses. McGill asserts that the entire score of *Sweeney Todd* revolves around (0148) and that even other larger sets that are used are comprised of multiple subsets of (0148). Sondheim has admitted to borrowing this sonority from Bernard Hermann's *Hangover Square* film score, although he thought of it more in terms of being a minor chord with a major seventh, often putting the seventh in the bass.<sup>91</sup> The major and minor qualities present in this chord give it a sense of "tonal and emotional ambiguity," making it an appropriate harmony for *Sweeney Todd*.

Although McGill sometimes attaches other pitch sets to certain characters in a way similar to outlining leitmotifs, such as his assigning of (0358) to represent Anthony's "goodwill and innocence," (0148) is not necessarily attached to one character or idea. He points out that Sweeney's first sung words in Example 3.9, besides the opening ballad, are set to (0148) in contrast to Anthony's (0358) to immediately characterize his hatred of London.<sup>92</sup> Many other characters use this pitch set as well, including the Beggar Woman's entrance on a D# over an E minor triad, Mrs. Lovett's melody "Seems a downright shame" from the number "A Little Priest" shown in Example 3.10, and its saturation in the chorus' "God, That's

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<sup>91</sup> Craig M. McGill, "Sondheim's Use of the 'Hermann' Chord in *Sweeney Todd*," *Studies in Musical Theatre* 6, no. 3 (2012): 292.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, 300.

Good!”<sup>93</sup> McGill suggests that the tonal ambiguity caused by the simultaneous sounding of both major and minor tonalities represents the idea of uncertainty in some cases, notably the Judge’s use of (0148) when considering the moral dilemma of having lust for a young Johanna when he is supposed to be held to higher moral standards as an honorable member of society.<sup>94</sup>

Example 3.9: Use of (0148) in Sweeney’s entrance



Example 3.10: Use of (0148) in Mrs. Lovett’s “A Little Priest”



Throughout his article, McGill describes projections of the (0148) set as a tool “to emphasize a dramatic moment,” “to introduce characters or a crucial idea,” to represent “uncertainty,” as appearing “in moments of terror and dark comedy,” and to “convey the eeriness of Mrs. Lovett’s business enterprise.” This approach seems a little incomplete, however, because the sonority reappears in different contexts, with various characters, and does not necessarily function to recall a certain character or emotion. That is not to say that

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 306.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 305.

the (0148) sonority's lack of leitmotif function precludes it from being an important unifying element in the musical, but it does not seem to be representative of much at all, except to recreate the thriller movie atmosphere from which he borrowed the sonority, and thus is more aptly described as simply a pervasive harmony.

However, when asked about the use of Hermann's chord in an interview with Mark Horowitz, Sondheim said "I don't want to make too much of it. I didn't use it as consciously as I have said. It's just that the sound of it underlay the music, and so it informed the music... As I have said earlier about how something lodges in your head while you're working on a given show, it just kept turning up."<sup>95</sup> The sonority has no connection to anything in particular in *Sweeney Todd* and thus seems to have less relevance than the melodies and motives which Sondheim consciously uses and develops; appearances of the (0148) set fit in with the harmonies that Sondheim had associated with thrillers due to Hermann's extensive use of the chord. If the chord were not connected to Hermann, its use, although clearly prevalent according to McGill's analysis, might just be explained away as an arbitrarily chosen harmony. Too much emphasis on (0148) minimizes the significance of other themes or leitmotifs that are connected to certain characters and ideas that act to organize and unify the work. These themes are more strategically used and developed and offer more relevance to the work's structure. Also, the specific voicing of the chord or melodic configuration is important in projecting extra-musical connotations. A minor chord with a major seventh has a very specific color that would function and sound differently if that seventh was a melodic neighbor tone, or if the seventh was not notated in the bass. The

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<sup>95</sup> Mark Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music: Minor Details and Major Decisions* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 128.

labeling of set types alone will not account for this, so it must be integrated into a broader interpretive analysis.



### Alfred Mollin's Character Analysis

Alfred Mollin's interpretive analysis delves into the characters and their associated music. Specifically, Mollin analyzes the characters of Sweeney Todd and Mrs. Lovett – and their differing justifications to commit murder – with musical instances of complement and clash. Sweeney's motive for murder is to avenge the downfall of his family at the hands of the Judge, taking morality and justice into his own hands.<sup>96</sup> According to Mollin, this leads to Sweeney's self-deification in "Epiphany," the turning point of his murderous plans, in which he assumes the role of judgment, similar to God's role on the Day of Judgment in the Christian religion. Interestingly, this is how Mollin explains the symbolism in the use of the *Dies irae* throughout *Sweeney Todd*, as a musical representation of Sweeney's hubris.<sup>97</sup> In contrast, Mrs. Lovett's motive for murder lies in self-interest and in reinventing her business, as the bodies of Sweeney's victims now become the source for her meat pies. According to Mollin, "Mrs. Lovett lacks both Sweeney's passion and his madness... And if Sweeney may be characterized as a radically moral mass murderer, Mrs. Lovett is his radically immoral polar opposite."<sup>98</sup>

After establishing his proposed character analyses, Mollin then shows how their differing motives represent themselves musically. "A Little Priest," a duet in which the two characters first begin to conspire to kill his customers and then utilize the bodies for her business, offers a musical instance of togetherness. They exchange puns about the various professions of their victims while complementing each other's musical phrases with similar rhythms and

