

EMPANADA LOCA

BY AARON MARK

INSPIRED BY THE LEGEND OF SWEENEY TODD

★ Revised Edition



DPS
DRAMATISTS PLAY SERVICE

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For Daphne Rubin-Vega

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to Abby Weston-Mark, Tommy and Luca Costanzo, Danny Feldman, Michael Growler, Tom Hewitt, Zachary Isaacson, Bradley King, Jennifer McCabe, David Meyer, Jim Nicola, Mimi O'Donnell, Melissa Orton, Lily Perlmutter, Brandy Rivers, Haleh Roshan, Ryan Rumery, Kevin Snipes, Lindsey Turteltaub, Ross Weiner, and Kristine Zbornik.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

On This Revised Edition

Since the initial publication of this play, a hell of a lot has happened in the life of the unkillable Dolores. She's popped up all over the place, including in a production in Taipei during the height of the pandemic, in my hometown of Houston, Texas, and in Majestic Repertory Theatre's fantastic production in Las Vegas that I was lucky enough to see. I also adapted Dolores' story into the Gimlet Media/Spotify podcast *The Horror of Dolores Roach*, and then again into a Blumhouse TV series of the same name, which as of this spring 2023 revision is about to launch on Amazon Prime Video.

This revised edition of *Empanada Loca* isn't intended to retroactively replicate Dolores' podcast or TV incarnations onstage; the play is very much its own piece. But unlike a podcast or a TV show, a play is a living, breathing thing, and there are characterizations I believe were true to Dolores when we premiered Off-Broadway in 2015 that simply don't ring true now. She would've evolved, as she has each time we've revisited the character for a new medium in a different moment in time. The adjustments made for the edition you're holding are made in the hope that the play can be set now, not strictly in 2015.

Additionally, as in the original, this text has Dolores in prison for thirteen years — though in subsequent iterations, that number of years has grown. I encourage you to adjust the length of her incarceration to best suit the age of the performer playing Dolores, as well as the length of time she's been in hiding underground. And should you feel your production requires any adjustments in addition to what I've included here, please don't hesitate to get in touch with me through DPS. If a play is a living, breathing thing, then so is this text.

On the Source Material

Empanada Loca is not drawn from the 1970 Christopher Bond adaptation of Sweeney Todd, which was famously the basis for the Sondheim/Wheeler musical. *The String of Pearls*, the original 1850 penny dreadfuls by James Malcolm Rymer, and the melodrama of the same name by George Dibdin Pitt were the primary sources for Dolores' story in *Empanada Loca*, though at the end of the day her story in fact differs more from these first incarnations of Sweeney than even Bond's rendering does.

I have also drawn from countless retellings that have been created over the last hundred-plus years, so *Empanada Loca* is less an adaptation of a particular Sweeney Todd than it is a contemporary New York story roughly suggested by an apocryphal Victorian premise.

On Playing the Character

Yes, Dolores accidentally-on-purpose becomes a serial killer, but it's crucial that she not be approached as merely a "villain." What makes Dolores particularly dangerous is how seductively lovable she is. As such, the graphic descriptions of sex and violence can be some of the most simply played moments in the play. These are Dolores' moments of hypnotic trauma recall, not her attempts to shock or intimidate us.

Though Dolores is monologuing out front, there is nevertheless unquestionably a fourth wall, and it should always be clear she's talking to a specific visitor who is *not* the audience. Commit to a single focus or the final reveal will feel like a cheat.

Above all, remember this: What drives the play is her desperate need to keep her visitor in the room. Dolores is inhumanly lonely and deliriously hungry. Therefore, *pace*. If you're running over ninety minutes, you're not talking fast enough.

On Producing the Play

In designing and staging *Empanada Loca*, remember that while the play itself takes place underground in an abandoned subway tunnel, ninety percent of the *story* does not. Whatever Dolores is surrounded by must be innocuous and deceptively uninteresting enough to be quickly forgotten, allowing us to be mentally transported seamlessly out of the tunnel and into Dolores' story. That's not to say the physical production can't be realistic, only that it should be uncompromisingly spare. Careful not use the design to answer practical questions about the Mole People that the play doesn't ask; it will only distract us. Less is more.

Strongly resist any urge to indicate mood or plot with lighting changes, additional sound effects, projections, or even much blocking. Put Dolores on the massage table and let her talk. Again, less is more. It's so much more intimate (and much more disturbing) if the story lives in our own imaginations as much as it does in the room with her.

EMPANADA LOCA was originally produced by Labyrinth Theater Company (Mimi O'Donnell, Artistic Director; Danny Feldman, Executive Director), opening on October 21st, 2015. It was directed by Aaron Mark; the costume advisor was Michael Growler; the scenic design was by David Meyer; the lighting design was by Bradley King; the sound design was by Ryan Rumery; and the production stage manager was Lily Perlmutter. The play was performed by Daphne Rubin-Vega.

