

‘Attend the Tale of Sweeney Todd’: Adaptation, Revival, and Keeping the Meat Grinder Turning

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Abstract:

Working with the stage adaptation of Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler’s *Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (1979), this article traces the musical’s rejection of the ‘low brow’ Victoriana associated with musical theatre, offering instead a biting Marxist critique that stems from the proto-Marxism of the original penny blood, *The String of Pearls* (1846-47). The article proposes that this social critique has been systematically repositioned in performance according to the contemporary *Zeitgeist* and current issues surrounding subsequent revivals, recognising the emergence of an apparent dialogue of revival practice and re-radicalisation.

Keywords: adaptation, Broadway, John Doyle, Karl Marx, musical, revival, Lonny Price, Stephen Sondheim, Sweeney Todd, *The String of Pearls*.

Of all popular commercial art forms, few are considered as unrelentingly profit-driven and as purposefully unedifying as the musical. The industry itself thrives on predictability, equally in the content that its audience expects to see and in its projected financial returns, which explains the high percentage of revivals and musical adaptations that come to Broadway and London’s West End each year (Hutcheon 2006: 5). The mainstream musical industry is at the mercy of its consumer. This is no more clearly illustrated than by the success of the *X-Factor*-style casting process for Andrew Lloyd Webber’s recent revivals of *Oliver!* (2009) and *The Wizard of Oz* (2011) or the BBC reality series *I’d Do Anything* (2008) and *Over the Rainbow* (2010) respectively, which attracted average audiences of 6.2 million and 5.4 million viewers who actively participated in choosing the lead (Hewitt 2012: n.p.). When it premiered on Broadway in 1979, Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler’s neo-Victorian ‘musical thriller’, *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, differed from the vast majority of musical

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adaptations. *Sweeney Todd* refused to pander to the commercial drive of the musical theatre industry and instead offered a biting Marxist critique of wider capitalist society in lieu of the feel-good entertainment that might be expected on Broadway.

This essay analyses how *Sweeney Todd*'s social criticism was originally realised on the Broadway stage and how variations in performance elements have enabled its critique to remain politically relevant through several subsequent revivals – namely, the 2004/2005 John Doyle revival and the 2014/2015 New York Philharmonic Orchestra concert.¹ The task of re-working *Sweeney Todd*'s anti-capitalist critique into a new production, which is at once true to the tone of Sondheim and Wheeler's text, by resisting changes to the libretto, and, at the same time, sensitive to the contemporary *Zeitgeist*, has yielded startlingly dissimilar revivals; these productions vary greatly in terms of scale, orchestration and, indeed, performance. In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon argues that “[w]ays of engaging with stories do not, of course ever take place in a vacuum. We engage in time and space within a particular society and general culture” (Hutcheon 2006: 27-28). As with the initial musical adaptation of a text, the decision to revive a musical does not “take place in a vacuum”; it is also sensitive to the time and place in which it is produced. Musical theatre revivals are new productions of older musicals that use predominately the same score and book as the original (although some aspects of the show, such as orchestration, might be updated). In revival, performance elements change and respond to contemporary issues to maintain the adapted text's relevance for a new audience. The nature of revival is palimpsestic; the changed performance elements of each subsequent production inscribe the revival with additional, contemporaneous layers of meaning that serve to revitalise and re-radicalise the social critique of the original and, indeed, of any preceding revival.²

An issue that arises with the discussion of neo-Victorian musical theatre adaptation is the implicit snobbery that considers the commercial aspects of the musical theatre industry and its cultural products “low-brow” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 223). Hutcheon observes that “if an adaptation is perceived as ‘lowering’ a story (according to some imagined hierarchy of medium and genre), response is likely to be negative” (Hutcheon 2006: 3). Indeed, it follows that when canonical Victorian authors have their novels adapted into the ‘lower’ medium of the musical,

these versions are often criticised and dismissed as commercial nostalgia. For example, when reviewing Frank Wildhorn's *Dracula: The Musical* (2004), Ben Brantley prompted readers to "think of every appropriate variation you can including the verbs to bite and suck", before concluding that the novel is "infinitely superior" (Brantley 2004: n.p.). The complex characterisation of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859-60) is denigrated to a clichéd love triangle, as Marian Halcombe is made the thwarted lover of Walter Hartwright in Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical adaptation of the same name (2004); in the words of one reviewer, "what this does is to patronise the Victorians" (Billington 2004: n.p.). As with other forms of neo-Victorian adaptation, some musicals are indeed kitsch reconfigurations of well-known texts that eliminate subtler elements of a novel's plot or subtext to, in the words of Scott Freer, "further entrench into popular culture constructions of a Dickensian 'Quality Street' world" (Freer 2008/2009: 54). However, as critical interest from Freer and others has suggested, while commercial nostalgia might be the prevailing impression of neo-Victorian musical theatre adaptation, *Sweeney Todd* contradicts this model.³ The musical challenges the expectations placed on neo-Victorian musical adaptations by utilising the proto-Marxist leanings of the original penny dreadful (and its afterlives) to launch a critique of social injustice.⁴ In place of the commercial (and highly criticised) nostalgia of the above examples, *Sweeney Todd* presents an alternative radical nostalgia, the aim of which is to use the Victorian setting and aesthetic to highlight continuing exploitation of the working classes under capitalism.