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<sup>96</sup> Alfred Mollin, "Mayhem and Morality in Sweeney Todd," *American Music* 9, no. 4 (1991): 406.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 407.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 410.

melodies.<sup>99</sup> Yet, when they rationalize their actions to each other, Sweeney singing about the harsh nature of the world and Mrs. Lovett about selling pies, their parts begin to differ, as shown in Example 3.11. Mollin writes that “Mrs. Lovett interrupts, with narrow, tangential thoughts, the grand, all-encompassing themes being sung by Sweeney. Sweeney’s lines are sung to the broadest and most sweeping melody of the entire number, while Mrs. Lovett’s interruptions have a sharp, insistent rhythm that the waltz tempo can barely contain.”<sup>100</sup>

Example 3.11: “A Little Priest”

Todd: Mrs. Lovett:

The his - to - ry of the world, my sweet... Oh, Mis-ter Todd, Ooh, Mis-ter Todd.

Todd:

What does it tell? Is who gets eat - en and who gets to eat.

Mrs. Lovett:

And Mis-ter Todd, too, Mis-ter Todd. Who gets to sell.

In the final scene, when Sweeney realizes that he has unknowingly killed his wife Lucy and that Mrs. Lovett had known that Lucy had been alive all along, the moral weight of Sweeney’s actions – and the lack of moral responsibility that Mrs. Lovett takes (“Said she took the poison she did / Never said that she died.”) – conflict more than ever. Mollin argues that this is musically represented by Sweeney’s “keening” melodic reference to Lucy and

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 411.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 411-412.

Mrs. Lovett's reference to her first act melody, "Poor Thing."<sup>101</sup> More clearly though, Sondheim notates the two characters in conflicting meters, Mrs. Lovett nervously flitting from 6/8 to 5/8 above Sweeney's constant 6/4, to show their divergence from a unified purpose to now one of separate intentions. Ultimately, in this approach, the music is used as a tool to portray the characters and their motivation for acting the way they do.

Along this line of character analysis, Stephen Schiff discusses Sondheim's musical output in general in the context of music history. According to Schiff, Post World War II America was more hesitant to accept the "corny-as-Kansas world view" of musicals being written at the time by Rodgers and Hammerstein and others.<sup>102</sup> Sondheim, a friend and pupil of Hammerstein, is thought to emphasize the humanness of his characters, allowing flaws and imperfections to reflect themselves musically, causing his music to accurately represent more realistic attitudes in the midst of the Cold War, where suspicions abounded against overtly cheery or optimistic world views.<sup>103</sup> Schiff argues that Sondheim's use of leitmotifs to "[tie] themes and characters together, and [probe] the psychology behind what is being sung" contributes to Sondheim's reputation for creating three-dimensional characters.<sup>104</sup>

Schiff's analysis echoes what every one of these sources and approaches agree on, that is, the general characteristics of Sondheim's musical language. His music is mostly tonal, but it is ripe with chromaticism and dissonance and without much adherence to Common Practice Era harmonic progressions. Sondheim admits, "I'm not particularly fond of atonal music. I'm very tonally oriented. I'm very old-fashioned – I'm about 1890. I'm still early Ravel –

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 414.

<sup>102</sup> Stephen Schiff, "Deconstructing Sondheim," *The Sondheim Review* 17, no. 3 (Spring 2011): 22.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 23.

that's my idea of terrific."<sup>105</sup> He also makes use of bitonality and modal melodies; the first two songs, "The Ballad of Sweeney Todd" and "No Place Like London" are both in the Aeolian mode, for example. The desire for realism lends itself to his speech-like melodies, syllabic text setting, and asymmetrical phrasing, avoiding refrains or repeated lyrics. He also usually avoids overly complicated rhythms, but he does use asymmetrical meter and meter changes in the middle of phrases to avoid being "too square," in his own words.<sup>106</sup>

Polyphony is a common texture in his music and Sondheim uses it as an opportunity to bring back the various leitmotifs attached to each character simultaneously to reflect how different their thoughts can be. In addition to Mollin's use of the final scene to portray this, it is also used in the quartet at the end of "Kiss Me (Part II)", where Johanna sings a quick and frantic melody about her worries against Anthony's swooning attempt to kiss her and the Judge and Beadle's sweeping melodies as they discuss going to Sweeney's parlor for a shave.

For analysts, Sondheim offers the challenge of being so character-driven, in that he takes different approaches in the writing of lyrics and the composing of musical styles from one character to the next; one song might be a light, comedic pastiche, the next a very intimate, expressive solo. To approach *Sweeney Todd* then, it seems a more character-driven analysis is appropriate. This can be done in a similar manner as Mollin and Schiff, but the thematic analyses offered by analysts such as Banfield, Swain, and Blyton are also valid because they seek to organize the music by revealing the interrelatedness of the characters' themes, that perhaps their individual melodies might not be as unique as it may seem, acting as elements of unification throughout the work as a whole.

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<sup>105</sup> Mark Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music: Minor Details and Major Decisions* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 117.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, 132.

