

# Jersey teens are bloody magnificent in NJPAC production of 'Sweeney Todd'

By [Peter Felicia/The Star-Ledger](#)

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Warren WesturaJaclyn Ingoglia and Kevin Melendez star in the NJPAC/NJYT production of "Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street."

The parents of the kids who appear in the New Jersey Youth Theatre aren't the only ones who will rave about their most recent production.

So will most everyone else.

Year after year, theater director Cynthia Meryl's astonishing corps of actors comes to the Victoria Theatre in Newark and proves the old adage: If you don't tell kids that something is impossible, they just go out and do it.

And, after doing it this week in Newark, these talented teens and twenty-somethings will move to the Algonquin Arts Theatre in Manasquan for a July 31 to Aug. 9 run. That's fitting, for such a magnificent effort should be seen by as many people as possible.

Tackling Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler's neoclassic musical "Sweeney Todd" with high schoolers and college kids would seem the hardest imaginable task. The voices needed to accomplish this frightfully difficult score range from the lowest of bass notes to the loftiest of sopranos.

Considering how many Meryl finds on an annual basis, New Jersey must lead the nation in producing glorious voices. An audience won't hear a single wrong note, and will be thrilled by the hundreds of right ones sung in this three-hour marathon performance. Three dozen performers skillfully present the story of a barber seeking revenge on the judge who separated him from his wife and daughter.

Right from the start, this production surpasses the last two Broadway revivals in offering more musicians; there are 27 on hand to play Sondheim's fascinating music. And they do so impressively.

An audience is also rewarded with more of the score than it got in the 2007 film version of "Sweeney." Meryl has reclaimed the half-dozen or so songs that the movie omitted. What Meryl excludes -- wisely -- is the film's excessive gore. In this production, we still understand that throats are sliced, but Meryl spares us the flowing blood. She lets Alexander Fogel's excellent atmospheric lighting provide the red tints.

Over the last two years, Kevin Melendez has proved he's the state's strongest young musical theater performer (via Billy Bigelow in "Carousel" in 2007 and John Adams last year in "1776"). Here, as Sweeney Todd, he easily retains that crown. With a sneer worthy of Elvis, he simmers through the first act before exploding in the second. As Mrs. Lovett, his accomplice in murder, Jaclyn Ingoglia portrays the character's immorality so superbly that she just seems to be another wife who's taken up her husband's hobby. Ingoglia also sings and speaks Cockney so well it might be her first language. Even such an atypical musical as "Sweeney Todd" has young lovers. Stephen Mir and Eryn LeCroy both sing wonderfully as Anthony and Johanna; he's careful to provide the right naivete, while she contributes the correct degree of frustration.

"Sweeney Todd" never included much choreography, but Meryl and her associate, Sherry Alban, make the scenery dance. As if the chorus doesn't have enough to do, dozens of kids are entrusted with moving staircases and platforms around the stage -- and never make a false move while setting them in place.

New Jersey Youth Theatre has now raised the bar so high, it's at field goal level. What can the company possibly do to top this -- "The Ring Cycle"