1. A Web of Adaptation: *Sweeney Todd* and *The String of Pearls*

As the Sweeney Todd legend has no singular authoritative source, the process of adaptation for Sondheim and Wheeler's musical was more complex than that of the other neo-Victorian musical adaptations that have a clear literary ur-text. The earliest appearance of Sweeney Todd in English fiction is in *The String of Pearls* (1846-47), which was published as a penny blood in E. Lloyd's *The Penny Periodical and Family Library* and is widely regarded as the original Sweeney Todd story, as it sets a precedent for the tropes and characters found in most subsequent versions (Mack 2007: 102).⁵ However, as Robert L. Mack demonstrates in his comprehensive volume *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd*, there are many possible sources for the tale of the murderous barber and his cannibal

accomplice that influenced this first literary appearance. These sources range from the urban myth of the sixteenth-century Scottish cannibal Sawney Beane, whose legend was published several times over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to the French urban legend of the barber/pâtissier partnership that terrorised the Rue des Marmousets, Paris in 1206 (Mack 2007: xvii). The process of adaptation is complicated in the case of Sweeney Todd as, in addition to the character's status in urban legend, in the century and more between the publication of *The String of Pearls* and Sondheim and Wheeler's musical a multitude of adaptations appeared across several genres, including melodrama, ballet, and music hall performance.⁶ The musical's narrative is taken most directly from Christopher Bond's play *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (1973); the play, in contrast to earlier adaptations, offered an alternative narrative of injustice and class exploitation that resonated with critical elements of the original tale. The musical emerges out of a complex web of adaptations, which are in dialogue with one another. Due to this multitude of source material, it is perhaps not such a transgressive act to adapt a non-canonical form into another popular medium which enables *Sweeney Todd* to avoid accusations of 'lowering' the original literary text that other neo-Victorian musicals face. In a sense, *Sweeney Todd* raises a cheap literary output to a "middlebrow art form", as identified by Sharon Aronofsky Weltman (Weltman 2009: n.p.). It is possible to assert, then, that the generic aspects of the original penny publications, the shared sources of their inspiration from urban myth, and the wealth of earlier adaptations has allowed Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* to be something other than the nostalgic neo-Victorian musical.

What *Sweeney Todd* does appropriate from *The String of Pearls*, which later melodrama adaptations do not, is its scathing proto-Marxist critique of the workings of early capitalist society. This is a vital aspect of *Sweeney Todd*'s critical status and an example of how adaptation functions by highlighting the aspects of a source – or in this case, sources – that are relevant to the contemporary mood. Despite being written two years before the publication of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engel's *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), *The String of Pearls* contains a perceptive critique of the state of the working classes in the newly capitalist society of Industrial Britain. When Lovett employs Mark Ingestrue "who has been famished so long", she tells him that "as long as you are industrious, you will get on very

well”, but that “everybody who relinquishes the situation goes to his old friends” (Anon 2010: 91). The capitalist exploitation of the working classes is depicted in the threat that the desperate man must continue to be “industrious” and to produce pies for the bourgeois clients of Lovett’s pie-shop, “his old friends”, in order that he is not consumed in a pie himself. Lovett’s labourers are not permitted to leave or to sleep as they “are made victim to the popularity of Lovett’s pies” (Anon 2010:164). In *Capital* (1867), Marx observes a “remarkable phenomenon in the history of modern industry, that machinery sweeps away every moral and natural restriction on the length of the working-day” (Marx 1867: n.p.). There is no restriction to Ingestrie’s working day and he, like the machinery, must continue without sleep. By denying her worker sleep, Mrs Lovett forbids Ingestrie a vital human need, and he becomes dehumanised by the demand for her pies as the endless cycle of supply and demand facilitates the dehumanisation of the worker. Ingestrie cries out, “I cannot be made into a mere machine for the manufacture of pies” (Anon 2010:160). Marx predicted the mechanisation of the worker under capitalism; he argued that “[i]n the factory we have a lifeless mechanism independent of the workman, who becomes a mere living appendage” (Marx 1867: n.p.). Mark Ingestrie’s declaration dramatises his transition into “a mere living appendage” for Lovett’s machine, embodying a key idea that would later form part of Marxist philosophy regarding the mechanisation of the working classes and their exploitation.

As the character of Sweeney Todd is a long-standing cultural entity, it would be naïve to assume that the characterisation of Todd’s villainy is homogenous across the multifarious forms into which the story has been adapted. The Sweeney of the original penny dreadful is not – like Sondheim and Wheeler’s Sweeney – a “fallen angel [returned] to claim a small victory over the upper-world” (Freer 2008/2009: 70). He is a pantomime villain driven by self-interest, who murders to steal from his contemporaries “who like himself, are small tradesmen, shop-keepers, farmers, and service providers, instead of corrupt judges and deceitful beaules” (Weltman 2009: n.p.). Moving forward from *The String of Pearls*, the Sweeney Todd of George Dibdin Pitt’s 1847 melodrama adaptation of *The String of Pearls* and the cackling Sweeney Todd, played by the aptly named Tod Slaughter, in the 1936 film *Sweeney Todd the Demon Barber of Fleet Street* are certainly inspired by the glamorised gore of the penny dreadful. These

characterisations utilise familiar melodramatic conventions of villainy, such as cackling laughter, but, despite following a similar narrative to *The String of Pearls*, they did not appropriate the social criticism of the penny dreadful into their adaptations. Indeed, Todd's villainy would remain pure pantomime until Christopher Bond's 1973 play, *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, offered an alternative interpretation that drew upon the undercurrent of proto-Marxist criticism present in the original penny blood; it was this re-telling that Sondheim and Wheeler followed in their musical adaptation. While the sheer number of adaptations of the Sweeney Todd myth complicated the process of adaptation for Sondheim and Wheeler's musical, the musical's adherence to those elements of proto-Marxist and Marxist critique found in particular versions of the story indicates that the contemporary conditions of the musical's adaptation called, not for a villain, but for an anti-hero to expose the exploitative workings of capitalist society.