## Original Analyses

The remaining portion of this chapter will include original Schenkerian analyses and commentary on two specific songs from *Sweeney Todd*, which both occur at crucial turning points in the musical. The Schenkerian approach will work to tie together the analyses by their individual ability to uncover the deeper musical meaning behind the drama during each of these pivotal plot points. My analysis allows for the consideration of the melodic lines on a local and on a large scale, the focus on melody being similar to the existing thematic approaches. The use of Schenkerian analysis will take into account harmonic support for the melody, polyphony, and connections on multiple levels. In this way, the analysis will also be character-driven in that the characters' musical output in terms of melody and harmony will reveal their psychology, motivations, and intentions, tying the deeper melodic and harmonic structures to their implication in the drama. Finally, this methodology will examine how the dramatic irony at these points in the work is either supported or undermined by factors such as an adherence to or deviation from the standard hypermeter, voice-leading tendencies, harmonic support, lyric analysis, formal sections, contrapuntal layers, and motivic parallelisms.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> The complete graphs are located in the Appendix for reference.

## **“Epiphany”**

The "Epiphany" scene of *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* presented a challenge for composer Stephen Sondheim, who thought that the justification of Sweeney's transformation from seeking revenge on the Judge to becoming a mass murderer was the weakest point in the Christopher Bond play on which the musical is based. Sondheim worked on this scene for a full month before feeling that he had believably justified such a quick metamorphosis of Sweeney's character, triggered only by his failure to kill the Judge when he had the chance. Such care was taken by Sondheim to flesh out the “Epiphany” scene because it is perhaps the most vital turning point in the musical, as the audience witnesses the madness of a man who, having momentarily lost his chance at revenge, now directs his rage at the world and, even more daringly, at the audience.

Because of the intensity of its context, the song offers a great challenge to the analyst. The “Epiphany” scene is the least tonal piece in the entire musical, and thus the most difficult to tie to the Schenkerian methodology. Nonetheless, it is still enlightening as a methodology in this case. Given the pervasive dissonance and general lack of functional harmonic progression and regular phrase rhythm, the analysis will focus more on intervallic relationships while highlighting other Schenkerian principles, such as the motivic parallelisms present in the dissonant harmonic language of recurring clusters and seconds, the formal organization of contrasting sections, the use of hypermeter, and the linear layers amid the contrapuntal melodies and accompaniment, which all contribute to the successful portrayal of the intensity of Sweeney's psychological descent.

To match Sweeney's emotional state at this point in the drama, Sondheim appropriately employs an extremely dissonant harmonic language in this scene, specifically with the use of clusters chords and half-step relationships. Simple and clear-cut harmonies, even if minor or diminished, would not accurately suit the character's state of mind, especially as he feels the world is crumbling beneath him. In m. 10, Mrs. Lovett enters with a short reprise of her "Wait" melody, which is stepwise, lyrical, and meant to calm Sweeney down. However, the discordant cluster chords that support Mrs. Lovett's melody, reminiscent of the Bernard Hermann soundtrack of the famous shower scene in *Psycho*, work to undermine her efforts and seem to push him further down his path of rage as the stage directions instruct Sweeney to "violently" interrupt as she sings, "What's your rush?" Sonorities similar to this one in Example 3.12 below are present throughout, including in the beginning of the *Meno mosso* section in m. 22 and as the piece ends. In the case of the *Meno mosso*, these clusters mark each beat and distinguish this as the start of a new section, but quickly drop out to make way for Sweeney's entrance and for an interesting quotation of the *Dies irae* in the accompaniment. In the ending, these clusters serve to challenge Sweeney's self-proclaimed triumph in a similar manner as the supporting B minor/diminished harmonies.

Example 3.12: Clusters in Mrs. Lovett's "Epiphany" interjection, mm. 10-11

The musical score for Example 3.12 is presented in two measures. The key signature has two flats (B-flat major), and the time signature is 4/4. The vocal line, written in a treble clef, is marked *mf* and consists of a stepwise melody. The piano accompaniment, written in a bass clef, is marked *f* and features dense, dissonant cluster chords. The lyrics are "Eas - y now." and "Hush, love, hush."

The minor second, one of the most dissonant intervals possible in tonality, appears throughout the scene, tying together various levels of structure with motivic parallelisms. For instance, the cross relation between Ab and A natural (written as Bbb) in the tremolos of the accompaniment in m. 41 represents a foreground half step relationship, presented harmonically over an F chord. Even the motive from the opening measure, which Joseph P. Swain calls Sweeney's "obsession motive" (notated in Example 3.13), presents the interval of a fourth opening out to a major seventh, which is an inverted minor second. In the beginning of the short march section in m. 64, Sweeney finishes his melody with a B natural moving to a Bb, which not only demonstrates a note-to-note statement of these important half step occurrences, but also foreshadows the troubled relationship that B and Bb will have in the last few chords of the song, the B weakening the strength of the optimistic Bb major cadence. Even within the chord that supports the B natural in m. 81 and 83 – composed from bottom up of an F#, B, D, and F natural – the diminished octave between the F# of the key signature and the F natural above it (which when inverted, becomes a half step) creates the unsettling sound of a hybrid B minor/diminished chord, represented in Example 3.14. Interestingly, despite its inherent instability as a sonority, this dissonant hybrid serves as a much more psychologically truthful alternative to the bright Bb major harmony that is here associated with Sweeney's "joy." Sondheim has turned reality on its head with this effect, creating a sort of musical irony in which the meaning of the sounds betray their harmonic stability, or lack thereof.