CHARACTERS

DOLORES, Latina, late thirties/forties

The actress playing Dolores also plays:

DOMINIC, thirties, Dolores' boyfriend

GIRL, twenties, in Dolores' old apartment

DEALER on the street

HOUSELESS MAN outside Empanada Loca

NELLIE, sixteen, works at Empanada Loca

LUIS, thirties/early forties, owns Empanada Loca

JONAH, early thirties, the new landlord

MARCIE, forties, a customer

EMPANADA LOCA

The lights flicker out during the almost deafening sound of a New York subway train approaching, passing, and leaving without stopping. A moment in total darkness. Then another train, this one farther away. Then another moment in the dark, longer this time. Then an abrupt, distinct metal clang from behind us, as if someone accidentally hit a pipe.

DOLORES. *(In the dark.)* Who's that.

Beat.

Who's that. You alone?

Beat.

Is that a cop? You a cop?

If it's a cop, better tell me now.

I have perfect aim in the dark, I see like a cat, I hear like a fuckin' bat, I can hit you right between the eyes, knock you out like it's nothing. But I don't wanna jump to any conclusions, I'm not that kinda person.

Dolores steps partially into a shaft of light, trying to make out something in the dark. She wears a black hoodie with the hood up.

Oh shit, sorry! I thought you were from the others! You see the others? When you came underground?

Don't be scared. Look —

She puts the rock she's holding on the ground.

See? I'm not gonna hurt you.

She steps out of the light.

They chased me out, too, when I first came down. Wouldn't even feed me, nothin'. I would share if I could, but food's really fuckin' bad this far underground.

She climbs up a ladder on the back wall.

Up on the first level, closer to the train tracks, they can go Topside — you know, above ground — at night — And get the leftovers, from nice places, too, nice places in Grand Central and shit. But this far down ... Makes me miss prison food. Sometimes.

From atop the ladder, she reaches out and tightens a hanging light bulb with one hand. Several bulbs go on at once, strung around her space. It's still very dark but we can now see we're in an abandoned New York subway tunnel. There's a purple massage table set up in the middle of the room and a metal trash can a few yards from it. Trash has been collected in a corner. She climbs back down.

But I thought — Sorry — 'Cause they still come down, sometimes they come, when they're expanding. They like this tunnel 'cause I got electricity — I set these lights up myself — And I got privacy, 'cause this is as far down as you can go. This is one of those tunnels the city gave up on before they even laid the tracks. Pretty much sealed it up. Those others, they sent this one girl by herself, they sent a girl to take my table, they never saw her again. This table went through a lotta shit with me, nobody's touching my fuckin' table.

She cleans a spot on her table.

So how come you had to come underground?

You can tell me, I don't judge. I'm only down here 'cause I'm not goin' back to prison. Thirteen years, they locked my ass up. You wanna sit down?

No?

You heard of me?

My name's Dolores, you heard about me? Up there?

I just thought maybe you heard of me 'cause you still look so fuckin' scared.

No, don't go, I didn't mean to — I'm sorry, I'm just by my-fuckin'-self down here, a female alone, man, so I gotta be on guard. But you're safer here with me than with those other motherfuckers, that's the truth.

Please don't leave me alone!

I really wasn't gonna hurt you, even if you *were* a cop. I actually got a lotta respect for cops, 'cause my mom was a cop, and I got her instinct for protecting people. She got shot, though. Got shot when I was nine years old. In a drug bust, funny enough. Not that it's funny, just fuckin' ironic.

You know what's ironic? I went to college too. I was gonna be a Urban Planner. Went to Hunter College for two years, I swear. I was gonna get certified too. I was gonna fix this fuckin' city, I really was. I was very ambitious before I met Dominic. But Dominic ...

She hops up on the massage table.

Well it was really 'cause I had this friend at Hunter, this Australian chick named Georgie, and she wants to buy some weed, right? And I'm a pretty good kid, I mean, I never bought it myself, so she gets some number from some guy, she has to pick it up on One-Fifty-Six Street. But I'm not gonna let her go alone, I mean, she's Australian, right?

So I go with her, and it's actually pretty fuckin' sketchy, this block's like *lined* with guys, all these dealers, right, up and down the block. And Georgie says we're lookin' for a guy with a purple hat. And I spot him first, he's standing on a stoop, not with any other guys. And he's got the smoothest cheeks, just smooth fuckin' skin, and his teeth are *perfect*, and he's big, like he's thick, right, not like the rest of the guys on the block, they're all like rail-thin or fat as fuck, but this guy with the purple hat ...

And I was always sorta into bigger guys, 'cause they make me feel small, you know, like they make me feel cute and shit. Even in prison, I had this crazy bitch, Tabitha, at Bedford Hills, she could pick me up, throw me around ...

Anyway, this guy with the purple hat, he takes us into the doorway of this building, and Georgie gives him the cash, and he gives her a little plastic bag, and she puts it in her bra, and he's like:

DOMINIC. "So you got my number now."

DOLORES. And then he looks right at me, these shiny green eyes, stops my fuckin' heart. He goes:

DOMINIC. "And you can get it from her. I'm Dominic."

