

NORTHWEST HERALD

‘Sweeney Todd’ at Raue promises to be ‘enormous’

By JAMI KUNZER – jkunzer@shawmedia.com | October 23, 2013

Opening Oct. 25, Sweeney Todd features one of the most elaborate sets ever created at the Raue Center for the Arts.

It’s a musical bound to thrill, say those involved.

“If people come see it, it’s going to blow them away,” said Amanda Flahive, who plays “Mrs. Lovett” in the production. “It fills the Raue Center. It’s enormous.”

Along with 8 p.m. Oct. 25, “Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street” takes place at 8 p.m. Oct. 26 and 31, Nov. 1-2; and at 3 p.m. Oct. 27 at the Raue, 26 N. Williams St., Crystal Lake.

Presented as Williams Street Repertory’s first full-stage production of the season, the show features a three-story set, reaching roughly 16 feet above the stage.

“This is on a scale that has not been seen at the Raue Center,” said Flahive, of Hoffman Estates, who has performed in nine shows at the theater and works as program manager and instructor for the Raue’s Sage Studio workshops.

Filled with dark humor, the musical tells the Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler story of a murderous barber who returns to 19th century London seeking revenge against the judge who framed him and ravaged his young wife. His thirst for blood expands to include his customers.

As Mrs. Lovett, Flahive plays the proprietress of the pie shop downstairs, who has the people of London lining up in droves with her mysterious new meat pie recipe.

“This is a bucket list role for me,” she said. “This is a role that I always wanted to play and probably one of the best written roles for a woman in musical theater. It’s a really complex and incredible character full of drama and humor and kinds of emotion actors are dying to play with.”

Featuring one of Sondheim’s best musical scores, audience members are bound to leave humming, those involved say. Perhaps not as apparent in the musical, which became a 2007 feature film starring Johnny Depp, is the rich humor in the script.

“One of the things I don’t think people realize is there’s a lot of humor in the show,” Director Mark Mahallak said.

“It definitely is kind of a black comedy. Believe it or not, they do find a lot of humor in the subject matter.”

As he prepared for the show, Mahallak said he knew he wanted it to have an industrial look as London had during that time period. It was a dank, dark, murky world, he said.

He also wanted to represent the period’s strong separation of classes, and that’s how the multiple-level set emerged. Because the set has been built into the stage, pieces will not have to be moved on and off during the show, creating more of a flow, he said.

Flahive said she has enjoyed exploring the character and working with Rob Scharlow of Woodstock, who plays Sweeney Todd in his first Williams Street Repertory production.

Scharlow called the show and its production quality “massive” and his role “challenging.”

“It’s a very, very brooding character,” he said. “It’s one of the hardest roles I’ve had to do.”

A favorite story of his since childhood, Scharlow said most are familiar with the film.

“To see it live and not on the big screen, it has so much more of an impact,” he said. “It’s a beautiful piece of theater. It’s a musical thriller and it’s going to give you everything you’re hoping to see.”

Formed in 2010 as the Raue’s in-house theater company, Williams Street Repertory has strived to attract regional and national attention and push the envelope. Along with “Sweeney Todd,” its third season will include productions of “It’s a Wonderful Life: A Radio Play,” “She Loves Me” and “Barefoot in the Park.”