Example 3.13: Reduction of Swain's "Obsession Motive," m.1



Example 3.14: B Minor/Diminished sonority, m. 81



Sondheim further supports his frenetic characterization of Sweeney through the use of hypermeter, especially in phrase elisions and hypermetrical breakdowns. When Mrs. Lovett enters in m. 10, she begins a set of four bar hypermeter, but Sweeney interrupts on her fourth bar with an elision to begin his own four bar phrase, highlighting his impatience. The fourth bar of his phrase is then also elided with the beginning of a new section that is saturated with Sweeney's "obsession motive" in m. 16, the phrase elision this time stressing Sweeney's tendency to suddenly change moods or thoughts, even interrupting himself. His sudden change of temperament is also reflected in the short "keening" sections that are interpolated into contrasting material, which consequently upsets the hypermeter. Presented in Example 3.15, m. 49 is a hypermetrical downbeat that is interrupted after one more bar with a three bar nostalgic reference to Lucy's melody

as he proclaims that he "will have vengeance [and] salvation," followed by a rapid shift back into a typical four bar hypermeter in m. 54 as he makes light of the naivety of his unknowing victims.

Most notably, in the last page of the scene, from mm. 76-83, there is a complete breakdown of hypermeter. It is very difficult to hear any hypermetrical organization due to the frequently and unpredictably changing meter and the continuous half step tremolos that blend the measures together seamlessly. This dissolution of metrical structure musically correlates with the idea that Sweeney has also reached a psychological breaking point, despite his disturbing belief that he is "full of joy."

Example 3.15: Hypermetrical breakdown, mm. 49-54

To mirror his almost schizophrenic changes of mood, the form of this scene is composed of various contrasting sections that display very distinct accompanimental and vocal styles. The first section introduces Sweeney's "obsession motive," the accompaniment figure of the fourth opening out to a seventh that is present throughout. Interestingly, the motion from D to F in the upper voice of this "obsession motive" parallels the direction of Sweeney's melodic motion throughout the course of the scene, where he starts on a D and ends on an F natural. Although the accompaniment in the first section of the piece suggests a Bb key area while Sweeney prolongs a D functioning as

the third scale degree, this section does not offer harmonic support in the form of a consonant supporting chord, avoiding any Bb's in the bass, instead using sudden *sforzando* non-tonic pedal tones, such as the F in mm. 4-9 and the D# in mm. 12- 15. The fact that these pedal tones begin and reiterate on upbeats also suggests an element of metrical impatience, frustration, and impulsiveness in their lack of coordination with downbeats.

The next section, marked *Feroce* in m. 16, begins with a diminution of the "obsession motive," now only occupying the space of half a measure, rather than its initial full measure statement. In m. 19, the motive is further compressed into a beat and a half, which not only contributes to a rushed feeling that mirrors Sweeney's frenetic desire to kill the Judge, but also creates a disorienting feeling since the full statements of the motive now cross beats and bar lines, confusing the listener's sense of meter. The following *Meno mosso* section in m. 22 firmly reestablishes the meter by pounding out cluster chords on each beat as Sweeney declares that "they all deserve to die!"

Sondheim, who struggled with creating an accurate justification for Sweeney's sudden transformation into a mass murderer, uses this section to describe how Sweeney feels that society has been enabling the oppressive class system ("There's the one staying put in his proper place/ And the one with his foot in the other one's face") and thus has acquired the rage that he is about to inflict on them. An analysis of the intricate voice leading of the accompaniment reveals that this section in particular contains concealed statements of the *Dies irae*, as shown in Example 3.16. Although it is difficult to hear in the context of the orchestra, these *Dies irae* quotations support Alfred Mollins' theory of Sweeney's self-deification as he begins to enjoy the idea of holding the life and death of

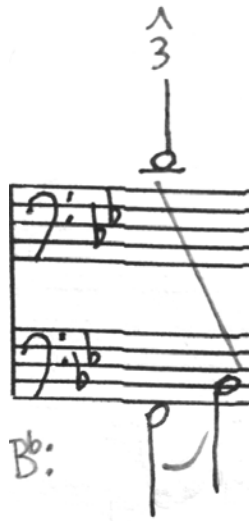


Lucy or Johanna, each statement of which departing further from its original statement above F harmony, moving to E in m. 60 and then C in m. 62. The short march-like section beginning in m. 64 aptly delineates his murderous plan of action to "practice on less honorable throats" before leading into the lyrical melody again, the descending stepwise qualities of which Sweeney defies when he leaps up to the F natural for his final note, revealing further that his desire for revenge has won out over his sorrow.