DOLORES. And he shakes my hand and his fingers are like fuckin' sausages, and I'm imagining, you know ... Well, I'm imagining things.

And then I'm hangin' out with Georgie a lot, right, 'cause I wanna get through all this weed so we can call him up again. And then I tell her if she gives me the money, I'll go get it for us.

So I go. By myself. And I find the guy with the purple hat. Dominic.

And he takes me into the doorway, like before, and he goes:

DOMINIC. "Where's your friend?"

DOLORES. And I tell him she had to study, and he laughs at me, he goes:

DOMINIC. “Shit, how old are you?”

DOLORES. And I tell him I’ll be twenty-one soon, he goes:

DOMINIC. “I woulda thought you were older. You got a very knowing look, like a very wise, like ... look.”

DOLORES. And I give him the cash from Georgie, and he gives me a little bag, and I put it in my bra, like I saw her do, and he goes:

DOMINIC. “You gotta go study now too? Or you wanna — free sample?”

DOLORES. So I go upstairs with him, and his apartment is *nice*, and *spotless*, like not like I thought it was gonna be, ’cause the block is such a shithole. And I guess I look surprised ’cause he goes:

DOMINIC. “You wouldn’t believe the kinda money that comes through this block.”

DOLORES. And he pulls out this big red glass bong, he smokes me out. And I had boyfriends in high school, but I was always shy, like sexually, I never instigated anything ever, but here I am with Dominic and something — I’m like a whole other person, I just *leap* on him. And then I’m like, Oh wow, those boys I had sex with were *children*, they did *not* know whatever this shit is Dominic knows how to do. I never let anybody go down on me before Dominic. I never had a orgasm like that, like with Dominic, I swear. And you could get addicted to sex like that. You could. I did.

Not to make it sound like it was just the sex, ’cause I — And this is the thing you have to understand: I loved that man so fuckin’ much. And yeah, he’s a drug dealer, but I respected Dominic, okay? ’Cause he didn’t give a fuck what anybody wanted him to do. He didn’t give a fuck if anybody judged him, or didn’t like him, whatever. He had his life, he made his money. And he enjoyed himself. And he was really, really good to me.

’Cause my dad was drinking a lot by that time, like *a lot* a lot. My dad was a doorman on the Upper West Side — And that’s a pretty good job, believe it or not, ’cause he got benefits and good Christmas tips and shit — And he never went to work drunk before my mom got killed. And then he like *sorta* kept it under control till I went to college, but then — And I don’t think he was even a alcoholic, I just think he was fucked up ’cause his wife got shot. Anyway, my dad’s like holding doors for white folks with strollers all day, he can’t take care of me. Dominic took care of me. Dominic helped me study, Dominic rubbed my shoulders. Dominic cooked for me, my dad never cooked for me, my dad ...

I was the one who found him, too. Choked on his own vomit. He had eaten ... You know what, I can't even remember what it was he ... But he would just drink and drink and gorge himself, you know, just intake, intake, 'cause it's fuckin' America. He didn't even know he needed to stop. A shish kabob, that's what it was. Anyway, my dad choked on his own ... vomit.

So that's when I moved in with Dominic. 'Cause I had to drop out of college, I was pretty much falling the fuck apart, right, and now I gotta pay back my student loans, so Dominic's like:

DOMINIC. "Work for *me*. Work from home, pay your debt, save some money. You wanna fix the city? You don't need a fuckin' certification from some place that's never gonna get shit done anyway."

DOLORES. So I start dealing for Dominic. 'Cause I trust him. And I pay off my loans pretty quick. With cashier's checks, of course. Dominic never had a bank account. But there's a loose tile behind our toilet, you gotta dig it out with your nail, there's a hole in the wall, that's where the stacks are. The cash. Thousands and thousands of dollars. Nobody else knows about this but me. And this is our future, you know? We got a plan, me and Dominic. I mean, we're talkin' baby names, we're gonna buy a house in New Jersey and stop smoking weed and just start poppin' out kids. And this goes on for about five years. Happiest five years of my life.

But some shit finally went down. 'Cause that's what shit does. 'Cause there was a bust in the apartment down the block, where we keep our product when it comes in from California, that's where it gets parceled out before we sell it. And there was just a couple pounds left, but the guy who lived there got arrested. And he took the rap, 'cause that's what you do, shit goes down, you take the rap, 'cause business has to keep going.

So there's this new shipment coming, and Dominic says we'll keep it at our place — for now. And that definitely sounds risky to me, but he's like:

DOMINIC. "We got nothin' to worry about. They don't bust the same block twice in a row."

DOLORES. So fifty pounds of weed comes in, and we put it in the closet in our bedroom — Just for now. And he goes out, and I go meet this guy downstairs, a customer, he looks like any of us, but he wants to buy more than I got on me. And he's pretty friendly and I'm pretty fuckin' trusting, so I say he can come upstairs with me — I'm not gonna make somebody wait in the doorway 'cause that looks

The play doesn't end here...

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