2. Sondheim and Wheeler's *Sweeney Todd*

As with the vast majority of Broadway shows, musicals that are adapted from Victorian literary texts are typically transformed to fit certain expectations that allow them to be easily digested and enjoyed by a contemporary audience. In his study of neo-Victorian criminality post-*Oliver!*, Benjamin Poore argues that "part of the appeal of *Oliver!* is [...] that it provides "a ritual of self-reassurance" that all will receive their just desserts" which, he suggests, is made all the more comforting by an inherent audience awareness "that the Victorian age is long past, and these social evils ameliorated" (Poore 2008/2009: 26). The starving orphans of the workhouse that sing for 'Food Glorious Food' are no longer an issue to the contemporary audience member who is reassured by the knowledge that the workhouses have long since been abolished. *Sweeney Todd* offered no such reassurance. This refusal to pander to the sense of nostalgia and the reassurance that other neo-Victorian musicals had led audiences to expect of the genre was made explicit in the staging of the closing 'Epilogue' in the 1982 recording of the original Broadway tour (Prince 1982: n.p.). After murdering his enemies and throwing Mrs. Lovett into her own oven, Sweeney Todd is murdered by his boy, Tobias, who is left surrounded by corpses to begin singing the 'Epilogue'. As each of the murdered characters stood up to sing her or his lines pertaining to the legend of Sweeney Todd,

first introduced to the audience in the opening ‘Ballad of Sweeney Todd’, such as ‘he kept a shop in London town’ (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 154), each actor travelled downstage to sing directly to the audience. This resurrection and direct mode of address indicated to the audience that the actors had dropped out of the characters played during the musical’s narrative, reassuming their narratological role to encourage the audience to take heed of the epilogue’s unnerving message. While the musical tension escalated through a crescendo with close, discordant harmonies, as the cast sang “Sweeeeeney” and began to point at members of the audience shouting, “There! There!” in response to the line “isn’t that Sweeney there beside you?” (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991:155). This direct audience contact dramatised the uncomfortable reality that Sweeney Todd as representative of an exploited, dehumanised, and alienated member of the working classes could indeed have been standing beside any member of the audience. In lieu of reassurance, Sondheim and Wheeler’s musical encouraged 1970s audiences to recognise that the social critique of *Sweeney Todd* was as much applicable to contemporary society in the context of growing social, economic, and industrial unrest.

There are innumerable factors that could have contributed to the general feeling of social unease and disillusionment of the period that enabled *Sweeney Todd* to mount its vehement anti-capitalist critique, such as the loss of the Vietnam War, the rise of the New Left, and various radical movements in feminism and civil rights – in addition to a period of high unemployment, economic instability and recession following the stock market crash of 1973-74 (Alcaly and Mermelstein 1977: 4). Arguably, it was the social unrest in New York in 1979 that impelled the musical adaptation to focus on those proto-Marxist and Marxist criticisms of earlier adaptations. Sondheim and Wheeler’s work premiered on Broadway at the Uris Theatre in March 1979; it was directed by the Tony Award-winning director Harold Prince and starred Angela Lansbury and Len Cariou (who was later replaced by George Hearn). Yet, while many neo-Victorian musical adaptations transform the original text into an easily-digestible product for consumption by a contemporary audience, Sondheim and Wheeler’s *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street* left a bad taste in the mouths of its viewers – despite winning eight of the nine Tony awards it was nominated for. *Sweeney Todd* only managed to repay 59 percent of its investors after a sixteen-month run (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: xxvi),

and there were several disparaging reviews, such as that by Hobe Morrison in *Variety* who commented, in reaction to the industrial scale of the staging, “perhaps the idea was to dazzle the eye and thereby obscure the dearth of engaging entrainment” (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: xxv). The musical was challenging for its first audiences, and there are several contributing factors to this unease that stem from the adaptation itself: firstly, the musical’s unrelenting Marxist critique of nineteenth-century capitalism and secondly, and more uncomfortably for its first audiences, the implication that this social critique is also applicable to contemporary society. As Audra MacDonald commented in her introduction to the PBS broadcast of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra’s *Sweeney Todd* in 2014, “On March 1st 1979 Broadway awakened to a different kind of music; it was fierce, menacing and filled with grisly humour and unsettling passions – *very much like the times themselves*” (MacDonald 2014: n.p, added emphasis).