The voice leading of both the melody and the accompaniment reveals the layered constitution of the music as a whole and offers different implications for when the two are or are not complementary. Throughout the first section, the Bb major key signature only weakly supports Sweeney's prolonged D, avoiding any tonic support. In the next section, where Sweeney exclaims that "we all deserve to die" in m. 22, he moves to prolonging a C which is supported by the F harmony in the bass. The concurrent statement of the *Dies irae* in E minor in the midst of the accompaniment in F and a series of cluster chords highlights the various vertical or harmonic layers in play here and contributes to the dissonant polytonal sound of the scene. In the next statement proclaiming "we all deserve to die" in m. 33, Sweeney's melody is transposed up a step, returning to the D; however, the accompaniment remains fixed on the F chord and its E minor *Dies irae* layer, showing the beginning of a conflict between Sweeney's melody and his accompaniment. As mentioned before, in his most unambiguous moment in which the stage direction instructs Sweeney to direct his rage towards the audience, breaking the Brechtian "fourth wall," his D finally achieves tonic Bb support in the bass in m. 45, as shown in Example 3.17. In other words, Sweeney's melody and the accompaniment come to an agreement at the most terrifying moment of the scene, representing the

incredible justification that Sweeney feels in his plan of action. Sweeney's “keening” melody has similar harmonic support, usually prolonging the third of the chord below with a descending interval of a fourth filled in by step, but it is always consistently undermined by the cross relation of the tremolos in the bass. The harmonic support of this lyrical melody breaks down in m. 74 where Sweeney's prolongation of the pitch D becomes dissonant against the C harmony in the accompaniment, at which point the orchestra takes over with prominent half-step trills and dissonant cluster chords that finally dissolve any sense of tonality.

Example 3.17: Background graph of harmonic support of D, mm. 5-4s5



This tonal and harmonic ambiguity, in combination with the lack of a clear hypermeter in the last ten measures, contributes to the chaotic feel as Sweeney brings the piece to a close. In fact, the most prominent instance of the various layers being in disagreement with each other lies in the last few measures with Sweeney's final note. Rather than descending traditionally from the persistently reiterated D to the tonic Bb, Sweeney defiantly leaps up to an F with absolutely no tonic support. Instead, his final

notes on "full of joy" are supported by tremolos, dissonant *fortissimo* cluster chords, and eventually the predominant Eb pitch in the bass. Once Sweeney has stopped singing, the orchestra comes in with the *piano* B minor/diminished hybrid chord, sharing the common tone of Sweeney's last F natural, but differing greatly from the triumphant air of his last note on "joy," instead expressing insecurity and doubt. The *fortissimo* Bb major chord that follows, the most unadulterated harmony of the entire song, signifies one last effort by Sweeney to convince himself that he is fine, but the B minor/diminished chord returns to subvert his proclaimed victory and quietly wins out, revealing his inner turmoil.

It is interesting to note that productions of *Sweeney Todd* have taken various approaches to the ending of the "Epiphany" scene, some changing the ending as written. To create more of a dramatic and triumphant ending, some productions cut out the B minor/diminished chords and instead place the Bb major chord right under Sweeney's final F natural. Although this still maintains the chilling nature of the ending with the use of a major chord to represent such a terrifying idea, the audience is given no musical reason to question Sweeney's pride at this point, leading directly into the comic relief of "A Little Priest" scene to round out the first act. In order to more accurately portray the lack of psychological and moral support as Sweeney transforms into a mass murderer, the original ending should be maintained. Although it may be less dramatic than simply cadencing on the Bb major chord, the ending as written is more in line with Sondheim's use of a dissonant harmonic language, sectionalized form, interesting breakdown of hypermeter, and use of contrasting tonal layers in furthering Sweeney's characterization as a fallen tragic hero.

## **“Johanna – Act II Sequence”**

The "Johanna" sequence from Act II of Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* is certainly a turning point in the drama; it is where the audience first witnesses Sweeney indiscriminately commit murder. The lyrics also convey his self-justification for his actions and his indifference in reconnecting with his daughter Johanna, which is still a distinct possibility at this point. Not only is there a change in Sweeney, but in the audience as well; this scene becomes a turning point in which Sweeney alienates the heretofore empathetic audience with his terrible actions, heightened by a light and comedic tone of the music that reflects his somewhat joyful mood. The song is a prime example of dramatic irony, as Sweeney calmly and lyrically sings while slitting his customers' throats with his razor. Despite the appalling nature of the action, the musical setting of this scene seems unaffected and static, especially with its predictable and repetitive form and the constant tonic chord arpeggiations in the bass. However, an analysis of the scene's melodic voice-leading, in combination with its corresponding harmony and lyrics, sheds light on the deeper implications of these melodies and Sweeney's underlying emotional progression towards acceptance of his chosen fate. Compared to the emotional state of the characters and the harmonic language of the previously examined “Epiphany” scene, Sweeney’s “Johanna” is much calmer and more traditionally tonal, so the analysis will reveal a closer tie to traditional Schenkerian principles than the former.

The piece begins with a reprise of Anthony's "Johanna," functioning as both a musical and dramatic introduction to the form proper. Musically, Anthony sings his reprise in the key of E major, which is distantly related to both the upcoming keys of Ab major and Eb major, the latter of which is the original key of Anthony's "Johanna." Example 3.18 illustrates that this key of E major acts as an introduction by slowly rising from the arrival on the dominant pitch B in m. 14,



through the sixth scale degree C# prolonged in mm. 15-22, to the D# leading tone in the last half of m. 22, which functions as a common tone (D# as the seventh scale degree in E major = Eb as the fifth scale degree in Ab major) in a smooth common tone modulation to Ab major leading to Sweeney's entrance. Dramatically, the reprise reminds the audience of Anthony's love for Johanna as he searches for her and introduces the idea of contrast between Anthony's persistence and Sweeney's passivity in finding Johanna, represented by the distant relationship between their two keys.

