

Brief Encounter with Sweeney Todd Choreographer Nick Winston

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A revamped version of the Stephen Sondheim classic musical thriller, *Sweeney Todd – The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* bursts on to the stage at the West Yorkshire Playhouse this autumn, before transferring to Manchester's Royal Exchange.

Choreographer and movement director Nick Winston takes a break from rehearsals to discuss the challenges of staging the same show in two different venues, working on James Brining's first production as the Playhouse's new artistic director, and the genius of Sondheim...

How are you feeling ahead of opening night?

I think you get nervous just before opening night, but right now it's just concentrating on the technical side. It's complex because the show's quite big, technically, with shoots and traps and flying pieces.

You've had a great run at the Playhouse with *Loserville*, *Annie*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Crash* and *Death of Salesman*, so you must be excited to be back?

Yes, I love being here. I moved to Northampton (from London) last year, so I'm even closer! It's got a great reputation and the productions here have been really high standard. Plus, the show itself is like a big tragedy and the theatre feels like an amphitheatre. So, it does serve the show really well. Emotions are high, so it's good to deliver it in this space.

Are there any particular challenges in putting on a show of this scale?

The real challenge is that Stephen Sondheim didn't want the chorus to all have the same thought at the same time. So, in a number like Pirelli's 'Miracle Elixir', the chorus is all singing five different lines at the same time, all with different intentions; so, it's just trying to place the focus of all those different intentions within the number. That's the hardest challenge.

What about ensuring the musical numbers are integrated into the story?

I think that's why Sondheim's brilliant because the show doesn't stop when a number starts. It's telling the story, but it's not just telling one point of view.

Has the cast adapted well to the challenges?

They've been great. It was a slow process putting a few of the numbers on because there's so much detail; you want to make sure you're serving all that detail.

On a show like this, are you involved from day one?

I've been involved from the beginning because (director) James Brining has put a framing device on the show, which is to set it in an asylum. The movement of the ensemble is all related to their characters within the asylum, so we've been working on each individual person having a different reason for being there; whether it's a megalomaniac or someone with obsessive compulsive disorder, it's just making sure their physical language is telling that story as well, so it's been quite intense.

Conversely, is your job done once you get to opening night, or will you still be involved?

Normally (opening night) would be the end of my role, but because we're transferring to The Royal Exchange in Manchester afterwards, we actually go back into rehearsals the week after we open and do three more weeks' of rehearsals to restage the whole show in-the-round. So that will be interesting because the cast will be playing the show in the evening and rehearsing a different production during the day. Actually, it will be interesting for me to be around and see how the show develops over the weeks.

Talking of James Brining, have you enjoyed being a part of his first show as the Playhouse's new artistic director?

I felt honoured when James asked me to be involved with his first show here. For his first piece, the team he chooses to have around him is quite an important decision, so I was really privileged to be asked to do the show. And it's a show I've always wanted to do, as well.

Having previously worked on *Follies* and the revue show *Side by Side* by Sondheim, would you say you have an affinity for Sondheim's work?

I love Sondheim and I find that when you work on the piece you get so much more from it as well because you get all the complexities. You pick everything up; all the detail. And it's such a brilliant piece of writing; you hear things constantly that make you go: "Wow, he's a genius!".

Do you also enjoy working on different types of productions?

I've been lucky that every production I've done has been quite diverse. I love that. After this, I'm doing an opera and just before this I did a musical, *To Sir with Love*, in Northampton. I do love the diversity of that.

Is it daunting putting on a show of the pedigree of *Sweeney Todd*?

It's easier than doing a new musical because you don't know if it works and you still don't know whether it works until it's in front of an audience. But with this, we know we've got a great piece of writing to work from. But there's no point just re-doing the show; we have to put our own stamp on it and have it be our version of it.

Finally, why do you think *Sweeney Todd* has such an enduring appeal?

Obviously, it's a great piece of writing and a tragedy can be entertaining, with moments of black comedy. It's such a tragic story of a man returning to London after 15 years and thinking he's going to find his wife and daughter only to discover his wife has been raped and, he thinks, murdered, and his daughter's been taken away. It's a heart-breaking journey he goes on...but I don't want to give away the end!

– Hannah Giles

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Andrew Quick On... The Challenges of Collaborative Working

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Andrew Quick is a founder member of experimental, multi-media loving, innovative Imitating The Dog Theatre Company. He is directing its most recent venture, *Tales from the Bar of Lost Souls*...

Following a successful run of shows in Cyprus and Greece, *Tales from the Bar of Lost Souls* is about to embark on a UK tour. The production, part of the British Council's Creative Collaboration project, is a joint venture between the National Theatre of Greece, Cyprus Theatre Organisation and UK theatre company, Imitating the Dog (ITD). Andrew Quick, founder member of ITD and director of *Tales from the Bar of Lost Souls* took time out from rehearsals to discuss the show and the challenges of collaborative working.