3. *Sweeney Todd* and Marxism

As previously noted, the musical differs from many preceding versions of the Sweeney Todd myth due to its unrelenting engagement with Marxist tropes.⁷ Initially the original director, Harold Prince, found it hard to see “beyond Sherlock Holmes” when it came to Victorian adaptation (Bragg 1980: n.p.). He stated in an interview for Melvin Bragg’s *South Bank Show* in 1980 that it was the element of class-struggle that resonated with the contemporary *Zeitgeist* and enabled him to understand the musical: “And, suddenly, it became about the Industrial Age, it became about the incursions of machinery on the spirit of the people” (Bragg 1980: n.p.). In *Capital* (1867), Marx discusses precisely these “incursions of machinery on the spirit of the people”; Marx recognises a symbiosis of man and machine that occurs under capitalism, “exploitation of the worker by the machine is therefore identical for him with exploitation of the machine by the worker” (Marx 1867: n.p.). The dual exploitation of man and machine that Marx describes is reflected in *Sweeney Todd* when man and machine fuse in Todd’s increasingly alienated and mechanised characterisation. The “exploitation” that prefigures Todd’s mechanisation is the impetus to produce pies and accrue capital. When Todd has his razors returned to him he “*holds up the biggest razor to the light*” and cries, “My right arm is complete again!” (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 21, original italics). Todd describes his razor as an appendage which is needed in order to complete his

right arm and allow him to work. Marx argued that while “the worker makes use of a tool; in the factory, the machine makes use of him” (Marx 1867: n.p.). The razor – the tool of Sweeney’s trade – connects Todd to the ‘machine’ of capitalism. Parenthetically, the dual meaning of Todd’s assertion that his razors “shall drip rubies” provides an additional indication of how the acquisition of capital occurs at the bloody expense of the worker (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 21).

As the musical draws towards its climax, Todd becomes increasingly mechanised in accordance with Wheeler’s stage directions and, indeed, in George Hearn’s performance in the recording of the original production. In the ‘Johanna’ quartet of the second act, the stage direction states that “*throughout the song, TODD remains benign, wistful, dream-like. What he sings is utterly detached from the action, as is he*” (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 107, original italics). This detachment is particularly conspicuous as Todd slits the throats of two customers during this “*dream-like*” song, illustrating the way in which Todd and Lovett’s murderous enterprise – an enterprise that analogises the perceived social reality under capitalism – has become automatic, mechanised, and almost industrial in scale. The lyrics of the song anticipate the automated action that Todd will perform on his customers, providing an added level of black humour:

And if you’re beautiful, what then,
With yellow hair, like wheat?
I think we shall not meet again –
(*He slashes the customer’s throat*)
My little dove, my sweet,
Johanna...
(Sondheim and Wheeler 1991:107-108, original ellipsis)

Here, the placement of the murder after “I think we shall not meet again –” is comic within the metanarrative context of his wistful song about his daughter, as fully realised in its performance. This motif is repeated in the next verse, in which the stage directions ask that “*as they both sing the second syllable of the name, TODD slashes the second customer’s throat so that his mouth opens simultaneously with theirs*” (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 110, original italics). When this stage direction is enacted in performance – as it is in the 1982 recording – it becomes apparent that

Sweeney Todd is now controlling the actions of his consuming public and claiming his place as one of the owners of the means of production – at least, for the time being. While maintaining the darkly comic tone of the song, this jarring disconnection of performance and lyric encourages an audience to evaluate what they are seeing as active consumers of musical theatre.

In her reassessment of the Victorian literary response to machine culture, Tamara Ketabgian describes the relationship between man and his mechanical appendage in Marx as one in which both man and his prosthesis are “jockeying for dominance and subject status” (Ketabgian 2011: 19) and, certainly, as the musical continues, Todd allows his appendage to dominate him and he is driven by the thought of his razor’s vengeance alone. During the aptly named ‘Epiphany’, which occurs when Todd misses his first opportunity to kill Judge Turpin, Todd transitions from a victim who seeks revenge solely upon Judge Turpin and Beadle Bamford to a wielder of a warped version of social justice:

They all deserve to die!
 Tell you why Mrs. Lovett,
 Tell you why:
 Because in all of the whole human race, Mrs Lovett,
 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 –
 (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 79)

“[A]ll of the whole human race” are pitted against one another in Todd’s understanding of society. The two opposing conditions of man that Todd recognises reflects the Marxist assertion that “society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other – Bourgeoisie and Proletariat” (Marx 1848: n.p.). While the representative of the working class is “staying put in his proper place”, the bourgeoisie has “his foot in the other one’s face”. Todd implicates “all” of society in the maintenance of this oppressive class-structure; he seeks vengeance on “not just one man, nor ten men, nor a hundred” (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 80). During this epiphany Todd

often directly addresses the audience in performance by asking an audience member, “You, sir,/ How about a shave?” (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 80). By communicating his own epiphany to the audience via direct address, Todd attempts to startle the audience into seeing social reality as he does.⁸

The capitalist ideology that Todd recognises in ‘Epiphany’ is repeatedly and explicitly criticised throughout the musical. In ‘A Little Priest’, Todd observes that “the history of the world, my sweet – [...] is who gets eaten and who gets to eat” (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 88). This reasoning is used to justify Mrs. Lovett’s suggestion that they dispose of the murdered Pirelli in her meat pies as her “business needs a lift” (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 82). In her drive for capital gain, Mrs. Lovett becomes the owner of a means of production that is a fiendish parody of capitalism. In her pie-shop, her customers literally consume each other for the sake of perpetuating the production of her pies. This harks back to *The String of Pearls* and its own radical imagining of early capitalist society: the continued production of pies in the musical ensures the safety of Mrs. Lovett’s latest cook, or rather, the latest “victim to Mrs. Lovett’s pies’ popularity” (Anon 2010: 91).