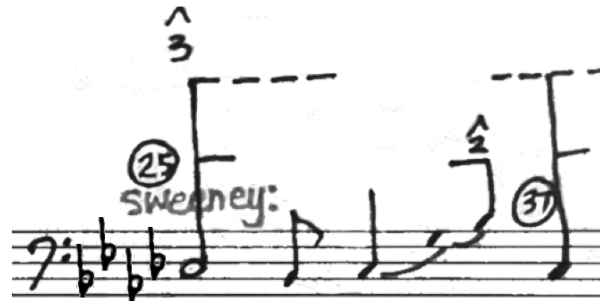
Example 3.18: Middleground graph of common tone modulation, mm. 5-23



A Schenkerian approach to the remainder of this scene highlights the importance of the note C and how it is prolonged in various ways as the third scale degree, most notably throughout Sweeney's phrases. Locally, the C is prolonged through a lower neighbor Bb in mm. 27-28, a figure that recurs each time Sweeney begins his phrases, foreshadowing the important relationship between C and Bb throughout the song, which is notated in Example 3.19. The return to C in m. 29 leads to a higher register, ending on a Bb3 that is left unresolved in its register until the final note; the following section in m. 37 begins back on the C in its original register. In addition to their unresolved nature in the upper register, these Bb's are further highlighted by their position as hypermetrical downbeats and the fact that they are now added ninths that are not harmonically supported by the tonic Ab chord underneath. Some might argue that these Bb's simply function as lower neighbors to each following C, but the C's do not function as resolutions; each time the C's begin anew in their original register,

paying no heed to the previous unresolved Bb's in a similar manner to Sweeney's disregard for morality as he kills his own innocent customers in this scene.

Example 3.19: Middleground relationship of C's and B's

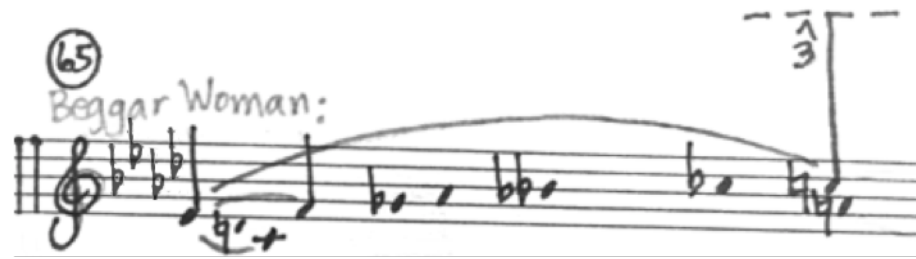


The recurring C's, which are initially harmonically supported with the static Ab major harmony underneath, now function as sevenths as the harmony finally changes to a Db major chord in Sweeney's bridge section in mm. 49-54 and Example 3.20. Both the change of harmony and the new functionality of C, as well as the change to a more reassuring tone in the text in these bridge sections ("I'm fine, Johanna," and "You stay... the way I've dreamed you are"), supports the idea that these bridges serve a different purpose, which is to convince the audience that Sweeney is mentally stable. The C's as dissonant sevenths to the Db harmony may act to undermine that idea; however, it is also in this section that Sweeney's unresolved Bb dramatically achieves its first harmonic support above the Gb subtonic chord in m. 55 as he assures himself "I'm fine." This harmonic support perhaps superficially justifies the Bb and his lyrics, as Sweeney may truly believe that he is handling the situation well, but the harmony quickly resolves to the tonic chord, forcing the Bb back into its status as a dissonant ninth.

Example 3.20: C's as dissonant sevenths and harmonic support of Bb

Another important instance of the note C, outside of Sweeney's statements, is in the Beggar Woman's first interjection. Beginning on an Eb, her melody dramatically ascends in a stepwise chromatic line to a C natural as she exclaims "City on fire!", creating a direct musical association with Sweeney as she warns everyone about him. In fact, this C connects in prolongation with Sweeney's previous and upcoming C's, as shown in Example 3.21. The C-G bass arpeggiations in the Beggar Woman's second interjection in mm. 125-149 suggest the key of C minor, especially since the ongoing arpeggiation pattern throughout the piece has functioned as a tonic/dominant relationship thus far. This key area of C is important not only because it is the only divergence from the Ab major key in the sequence, but also because it is the Beggar Woman and her foreboding that draw the music into this minor key area, again bringing with it associations of Sweeney's prolonged pitch of C.

Example 3.21: Beggar Woman's ascent to Sweeney's C, mm. 65-73



Interestingly, the Bb which functions as the second scale degree in Ab major and has been left hanging at the end of Sweeney's phrases finally resolves dramatically as he tells Johanna "goodbye" in m. 184, but it unexpectedly leads back to a C (the third scale degree), eluding the traditional *Urlinie* descent to the tonic Ab, shown in Example 3.22. Both the choice of C as his final note and the harmonic stasis point at an unchanged character in Sweeney; however, the C at the ending brings with it a substantial sense of finality that the first C does not have, which forces a reinterpretation of this resolution and its implications of Sweeney's emotional progress over the course of the song. Ironically, a resolution to the tonic pitch on the word "goodbye," possibly recomposed as Bb to Ab, or even G to Ab, would not bring such a sense of satisfying finality to the song. The final C in its upper register represents the only resolution of both the upper Bb tone and its phrases, with further emphasis because of its dramatic lyric. Thus, throughout the course of the song, the C has become a more attractive resting place than the tonic, especially with the added Db on "good-" that creates a strong half-step pull to the C that is even more fulfilling than a hypothetical resolution from the supertonic to tonic. To Sweeney, the C on which he starts becomes just as acceptable an ending place, saying much about the evolution of his emotions as he continues in his plot for revenge.

