Mitch's latest movie review for us here at TCF is on "Sweeney Todd" a flick that Mitch just flat out loved. It's done by Tim Burton, the man who has turned macabre into an Art Form, and Mitch says that he has found the perfect vehicle for his twisted visions in the form of one of the most violent, bloody, depressing, and beautifully scored musicals to hit the stage. Mitch says this one isn't for everyone, but that doesn't stop him from giving this film a rating he rarely doles out.

I don't normally do this, but I am going to break tradition and give out my rating of this movie right away:

Bernie Kosar (4 Footballs).

It is that good.

It is also a movie that I would not recommend to most people. The average movie-goer is going to hate it.

If you still shake your head and wonder how "Chicago" could win the

Best Picture Oscar; stay away.

If you would rather shave your head with a cheese grater than sit through "Phantom of the Opera" or "Rent", avoid this like the plague.

However, if you have an appreciation of musicals, and a love of excellent movies, this is something you need to see. Tim Burton, the man who has turned macabre into an Art Form, has found the perfect vehicle for his twisted visions in the form of one of the most violent, bloody, depressing, and beautifully scored musicals to hit the stage, Steven Sondheim's twisted tale of revenge; "Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street".

The 1979 stage show took the theater world by surprise. Sondheim started as a lyricist for some of the greats, including working with Leonard Bernstein to put together one of the all time classics; "West Side Story". His first stab at doing both music and lyrics was the hit Broadway farce "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum" in 1962. From there, his stature grew, and as he was given more freedom, he started writing more daring scores adapted from books that took a much deeper look into the human psyche than your standard light Broadway musical.

"Sweeney Todd" was the culmination of that migration away from the happy/schmaltzy fare seen in the ‘50s and ‘60s with shows such as "My Fair Lady" and "Oliver!". The end of the ‘70s was a time ripe with cynicism, and Sondheim's musical fit perfectly into that time frame, becoming a huge success that has run off and on for years.

But to anyone that has seen the stage show, it was not something one could possibly imagine being converted into a movie. The mood is too dark, the music is too hard (a Sondheim tradition...one must be practically a trained opera singer to handle it), and it runs too long (the stage show is over three hours).

Enter Tim Burton, and the man who is his extension on screen, Johnny Depp. Bolstered by Sondheim's collaboration and input, Burton was able to trim away an hour from the stage show by concentrating on the central characters, and removing large chorus pieces that weren't necessary to advance the plot (although they did sound nice). Burton's love of putting gothic touches everywhere works perfectly here in a 19th Century London that looks as grimy, damp, and hopeless as anything Charles Dickens ever imagined.

Johnny Depp may have been in a rock band in his younger days, but he wasn't exactly the vocal powerhouse normally selected for this role, nor was Helena Bonham Carter (Burton's partner and the mother of his children). But Sondheim agreed that powerful acting was much more important than powerful voices, which was the smartest decision that could be made.

Depp simply amazes as Sweeney Todd, a simple barber originally named Benjamin Barker who, as the movie begins, is returning to London after a 15 year banishment to Australia. A lustful and powerful judge had feasted his eyes upon the young man's beautiful wife, and had him exiled on a false charge. Now possessing a shock of white in his Burton-esque wild hair, Sweeney is no longer the naïve, gentle fellow he was before, but a hollow-eyed personification of rage and desire for revenge. He sets shop at his former place of business over a meat pie store owned by Mrs. Lovett, finds his silver barber blades, and gets to work plotting his vengeance.

Things don't work out as he would like, as he learns his wife poisoned herself, and his daughter is now the ward of the judge (Alan Rickman, in full slimeball mode), who has his lecherous eyes on her. After dealing with a charlatan out to blackmail him (an understated performance by

Sacha Baron Cohen), and a missed chance to strike at the judge, Sweeney snaps, singing out "they all deserve to die".

This is where the film takes a big turn towards horror. Mrs. Lovett's meat pies had been described as "the worst in London"...so with meat scarce, she comes up with a plan for disposing of the bodies that Sweeney dispatches without a hint of remorse. Dark humor is served in a heaping portion with the pathos as Mrs. Lovett becomes the toast of London with her now "wonderful pies" that people just can't get enough of ("try the priest", they sing in one of the most disturbingly funny songs in the show). However, the success of her business still cannot give Mrs. Lovett what she really desires; the affection of Sweeney. He doesn't reject her advances, he is simply oblivious to her pining, being totally focused on his bloodlust.

In the meantime, the darkness and despair of Sweeney are counterbalanced by Anthony, the young sailor who befriended Sweeney on the trip back to London. Once in the city, he comes across the barber's lovely young daughter Johanna, and falls in love with her, vowing to save her from the clutches of the evil judge and his sadistic henchman, Beadle Bamford (Timothy Spall, making his 100th appearance as an evil sidekick. The man has no worry about job security).

That's a lot of plot for a two hour movie...especially considering the fact that it is 90% sung. Sondheim's music is wonderful, and Depp handles it well in his light baritone, delivering a rock singer's force not heard from the standard Broadway tenor...much to the betterment of the film. Bonham Carter's

voice is a bit too thin for the part made famous by Angela Lansbury, but she makes up for it with her acting, as does Rickman. When the film needs some truly amazing voices, they are supplied by the young people playing Anthony, Johanna, and Toby, the workhouse boy devoted to Mrs. Lovett. Jamie Campbell Bower, Jayne Wisener, and Ed Sanders astound you with their vocal skills.

Still, this movie is carried entirely by the bravura performances of Depp and Bonham Carter. The evil genius of Burton is visualized by Depp in the pessimism and sadness always present behind the anger. Depp's soft rendition of the song "Pretty Women" is a heartbreaking lament to what all was lost due simply to the beauty of his wife, and through it you can see the slightest glimpse of humanity in what is now a serial killer. But those glimpses are fading as Sweeney finds that he's losing himself more and more to the monster within.

There are pieces of sly humor splattered about the film, but most of the splattering is in the eye-diverting throat slashings, and then the ear-covering body dumpings from a secret tunnel down to the stone floor of the cellar. This is NOT a film for anyone under the age of 13, as it has well earned its "R" rating. Nor is it a happy film. This is very different from "Dexter" on Showtime. The joy of watching that show is that the serial killer has morals and a conscious, and watching him try to balance them with his

homicidal desires. Those human traits are absent in Sweeney (although he doesn't kill people that ‘would be missed', but that trait is more due to a desire not to be caught).

No...it is not an uplifting experience. But it is completely original, and completely compelling. And the best Tim Burton film I have ever seen.