Although the consumption of human flesh in Mrs. Lovett’s pies is particularly shocking, it does not represent the only incidence in which human materials are bought and sold for capital gain in the musical. It is revealed that Pirelli’s Miracle Elixir is, in fact, “piss with ink” (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 37) and that all the London wigmakers obtain their human hair from Bedlam: “for the right amount, they will sell you the hair off any madman’s head” (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 120). These details are not as central to the narrative as are the pies, but their inclusion offers an insight into the depths of depravity under the forces of capitalism. Indeed, these further examples of the exchange of human products prevent the actions of Todd and Lovett from being dismissed as the actions of two extremists. Their actions may be severe, but they are not that far removed from the other exchanges of human body parts and fluids that are going on around them. Todd and Lovett view their macabre project of production as a small-scale enactment of the wider capitalist project. “For what’s the sound of the world out there?”, asks Todd rhetorically (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 83). His implicit answer, again phrased as a question, draws a powerful parallel between his enterprise and that of society: “It’s man devouring man, my dear, and who are we to deny it in here?” (Sondheim

and Wheeler 1991: 83). This critique is not only an essential part of the musical's narrative, as it is used to sanction the murder and consumption of Todd's victims under the guise of social justice, but it is also analogous to "the world out there" and the injustice of the world outside of the theatre (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 83).

4. Keeping the Grinder Turning: *Sweeney Todd* in Revival

If adaptation is subject to the conditions of its creation, to paraphrase Hutcheon, so is revival (Hutcheon 2006: 27-8). Ben Brantley from *The New York Times* observed in his review of *Sweeney Todd*'s first major revival that the return of certain musicals to Broadway seems to coincide with current events and issues; he remarked:

When the 1975 [John] Kander and [Fred] Ebb musical *Chicago* returned to Broadway [in 1996] critics remarked on how that show's time had arrived, how its flippant cynicism about American jurisprudence fit in perfectly in the age of the O.J. Simpson trial. In like manner, theatregoers may find that this raw new *Sweeney* matches their moods. For many Americans, the course of current events, at home and abroad, has engendered an attitude that has progressed beyond cynicism into a wondering disgust and on into blazing anger in search of an outlet [...]. Mr. Doyle's production is perfect for vicarious venting. Instead of going postal, let Sweeney do the slashing for you. (Brantley 2005: n.p.)

The original production of *Sweeney Todd* offered a reading of "class-struggle", to use the words of its director Harold Prince, to the audiences of New York and London in 1979 and 1980 within the context of growing social, economic and industrial unrest; this neo-Victorian critique of the dehumanising effects of capitalism was particularly appropriate following a period of economic recession. Again in 2005, when the revival of *Sweeney Todd*, directed by John Doyle, transferred to Broadway, it spoke to the contemporary mood – what Brantley described above.⁹ In the revival, John Doyle made drastic changes to the staging, orchestration and performance elements that had enabled his austere production of *Sweeney Todd* to channel the anger of the period. Revival became an act of repositioning,

re-radicalising, and, ultimately, re-realising the original production's critical potential via an evolved performance practice tailored to its new audience.

In *The Haunted Stage*, Marvin Carlson argues that theatre is a haunted practice, the application of which provides a useful point of departure for considering revival practice and the impact of cultural memory (Carlson 2003: 1). Carlson postulates that there is a "ghostliness" to theatre in "its sense of return, the uncanny but inescapable impression imposed upon its spectators that *we are seeing what we saw before*" (Carlson 2003: 1). There is a deep connection between cultural memory and the theatre and that cultural memory – of past productions, past roles played by the actors, or individual experience – informs the reception of a performance (Carlson 2003: 2). Where a production is a revival of a well-known show (in this case, a multiple Tony Award-winning musical), the impact of cultural memory — the 'ghost' of its original incarnation *per se* – is accentuated. The 2005 John Doyle revival (the first major Broadway revival of *Sweeney Todd*) itself was positioned as a performance of cultural memory. Tobias opened the proceedings sitting alone downstage, dressed in a straightjacket, inviting the audience to "attend the tale of Sweeney Todd" (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 1); he was then released from his straightjacket and became a player in the performance of *Sweeney Todd*, to be returned to his straightjacket at the end of the musical. By positioning this revival as the imaginings – perhaps the memories – of a madman, the revival created an additional level of distance between it and the original production out of which the revival could mount its own critique. If we are to read the revival as the memories of the incarcerated Tobias, the implication is that the events of the performance have already happened and, on a metatheatrical level, they have – in the original production. The acknowledgement of memory in the revival's opening fostered an additional level of self-referential irony when the already metatheatrical line of the opening ballad teased "what happened then – well, that's the play, /And he wouldn't want us to give it away" (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 3); the chances are that a revival audience does know "what happened then", which will affect the production's reception.

Audience foreknowledge of the text can be a useful element to manipulate in revival practice as it encourages audience members who already know the story to pay more attention to performance elements. Marvin Carlson argues that

one of the most important effects of drama's recycling of material is that it encourages audiences to compare varying versions of the same story, leading them to pay closer attention to how the story is told and less to the story itself. (Carlson 2003: 27)

The original Broadway production had used a large-scale set complete with "an actual Rhode Island iron foundry", which towered over the stage to suggest the enormity of the industrial machine over the individual worker (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: xviii). In contrast, the revival set was intimate and bare with a row of chairs to each side of the stage for the players to sit in during the performance, a piano set into the backdrop underneath shelves which stored all the props used during the production, a ladder used to create levels during the performance, and a large black coffin centre-stage from which Todd emerged during the opening 'Ballad of Sweeney Todd'. The original's industrial scale became "stark to the point of skeletal" in John Doyle's revival with a cast of only ten actor-musicians, who remained on stage for the entirety of the production and told the story as they provided the instrumentation (Cavendish 2006: n.p.). Although the use of actor-musicians is not a new phenomenon, the practice had never been attempted in the staging of a Broadway musical, and this performance feature continues to define this particular revival. This element was an appropriation of Artaudian practice; in his 'Theatre of Cruelty', Antonin Artaud stipulated that musical instruments were to be "used as objects, as part of the set [...] they need to act deeply and directly on our sensibility" (Artaud 2001: 115). The object of this practice is "a theatre that wakes us up heart and nerves" (Artaud 2001:120), assaulting the senses to excite the audience from their passive position as spectators to engage completely with the performance and, in this instance, with its social critique. In the case of Doyle's revival, the assault of Artaudian theatre practice was well suited to re-radicalise the musical to suit the frustration and anger felt in the contemporary moment.