Example 3.22: Background graph of defiance of *Urlinie* descent



The progression of the lyrics further supports this idea of a deeper self-justified Sweeney as he begins the song by describing how he imagines Johanna's appearance ("beautiful and pale," "yellow hair like wheat"). As the song continues, however, Johanna is no longer the focus; instead the lyrics center around the hope that he has for his own future ("I still have reason to rejoice, the way ahead is clear," "It's always morning in my mind," "I think I miss you less and less as every day goes by," "Another bright red day!"). His final stanza returns to a reference of Johanna's physical appearance, but at this point he dismisses the idea of seeing Johanna again, claiming that she would "look too much like [Lucy]," which brings to mind legitimate questions as to whether Sweeney's desire for revenge on the Judge is actually for the sake of his family, especially when Anthony in contrast is actively seeking to find Johanna. It seems that his endgame concerns Johanna less than revenge itself.

It is tempting to think that Sweeney's character has not changed; after all, the Ab harmony is notably static throughout, the tension-creating additive notes that climax in the middle of the piece are absent from both the beginning and ending accompaniment, Anthony continues to search tirelessly for Johanna, and the Beggar Woman declines back to her original intensity after her climactic last warning. Sweeney's refusal to budge from his prominent C seems to fit in with this argument, but the reinterpretation of the C as a starting place that traditionally should resolve to the tonic but instead has become a very satisfying ending place throughout the course of the piece illuminates that he is not in the same emotional state in which he

started; instead, he has grown even more entrenched and self-justified in his plot. Sweeney's surroundings may swell with tension, but they return to their original state in the end; it is Sweeney who comes to a turning point in his thoughts and acceptance of his life without Johanna, perhaps even with a bit of joy, as he imagines the Judge under his knife. Analysis of the voice-leading within *Sweeney Todd*'s "Johanna – Act II Sequence" provides insight into the psyche of Sweeney Todd, which allows the audience to also hear his final C as an acceptable resting place, eliciting complex feelings of cognitive dissonance from even the most sympathetic listeners, especially as they serve as witnesses to Sweeney's terrible actions in this scene.

## Conclusion

Through the musical depiction of horror and black comedy – as embodied by “Epiphany” and Sweeney’s “Johanna” scene – the music enhances the commentary on a deeply flawed urban industrial society, in which social interactions barely conceal the underlying dysfunctionality and brutality of class divisions. In “Johanna – Act II Sequence,” we see that while the harmonic progressions are fairly traditional, the defiance of the *Urlinie* to descend, as Heinrich Schenker argues is natural in tonal music, highlights Sweeney’s denial of reality and his complacency with what he believes to be his future. Although the “Epiphany” scene is much less tonal, and thus less relevant to considerations of the *Ursatz* and *Urlinie*, the application of the Schenkerian methodology to this song brings attention to other principles central to this approach. This song can remind analysts that Schenkerian analysis does not just encompass ideas of tonal progressions and their corresponding descending notes, but it also includes an examination of harmony, counterpoint, musical layers, relationships of notes on a larger scale, motivic parallelisms, form, hypermeter, and hierarchy, and how all of these elements work to support – or conflict with – the dramatic context of the music. Tying together the advantages of character-oriented approaches of Schenkerian methodology, motivic analysis, and dramatic character study, these original graphs and corresponding analyses form an interpretation of Sondheim’s music that further elucidates the subtext of the drama itself and of the mental state of the title character, which should be a primary goal of any musical analysis of a dramatic work.

# APPENDIX

Handwritten musical score for "Epiphany" - Foreground. The score is written on ten staves, with the first five staves grouped by a brace and labeled "Sweeney" and the last five staves grouped by a brace and labeled "Mrs. Lovett".

The score includes the following annotations and markings:

- Staff 1:** Labeled "Foregound" in a box. Measure 5 is circled and labeled "5".
- Staff 2:** Labeled "Sweeney".
- Staff 3:** Labeled "Sweeney's repeated 'Obsession Motive'".
- Staff 4:** Labeled "Mrs. Lovett".
- Staff 5:** Labeled "Mrs. Lovett".
- Staff 6:** Labeled "Mrs. Lovett".
- Staff 7:** Labeled "Mrs. Lovett".
- Staff 8:** Labeled "Mrs. Lovett".
- Staff 9:** Labeled "Mrs. Lovett".
- Staff 10:** Labeled "Mrs. Lovett".

The score is written in a handwritten style, with various musical notations including notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The time signature is 3/4. The score is marked with "Bb:" at the beginning of the first system and "F:" at the beginning of the second system. The score is marked with "Desire in E minor" at the end of the second system. The score is marked with "Foregound 1" at the bottom right.



