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MAT to undertake challenge of Sweeney Todd

By [Stephen Real](#)



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Casey Pratt, playing Sweeney Todd, and Angela Pratt, playing Mrs. Lovett, rehearse a scene from Montana Actor's Theatre presentation of the musical "Sweeney Todd." Opening night will be Friday at the Atrium Mall.

Montana Actors' Theatre is set to perform its most grueling production of the season in "Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street" which opens Friday at the Atrium Mall.

"Sweeney Todd" is a musical with music and lyrics composed by Stephen Sondheim, based on the book of the same title by Hugh Wheeler. The play is directed by MAT Associate Artistic Director Grant Olson, Ph.D. The plot surrounds the title character, Sweeney Todd, a barber, who seeks revenge on the corrupt Judge Turpin who had Todd imprisoned under false charges and caused the death of Todd's wife after he raped her.

Todd is played by Casey Pratt.

Olson said he and Angela Pratt, who plays Mrs. Lovett and is the costume designer, have been wanting to perform this particular play for a long time. They each had different ideas about the production of the play and what they wanted to do.

"I know for a fact it's the most difficult musical that MAT has ever done," he said. "It's crazy difficult just musicwise and different staging things."

The difficulty lies in the way the music is composed, Olson said. There are different melodies and different time signatures and different key signatures, he added. The different musical notes all have a purpose, though.

"He wrote it in a way that would stretch any Broadway cast," Olson said. "And there have been days when we have been looking and saying, 'How can we even do this?' Then the actors just work harder and harder and then they do it. They stretch their voices."

If mastering the music wasn't challenging enough, MAT decided to perform its most daunting play away from a place of familiarity and in a new venue at the Atrium. Olson said it was difficult for them to have to move all their lighting and sound equipment from the Little Theatre at Cowan Hall to the Atrium.

"We both, right from the beginning, didn't want it to be on the main stage," Olson said. "We, for some reason, are insane and decided to produce a full-size musical outside of our home."

Olson added that he likes the space and the "acoustics are phenomenal," although he said his team has had to move the speakers around the Atrium to find the right balance for the play.

Lighting was also an issue for MAT because the lights are typically right above the actors, Olson said. He added that they had to get creative with the lighting and it's going to be more simple lighting compared to normal.

He also likes that the Atrium is old and has some history behind it. He said it feels like it adds to the story.

"We've kind of had to build the show around the space," he said.

Another challenge MAT had to overcome was centered around timing of multiple productions. Olson said with MAT, knowing it they was putting on this play outside of its usual theater, they decided to use the Little Theatre as a rehearsing area to practice for "Rocky Horror Picture Show" which will be performed in Missoula this weekend.

On top of that, Olson added, Ed Asner brought "God Help Us" to Havre two weeks before the opening of "Sweeney Todd." Olson said their support team was really stretched between the three productions, and they had to ask the actors to assist in set design for "Sweeney Todd."

In light of all these challenges, Olson said, his group of actors have responded to the adversity they have faced. He added that he has faith in his actors and believes they can give "Sweeney Todd" the prestige it deserves.

"This last year, after seeing the musicals we produced in the last two years, we as a company and Angela and I thought, we could do this. So that's why, now," Olson said.

Olson said he likes the blend of humor and dark elements in "Sweeney Todd" and the way it is presented.

"If it wasn't funny, nobody could watch it," he added. "Chopping people up and putting them into pies and feeding them to other people, it should be turning your stomach, but the audience should be laughing at it and then go home and say, 'Oh, what did I just laugh at?'"

Olson said he also likes the subtle message regarding inequality that is present in the play. In Victorian-era England, 6 percent or fewer owned all of the wealth and everybody else was working for the upper class and, most often, in inhumane conditions.

He added, the author isn't trying to say that the rich, during this time, were eating the poor; instead, they were making a profit at the expense of the poor.

"Sweeney himself was wrongfully convicted and sent somewhere. So when he comes back to London and he sees the inequality, he's like, 'Well, we're going to switch this up a little bit, the rich are going to feed the poor. Literally.' That's what he does. It's social commentary on this idea of, if not literally eating other people, what we do to other people."

Olson said he drew inspiration from other adaptations of "Sweeney Todd" and was also influenced by his interest in German expressionism. The German expressionist movement began at the start of the 20th century and lasted a few years after World War I.

Some elements of German expressionism are white faces and big gestures, Olson added. Audiences may have already seen this style on display in several of Tim Burton's films including his own cinematic production of "Sweeney Todd."

Olson said one of the differences between expressionism and realism is that expressionism is about conveying a character's emotion through their body language. He gave the example of a character crying - in realism it is a single tear, but in expressionism, it is also the actor falling on the floor and wailing and moving their body into various positions to convey that sorrow.

Tickets for "Sweeney Todd" are available online at <http://mtactors.com> and will be general seating. Olson advises people if they want a particular seat, to show up early. Tickets can also be purchased physically at Bear Paw Meats, fivehead's, Computer Center or at the door.

Seating will be available on the ground floor near Grateful Bread and up on the second floor only. The seats will be tiered on the second level and Olson recommended sitting in the second level for the play.

Meat pies will also be served during the second week of the play.

"From the actors that don't perform well. They get to perform in other ways," Olson said jokingly.



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There will be a bar open both weeks of the play as well.

The show runs Friday and Saturday; next week Wednesday - Halloween - to Nov. 3 and Nov. 8 through Nov. 10.

Despite the graphic nature of "Sweeney Todd," Olson said, this will not be a gory production. He added they don't use any fake blood and it is all stylized. The murders are comical and not realistic.

Olson said the murders depicted in the production are intentionally made to look absurd because if it was realistic, then the audience reaction would be one of disgust rather than humor.

"So yeah, it's a comedy. With murder," Olson said, laughing at the juxtaposition of the two themes.