The radical shift in orchestration from a 27-piece pit orchestra to a 10-piece actor-musician ensemble served not only to discomfort audience sensibilities, but to emphasise certain aspects of characterisation. In classical music there is a long-standing tradition of using instruments to represent particular themes or characters. Arguably the most well-known example of

this is Sergei Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* (1936), in which the wolf is represented by French horns whereas Peter is represented by string instruments. Doyle's revival of Sondheim and Wheeler's musical perpetuated this tradition. For example, Johanna's status as ingénue was subverted by the instrument that she played – the cello – and the manner in which others were obliged to move around her. The cello was traditionally considered a highly sexually suggestive instrument due to its compromising playing position and its close association with the violin – the devil's own instrument (Gillett 2000: 111).¹⁰ The symbolic relevance of Johanna's instrument was particularly emphasised in the staging of 'Mea Culpa', the solo that Judge Turpin sings as he asks God for deliverance from his lust for Johanna; this scene was originally performed with the Judge kneeling downstage and flagellating himself. In the revival, Johanna was seated centre stage on top of the coffin underneath a single spotlight as she played the accompaniment for 'Mea Culpa'; her seated position in this scene meant that Turpin could stand directly behind her with his hands on her shoulders, manipulating her movements. This *mise-en-scene* is a powerful representation of Turpin's sexual desire for Johanna and the level of control he exerts over her. Judge Turpin and his beadle play trumpets, which are historically masculine instruments. Trumpets are also used to sound fanfares and therefore have a rather self-aggrandising association, which symbolises the hypocrisy of the social institutions represented by the characters as the embodiments of law and civic order; in other words, trumpets are an appropriate choice for those who blow their own. The revival's reliance on symbolism encouraged the audience to piece together the action on stage for themselves; this fragmentary comprehension, in a way, replicated the conditions of alienation being felt across society in a confused and frustrated era of American history.

The revival received two Tony Awards (Best Orchestration and Best Direction), but critics determined to measure the success of the production, not by critical acclaim, but by its ability to shock. One reviewer remarked that

no previous production of *Sweeney Todd* has had such a high quotient of truly unsettling horror or such a low quotient of conventional stage spectacle [...] yet this concentration of resources only tightens both narrative pull and emotional focus. (Brantley 2005: n.p.)

Where the murders in the Harold Prince production had been animated with the spurting out of stage blood from a victim, who then dropped dramatically from the barber's chair through a trap door, the murders in the John Doyle production were pared down. At each death the stage was washed with red light and one of the by-standing actors poured a bucket of stage blood into another bucket in a striking reference to Peter Brook's *Marat/Sade* (1967) and its Artaudian presentation.¹¹ The staging of the deaths in this production used a non-verbal symbolic gesture and thus encouraged the audience to decode the visual performance which, theoretically speaking, should excite an audience from their passivity and encourage them to actively consider the social commentary the piece is offering, instead of letting the musical wash over them. It was the production's austerity – a performance mode that had not been witnessed in a musical on Broadway up to this point – that had enabled its “truly unsettling horror” to manifest. This disruption of expectations of what a Broadway musical should be, of what a production of *Sweeney Todd* should be, and what was actually being presented to audiences, managed to reposition the text in performance.

There is a need to recognise that between the revivals of *Sweeney Todd* there is an apparent dialogue of re-radicalisation emerging. As *Sweeney Todd* is revived, practitioners make drastic changes in the performance of the text in order to revive, reinvigorate, and re-radicalise its social critique for each subsequent audience who, by the frequency of revivals, have an increasing familiarity with the musical. In the reviews Doyle was heralded as “the man who changed the face of the American musical” (Gardner 2008: n.p.); this moniker was also used to describe Stephen Sondheim in relation to the original production of *Sweeney Todd*. Accepting that both productions were radical, but also that they were of their time, it is necessary that each iteration should be understood as part of a larger dialogue of adaptation and revival.

5. Coda: The Continued Afterlives of *Sweeney Todd*

Hollywood took control over the next significant revival of *Sweeney Todd* when Tim Burton's film adaptation brought the musical to a new audience worldwide in 2007. This success was due partly to the popularity of the leading actor, Johnny Depp, and of Tim Burton's trademark Gothic cartoon

style in films, such as *Beetlejuice* (1988), *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) and, more recently, *Corpse Bride* (2005). Several neo-Victorian critics have noted the biting Marxist satire of the film adaptation of *Sweeney Todd*, but significant changes to the musical to some extent diminished much of the scathing austerity of the preceding 2005 revival (see Poore and Jones 2008/2009; Freer 2008/2009; and Weltman 2009). The stage musical had utilised Brechtian, in the case of the original Broadway production, and in 2005 Artaudian alienation techniques that present the audience with a relentless barrage of Marxist critique with regard to the dehumanisation of the working classes that the medium of film struggles to recreate. For example, the framing, often reprised, ‘Ballad of Sweeney Todd’ that punctuates the musical with its insights on Sweeney’s vengeance on the hypocritical institutions of the bourgeoisie – “freely flows the blood of those who moralize!” (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 2) – is omitted entirely from the film. Benjamin Poore and Kelly Jones regard this omission as a “bold step” taken in order to “aestheticize the gore rather than critically comm[ent] on it” (Poore and Jones 2008/2009: 45); this aestheticising seems like a move toward the commercial nostalgia of other neo-Victorian musicals that has been vehemently criticised by theatre critics and neo-Victorian scholars alike.

