

sweeney todd



DAVID ALLEN STUDIOS

Sweeney Todd cast member Lauren Molina (far left) thinks her ability to play multiple instruments, including the cello, helped her land the part of Johanna.

The demon barber brings his meat pies to Cincinnati in a surprising new adaptation

RODNEY WILSON | CIN WEEKLY CONTRIBUTOR

Back in 2005, when Lauren Molina auditioned for a role in *Sweeney Todd*, the title didn't inspire people to picture a corpse-like Johnny Depp — in fact, it was more likely to conjure up images of Angela Lansbury, who appeared in the original stage production (perhaps a clue to why Jessica Fletcher never seemed surprised when dead bodies kept showing up around her).

While the film adaptation has brought the demon barber a much larger audience, it by no means discounts the stage musical, which has undergone some changes from the days when Mrs. Potts was baking those strange meat pies.

A MULTITALENTED ACTRESS

"I came to New York in 2003 after graduating from the University of Michigan," says Lauren Molina, who plays *Sweeney Todd*'s daughter, Johanna, in John Doyle's adaptation of the musical, which is touring as a part of Broadway Across America. "I was just trying to make it as an actress and singer."

Molina is more than your average pie-eyed actress and singer in the big city. A multi-instrumentalist with experience on cello, guitar and more, Molina comes from a pedigree that many hopefuls would kill for — her parents met at CCM, and both have successful careers in the performing arts.

"I grew up in a very artistic household," she

JUST THE FACTS

WHAT: *Sweeney Todd*, presented by Broadway Across America

WHERE: Aronoff Center for the Arts, Procter & Gamble Hall, 650 Walnut St., downtown

WHEN: 8 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday and 1 and 6:30 p.m. Sunday, now through March 2

PRICE: \$20-\$60

PARKING: Parking garages and lots are located nearby. Valet parking is available at the northeast and southeast corner of Seventh and Walnut streets for \$7.

CONTACT: 513-241-7469 or www.broadwayacrossamerica.com

says.

Her artistic background paid off when she saw an audition call for an interesting adaptation of Steven Sondheim's murderous musical.

"I saw the audition for *Sweeney Todd* that called for a Johanna that played the cello, bass and piano and I knew that it was perfect," she says. "I went in and, after five auditions culminating in performing for Steven Sondheim's approval as he sat five feet away from me with a smile on his face — it was kind of like performing for a musical theater god, very surreal — I won the part."

SIDE TOUR

Lauren Molina will be portraying the murderous Sweeney Todd's daughter, Johanna, when Broadway Across America's touring show stops in Cincinnati. She'll also be in town as herself - promoting her new album, *doo-be-doo*, which she describes as "quirky folk pop, with a lot of songs that are bittersweet with a touch of whimsy and playfulness."

The multi-instrumentalist sings and plays guitar, cello, ukulele and much more on the album, which will be available at performances. Also check out www.laurenmolina.com to see if she'll be playing her songs at any local venues while in town.

MOVIE MEAT PIES ARE DIFFERENT

Sweeney Todd is the darkly comic tale of a man who, driven by revenge, murders his enemies in a barber shop, cutting their throats during too-close shaves and disposing of the bodies through the pie shop downstairs. (Here's a tip: Don't eat Mrs. Lovett's meat pies.) And though Tim Burton's big-screen adaptation has introduced scores of moviegoers to the morbid tale, Molina is quick to point out that this production is different from anything else out there.

"The concept is very unique in that all of the actors are also the musicians and singers - there is no additional orchestra," she explains. "It's all contained, and the 10 actors that appear on stage never leave the stage. There's only one set with very few pieces that sort of shift and slip and turn and, because it's so minimal, really forces the audience to use their imagination. ... It's very sparse and pared-down, which also creates a very eerie, creepy feel - perfect for *Sweeney Todd*."

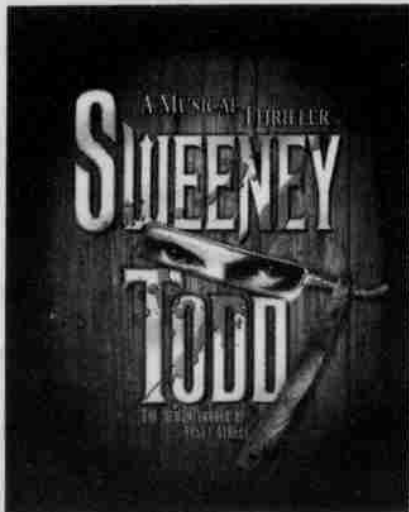
The touring production varies from most big Broadway productions, which rely on lavish sets and numerous costume changes to keep audiences entertained. In comparison, this version of *Sweeney Todd* is more like an avant-garde chamber piece.

"It's sort of artsy and challenges the audience," she says. "John Doyle actually said in rehearsal that we shouldn't treat our audience as unintelligent people, that we should think that they are educated enough to digest material - we shouldn't dumb anything down. I think that too often in musical theater, things are dumbed down for audiences."

And for those who think seeing the movie in theaters means seeing it all, Molina predicts a pleasant surprise.

"I think the movie is much different than our production. There are constant surprises, like in the way that the music connects to the piece - because we're all playing our own instruments, the instruments essentially become extensions of our own characters. So when, for example, Johanna is frightened, she ducks behind her cello and that becomes her voice.

"It's very, very different. The music in *Sweeney Todd* is epic and one of the greatest scores of the twentieth century. It is not to be missed."



PROVIDED

The version of *Sweeney Todd* on stage at the Aronoff Center is much different from the movie.