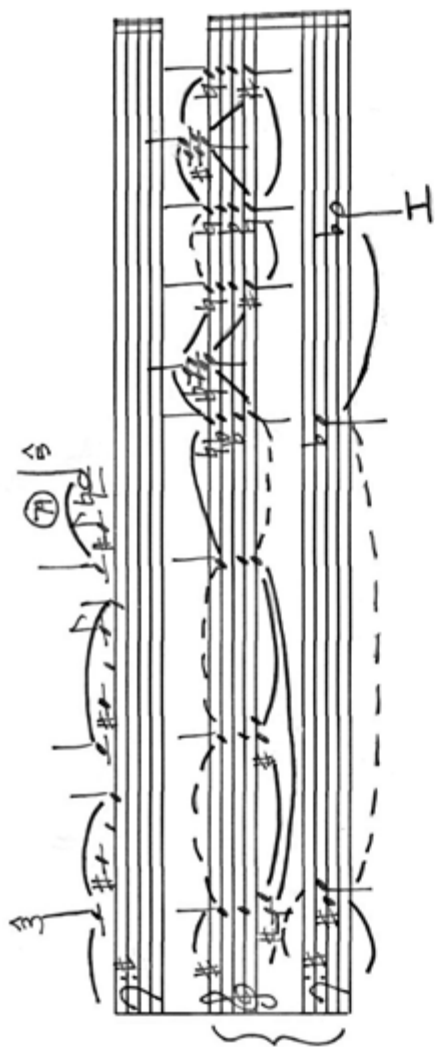
Handwritten musical score for a piece titled "Dies irae in E minor". The score is written on ten staves, organized into three systems of three staves each, with a final single staff at the bottom. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Key annotations and markings include:

- Dr. 3** and **(33)** at the top left.
- Die irae in E minor** written vertically on the first staff of the first system.
- (3)** in a circle on the first staff of the second system.
- variation on "obession"** written vertically on the first staff of the third system.
- Die irae in E minor** written vertically on the first staff of the fourth system.
- (45)** in a circle on the first staff of the fifth system.
- B:** at the bottom right, indicating the end of the piece.

Foreground ②





Foreground ④

"Epiphany" - Middleground & Background

**Middleground** (5)

Sweeney

Accompaniment

Mrs. Lovett (2)

Ch:

Sweeney

(22) F: (23) B:

(45) B: (46) F: (47) G: (48) F:

Middleground/Background ①

Handwritten musical score for a string quartet, measures 72-75. The score is written on four staves. Measure 72 begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notation includes various note values, rests, and dynamic markings. A bracket groups the first two staves in measure 72. Measure 73 continues the melodic lines. Measure 74 features a large slur over the first two staves. Measure 75 ends with a double bar line and a repeat sign.

Handwritten musical score for a string quartet, measures 76-77. The score is written on four staves. Measure 76 begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notation includes various note values, rests, and dynamic markings. A bracket groups the first two staves in measure 76. Measure 77 continues the melodic lines. The score ends with a double bar line and a repeat sign.

Middleground/Background ②

# "Jhanna - Act II Sequence" - Foreground

Foreground

Reprise Introduction

Anthony:

5 6

E:

I

IV

17

23

7 = 5 of new key

Sweeney:

IV

I

37

38 = m. 25

39 = m. 26

40 = m. 27

41 = m. 28

42 = m. 29

43 = m. 30

44 = m. 31

45 = m. 32

46 = m. 33

47 = m. 34

48 = m. 35

49 = m. 36

I

IV

I

Foreground ①

Handwritten musical score for two pieces: "Beggars" and "Sukareng".

**Top System (Measures 13-34):**

- Measures 13-14:** Key signature change to two flats (Bb, Eb). Measure 13 has a 2-measure rest.
- Measures 15-16:** "Beggars" vocal line begins. Measure 15 has a 2-measure rest.
- Measures 17-18:** Piano accompaniment with chords and eighth notes.
- Measures 19-20:** "Sukareng" vocal line begins. Measure 19 has a 3-measure rest.
- Measures 21-22:** Piano accompaniment.
- Measures 23-24:** "Beggars" vocal line continues.
- Measures 25-26:** Piano accompaniment.
- Measures 27-28:** "Sukareng" vocal line continues.
- Measures 29-30:** Piano accompaniment.
- Measures 31-32:** "Beggars" vocal line continues.
- Measures 33-34:** Piano accompaniment.

**Bottom System (Measures 35-52):**

- Measures 35-36:** Key signature change to one flat (Bb). Measure 35 has a 3-measure rest.
- Measures 37-38:** "Beggars" vocal line begins. Measure 37 has a 2-measure rest.
- Measures 39-40:** Piano accompaniment.
- Measures 41-42:** "Sukareng" vocal line begins. Measure 41 has a 2-measure rest.
- Measures 43-44:** Piano accompaniment.
- Measures 45-46:** "Beggars" vocal line continues.
- Measures 47-48:** Piano accompaniment.
- Measures 49-50:** "Sukareng" vocal line continues.
- Measures 51-52:** Piano accompaniment.

Foreground ②

### Foregrund ③



# "Johanna-Act II Sequence"

- Middle ground & Background

## Middleground

Reprise/  
Introduction

Anthony:

Middleground/Background ①

[illegible]

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