In the dialogue of re-radicalisation that emerges between revivals, the film functions as a mediator between the stark austere revival of 2005 and the opulent grandeur of the 2014 concert – a grandeur which is systematically undermined during the proceedings. The unifying feature of these stage revivals was their determination to alienate the audience; in contrast, the film invited its audience into the world of the musical. In the film, as Poore and Jones observe, “characters sing in a more self-consciously ‘pop’ style, where notes can fade to a whisper or be croaked and mumbled” (Poore and Jones 2008/2009: 10); this shift in vocal performance draws an audience in, as they are no longer responding to a belted musical number, but instead they become complicit in the characters’ lives through mumblings and secrets. Arguably, in the original Broadway production and in the subsequent revivals, Todd’s direct address during ‘Epiphany’ is the most jarring instance of audience interaction; the aim of the sudden address, “You, sir, / How about a shave?” (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 80), in most stage productions is to startle the audience and to encourage them to engage with Todd’s epiphany with regard to the injustice of capitalist

society. Contrary to this direct approach, the film immerses the audience in Todd's thoughts. On the shouted line, "all right" (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 80), the film cuts from the narrative reality of Todd's barber shop to an imagined street scene. As Todd walks through this tableau he addresses each group of men, touting his razor, and shouting, but in each case he is greeted with no reaction. The effect of this is two-fold: firstly, it strengthens the complicity between Todd and the audience who are privy to his anger, and, secondly, it symbolises that wider capitalist society is blind to the suffering of the individual working man. The subjectivity shifts between stage and screen, as the audience is no longer implicated as part of the system that causes Todd's suffering; rather, spectators are united with him against those figures that ignore his screams. This empathetic rendering of *Sweeney Todd* functioned as an antidote to the austerity of Doyle's revival, instead seeking to foster camaraderie between protagonist and audience to aid the musical's critique of social injustice.

Just as Doyle's piece captured the anger of the contemporary moment, Burton's adaptation sought solidarity. In reaction to the 2007 film adaptation, Poore and Jones remarked that "it would be unfortunate if the success of Burton's film led to stage variations attempting to tone down the Brechtian, grotesque savagery in line with a new 'definitive' version" (Poore and Jones 2008/2009: 12). Thankfully, this does not seem to have happened – at least not in the most recent large-scale New York revival in 2014 – instead, the director Lonny Price expanded *Sweeney Todd* to an immense scale but then focused its energies on undermining this grandeur in performance. The production, billed as a 'semi-staged' concert alongside the 52-piece New York Philharmonic Orchestra and starring Bryn Terfel and Emma Thompson, ran for only five performances at the Avery Fisher Hall in March 2014. In the words of one reviewer, the revival started

[w]ith a wink toward the formalities of classical concerting, as the cast of principals lined up in front of music stands at the lip of the stage, clad in tuxedos and staid dresses, binders in hand, as if they were about to sing a little Schubert. (Isherwood 2014: n.p.)

This decorum was not to last, and what ensued left the "Gala audiences [that] tend to sit on their hands, saving their energies for the air-kissing over

dinner [...] flapping their fins from start to finish” (Isherwood 2014, n.p.). As the first verse of the opening ‘Ballad of Sweeney Todd’ finished, the cast – led by Terfel as Todd – started to dismantle the theatre, knocking over their music stands and ripping apart their formal attire; the chaos climaxed in the up-turning of the grand piano that had been centre stage on the beat of the bar that ends the chorus of “Sweeney!/Sweeney!/Sweeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeny!” (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 3). What is remarkable about this revival is that the staging had remained a secret until opening night, so that the deconstruction of the concert setting had seemed like an invasion of the tradition and the upper class associations of the space itself. There is some irony in the decision to stage the revival in this manner, as the formal concert setting affirmed the cultural capital of Sondheim and Wheeler’s work and the staged ‘anarchy’ was controlled and well rehearsed – an aspect of the revival’s theatrical process that seemingly undermines the critical aims of the original musical. The objective of this revival was to make *Sweeney Todd* relevant anew for a post-recession society where the gap between the rich and the poor was becoming increasingly wider.

The re-radicalisation of *Sweeney Todd* that was attempted in Price’s revival was a sustained exercise of subverting the performance space and its decorous traditions. During the production Thompson, as Mrs. Lovett, snatched the conductor’s baton from Alan Gilbert (conductor and musical director) repurposing it as a comb to fuss over Todd during her wistful ‘By the Sea’; she demanded that a double-bass player “get up, please” so that she could use his chair as Todd’s infamous barber chair; during ‘God, That’s Good’, Thompson took a fox-fur stole from an audience member, which she wore throughout the number as a marker of Mrs. Lovett’s new found wealth and social status. These moments undermined the grandeur of the concert proceeding by neutralising the immensity of the setting, thus capturing the musical text’s critical stand against bourgeois mores and privilege.

