



May 8, 2016

Dr. David Z. Saltz
Head, Department of Theatre and Film Studies
Executive Director, Ideas for Creative Exploration (ICE)
University of Georgia
Athens, Georgia 30602-3154

Dear Dr. Saltz:

On Thursday April 14, 2016, I attended a production of Hugu Wheeler and Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* directed by Professor George Contini, in University of Georgia's Performing Arts Center. I am pleased to offer my response to his direction of the production.

I first note that *Sweeney Todd* is an iconic and beloved work in the canon of contemporary musical theatre, one that is known for its challenging score, emotionally demanding content, complex characters, and enormous staging, design, and technical theatre demands. The production I saw addressed these challenges successfully and offered a compelling evening of theatre. Professor Contini's rendition of *Sweeney Todd* reflected the work of an accomplished theatre director whose artistic leadership resulted in clear storytelling, visually compelling staging, clear characterizations, and interesting design choices of extremely high caliber.

The scenery, lighting, and costume designs were evocative and coherent. I attribute this to Professor Contini's clear vision and his collaborative skills. With the designers, he created a visceral world: gritty, textural, dark, violent, and frightening. The collage of rickety constructions with distorted angles and worn interiors composed of an array of found objects; the multiple levels, and the intricate properties accommodated the various locales in the text and the gruesome actions that unfold throughout the story. The multiple layers, textures, and distressed fabric that composed the costumes supported Professor Contini's vision of this grim and ramshackle world in like fashion.

The difficult score, and the huge range of character types, personalities, and ages in *Sweeney Todd* can be a daunting casting challenge for any director. I found Professor Contini's casting choices to be excellent matches for every character, both in terms of vocal demands and physical types. I noted in the program that most of the students in the cast were vocal majors. As a theatre director and educator, I appreciate the expertise involved in coaching singers to merge their vocal skills with the complex inner lives and heightened emotional stakes shared by the characters that inhabit this play. I discerned that the students had made significant strides in

capturing the stylized movements and larger-than-life emotions that are embedded in the book and the score. It was Professor Contini's job to ensure that the actors all committed to this stylized world—emotionally and physically. I commend him on his success in doing so.

The staging was exemplary as well. Professor Contini's use of the scenic space was masterful, detailed, and varied. He maximized the use of levels, horizontal, upstage and downstage space. His use of the apron so as to bring more intimate scenes closer to the audience was a very effective choice for the explicitly confrontational style of this work. The choice to have every design element present in the space that was needed to tell this story facilitated his direction of fluid and swift transitions from one scene to the next, a pacing that contributed to the dramatic tension. I found the second act staging to be particularly strong with Professor Contini's simultaneous arrangement of the asylum inmates moving throughout the nooks and crannies of the set, while the other characters were involved in the focal scenes. This image of multiple worlds colliding supported the mounting chaos as the story drew near its conclusion. Another compelling choice included the use of huge doors in the extreme upstage wall of the theatre from which emerged the ensemble at the beginning of the production. At the end of the play, Professor Contini created a bookend for this choice when the ensemble retreated through these doors into an environment of vivid red light—a fitting and highly theatrical conclusion to the bloodbath that we have witnessed.

In closing, I was impressed and inspired by the high quality of work in this production, a level of quality that I attribute to Professor Contini's expert guidance. This production of *Sweeney Todd* documents a sustained and accomplished career as a theatre educator and artist who knows his discipline and practices his art with skill, insight, and professional standards. I am proud to have Professor Contini as a colleague and role model in university theatre.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Karen Robinson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, decorative flourish at the end.

Karen Robinson
Professor and Assistant Chair
Department of Theatre and Performance Studies
Kennesaw State University