Founded in 1997/8, ITD grew from a third-year project by students at Lancaster University, where Quick is a senior lecturer in theatre studies at the Institute of Contemporary Arts. Since becoming a professional theatre team, ITD has been producing work every year and a half. In terms of their ethos, Quick says their interest lies in "the relationship between theatre and the cinema" and how film narratives "can be challenged and reworked through theatre performances in relation to film aesthetics".

The latest project, *Tales from the Bar of Lost Souls*, was born following a successful workshop residency that Quick and fellow ITD founding member, Simon Wainwright, spent in Cyprus with the National Theatre of Greece working with recent graduates of its acting school. Quick says that the experience was very productive for all concerned: "It went really well; we really liked working with them and they really liked working with us and they invited us back to work on a project – *Tales from the Bar of Lost Souls*." The project attracted the attention, as well as all-important funding, from the British Council's Creative Collaboration scheme. The scheme was launched in 2007 and, according to its website, aims 'to encourage arts and cultural leaders from different countries and different art forms to talk together, learn from each other and develop new partnerships for effective cross-border working'.

Tales from the Bar of Lost Souls is described by ITD as 'part musical, part dream play' which 'takes as its starting point the melting pot of Mediterranean port communities'. Indeed, according to Quick, it is the setting of the piece that unites those involved in a production that includes a cast comprised of two actors from each participating country. "What we thought of when we got involved with the project was that the thing that linked all three countries was the sea and the fact that all three countries built their histories around shipping and ports, so we became very interested in the mythology and stories around the port and sea." Quick goes on to cite the likes of Ezra Pound and Bertolt Brecht as influences on the piece, which also challenges the notion of borders and nationalities as the lines of ethnicity and morality become increasingly blurred.

According to Quick, so far the production has been received "really well" by audiences in Greece and Cyprus, although he admits the experience has been "exhausting" as funding for the show is "quite tight" and rehearsal time was limited. "In a two-week rehearsal period it is difficult to make a show, but we did it and they did a really good job". Their efforts were rewarded by sell-out crowds and demand for extra shows.

The production now moves to the UK for a tour that starts on 9 March in Exeter and takes in Bristol, Leeds and Lancaster. Quick reveals that for UK audiences the show has been “completely reworked”. “The story’s very similar, but in the first show, which was designed by Laura Hopkins, a very well-known designer who’s designed for the National Theatre and lots of other companies, we had a very beautiful set looking through one window, but now she’s redesigned it to look through three windows.” This gives the audience the experience of “looking through a graphic novel or a series of filmed stills that continually move and change”.

Quick is clearly proud of the look of this production, as well as those created for other ITD projects. “What we try and do is create these magical worlds that are surprising in the theatre.” The drawback to this, of course, is the cost of putting together these “large scale” projects, especially in the current economic environment. Quick believes that these financial straits have even led to “pressure in the contemporary theatre scene” for what he calls “short, low-resource shows”. This is clearly in conflict with ITD’s grander vision as, while smaller shows are “easier to tour, easier to finance and...easier, probably, for venues to deal with”, ITD’s work “is the opposite”. “In this show, it’s a big set and we need a whole day to get in”. An example of how ITD’s work translates into larger venues is its 2008 production, *Kellerman*, which Quick says looked “fantastic” on the stage at the Bristol Old Vic. Ultimately, it is obvious that part of what makes ITD’s work stand out is its unique visuals. Says Quick, “we hope at the end of this it looks nice and people are amazed at the world we create”.

Given the limited resources available, however, Quick believes that further collaborations are “the only way forward” for companies such as ITD who specialise in these larger scale projects. But are there any drawbacks to working alongside other theatre companies? “I think it’s really interesting because when you’ve been working...in a collaborative company...you have a private language that you build up over time, and then you suddenly have to work with people who have not got used to that private language.” But while Quick admits that this “slows everything down”, he also believes that “in some ways it really makes us rethink about how we work and how successful we are working with outside people”. So how has Quick found the experience overall? “I think we’ve done a good job here working with people who have come from a very different tradition. They’re very classically trained the Greek actors, and we are not so classically trained. I wouldn’t even say we were trained at all in one way! Glorious amateurs, is what I’d say!”

While the unique vision of ITD has been well received by audiences, their shows have not always gone down well with the critics, with Quick admitting they have had some “terrible reviews”. But he is quite sanguine about this, adding, “I don’t have a problem with that at all, but it does polarise people as they see our work as cold and non-theatrical and I can see the problem it has”. However, Quick hopes that audiences and critics *Tales from the Bar of Lost Souls* with an “open mind”. “We’ve had some criticism, but we like making these worlds. We hope they haunt people and challenge them”.

– Hannah Giles

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