In reference to his vision for this *Sweeney Todd*, the director Price observed a “new relevance in the story for a new era. With increased awareness of financial inequality and class distinctions, *Sweeney Todd* and its view of classism in Victorian England is especially timely today” (Fox 2014: n.p.). For Price, the economic crises of the past decade had led to an increased significance of the social critique of *Sweeney Todd*, so that it “feel[s] more pertinent to me than it did in 2000” (Price qtd. in Fox 2014:

n.p.). In this recent revival, the immense scale of the performance situation was analogous to the scale of alienation the individual feels in contemporary society; this is the alienation that happens, in Price's words, "when people are lacking in basic needs" and when wider society will not provide (Price qtd. in Fox 2014: n.p.). The assault on the audience themselves, as representative members of an affluent section of society, reaches its pinnacle when, instead of being pushed into her own oven in the musical's final scene, Mrs. Lovett was pushed off the stage and into the audience. This act aggressively punctuated the call for observers, and society as a whole, to react to the critique that they had just witnessed in this 'timely' revival.

In any performance of *Sweeney Todd*, perhaps the image that stays with audiences long after they leave the theatre is the *mise-en-scene* in the bake-house that precedes the 'Epilogue'. Tobias, having slit Todd's throat with his own razor, turns to the meat grinder and begins to turn the handle. The musical finishes with the suggestion that, despite the death of Todd as one of Marx's owners of the means of production, the mechanistic wheels of capitalism are still turning – and grinding the flesh of the proletariat. This critique of social injustice is continued in the practice of revival, as the radical elements of the original are subsequently re-radicalised in performance, ensuring that the commentary remains as relevant and as damning for the contemporary audience. As a neo-Victorian musical, *Sweeney Todd* is a striking adaptation which offers a biting critique of capitalism that, unlike other musical adaptations, remains true to the proto-Marxism of its predecessor, the anonymous penny dreadful *The String of Pearls*. The radical nostalgia of *Sweeney Todd* is one that refuses to be dulled by the tastes of its commercial audience and one that refuses to be silenced. The neo-Victorian mode is used in musical theatre adaptation to create, but also bridge, a distance between the narrative of the production and contemporary society; neo-Victorianism serves as shorthand for exploitative present-day institutions or ideologies that are commonly attributed to the nineteenth century – in this case, capitalism. The persistent popularity of Sondheim and Wheeler's musical lies in the potency of its gory anti-capitalist critique. As we continue to live under capitalism and as the rich continue to exploit the poor, the musical will retain its relevance; thus, Todd's meat grinder will keep turning.

Notes

1. In response to the two theatrical revivals that this article mainly focuses on, critics have explicitly commented on the musical's lasting political relevance (see Brantley 2005 and Rooney 2014).
2. As Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn observe, in "an age of adaptation what comes into play is not only the dialogue between new text and old but also intertexts and interplays between different adaptations in their own right" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 212); in other words, neo-Victorian adaptations increasingly reference prior adaptations in addition to the source text.
3. See also Poore and Jones 2008/2009 and Weltman 2009 in this respect..
4. By 'proto-Marxism', I recognise that using Marx's theories on the relationship between man and machine and the mechanisation of the worker under capitalism, as found in *Capital* (1867), is anachronistic. As I hope to demonstrate, however, the treatment of the working man in *The String of Pearls* is so strikingly Marxist that its anticipation of the ideology warrants acknowledgment.
5. *The String of Pearls* is thought to have been written by James Malcolm Rhymer, although it has usually been attributed to Thomas Peckett Prest; current critical thought is that Rhymer was indeed the author.
6. For an exhaustive list of adaptations of the Sweeney Todd myth, see Mack 2007.
7. The notable exception to this is Christopher Bond's play *Sweeney Todd: the Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (1973); this adaptation introduced the revenge narrative followed by the musical into the Sweeney Todd canon.
8. The breaking of the fourth wall at this point in the production is certainly true for the 1982 DVD recording and the 2005 Broadway revival; in the 2014 revival, Bryn Terfel walked into the audience accosting punters as he progressed through the stalls.
9. Brantley continues his critique by specifically citing the 2003 Iraq War as a source of the growing frustration in a post-9/11 America.
10. In the nineteenth century, the choice of instruments women could play was dictated by whether the instrument itself would encroach upon feminine modesty. In 'The Fair Sex-tett' (1875), an illustration published in *Punch*, the cellist gives "a glimpse of a lifted skirt inside her right leg and the hint of her left knee on the other side of the cello suggest[ing] that she uses the male cellist's playing position, one that would be considered shocking for women players" (Gillett 2000: 111). The cello has also been used to suggest sexual

desire in contemporary musical theatre; the seduction of Jane Smart by the devil in *The Witches of Eastwick* (2000) takes place as she practices her cello. The scene climaxed with her seduction and the cello playing by itself.

11. The enduring image from Peter Brook's seminal production of Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade* is arguably the pouring of buckets of paint into the drains on the stage to represent various deaths. Peter Brook's production remains "a standard object of study" of hybrid Artaudian/Brechtian aesthetics (Williams 1994: 61-62). There are parallels to be drawn between Doyle's revival of *Sweeney Todd* and *Marat/Sade*, such as the performance of the play within the framing device of the lunatic asylum and the non-verbal affects characteristic of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty.

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