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**SCENE-STEALER:** David Baida, the Piragua Guy in "In the Heights," stands just right of center with his piragua stand.



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PHOTOS COURTESY JOAN MARCUS

# He's 'born to be this part'

UCI voice major worked up courage to get part in New York play. Now, cast will perform it here in Orange County.

**BY CANDICE BAKER**

COSTA MESA — David Baida's heard it hundreds of times by now: "You were born to play that part."

But it nearly took a miracle for the actor to audition for the role.

After a run at Los Angeles' Pantages Theatre, Baida and the rest of the touring cast of the hugely successful Broadway musical "In the Heights" will debut at the Orange County Performing Arts Center on Aug. 3.

Set in New York's Washington Heights neighborhood, "In the Heights" brings three days in the life of its Dominican and Puerto Rican community to colorful, euphoric existence.

Baida's character is a scene-stealing, willfully optimistic piragüero (Puerto Rican shaved ice vendor) who, together with his push cart, constantly thwarts the ingresses of the rival Mr. Softee truck. For Baida, stepping onto the eerily realistic show set is like walking out his own front door.

"I myself live in Washington Heights," Baida said. "I lived there for a couple of years before I got this part. I see piraguas all the time and eat them, too. The Piragua Guy sort of represents the



**AUG. 3 TO 15:** Yvette Gonzalez, Isabel Santiago, Arielle Jacobs and Genny Lis Padilla in "In the Heights."

everyday man who's got his job and is struggling to make a living, and you see his sort of journey over those three days. Finally, he gets to have his moment in the sun."

The Piragua Guy is given a catchy tune to sing near the end of Act I that, like much of the show, is partially sung in Spanish.

"It's hotter than the islands are

tonight, and Mr. Softee's trying to shut me down," he sings. "But I keep scraping by the fading light; mi pana, this is my town."

"So many times, people have come up to me to say, 'I can't get your song out of my head,'" Baida said. "As we've gone throughout the United States, I never knew

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## If You Go

**What:** "In the Heights"

**When:** Aug. 3 to 15

**Where:** Orange County Performing Arts Center, Costa Mesa

**Cost:** \$20 and up

**Information:** [ocpac.org](http://ocpac.org)



Summer theater program will end with shows July 31

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Musical 'In The Heights' will soar at OCPAC in August

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## PART

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how the show would play somewhere like Appleton, Wis. — we really did perform there.”

People do seem to identify with his character, he said.

“They say, ‘I really appreciate the struggles that you went through,’” Baida said. “During the bows, they play my song. It’s really great. It’s not a huge part, but you make it memorable. You do what you can with what you’ve got.”

Although Baida relishes his role now, as well as the opportunity to travel the world, it almost required an act of God in order to see “In the Heights” onstage — let alone audition for it. Like some of the show’s characters, he had left his aspirations by the wayside.

“I didn’t know much about the show when it came out. I had been out of the business for about 10 years; I hadn’t done a musical since about 2001,” Baida said. “A friend called me when ‘In the Heights’ came out and said, ‘You have to audition for this show. It has your name written all over it.’ I had given up my Broadway dreams. But even my boss pestered me for about a year. He finally bought me a ticket to see the show. As much as I did love seeing it, I said I still wasn’t interested, and I was happy what I was doing.”

But when his friend called again to say auditions for “In the Heights” would be held at lunchtime in the near future, Baida swallowed his pride, paid his Equity back dues, and showed up — heart in hand — at the audition.

“Now here I am,” he said. “It’s pretty amazing. I was kind of thrust back into musical theater unexpectedly, and I had pretty much given up on myself. It just



**ROLE:** Actor David Baida is The Piragua Guy.

goes to show — sometimes your friends believe in you more than you do. It’s funny now because everyone says to me, ‘You were born to be this part.’”

Far from a New York native, Baida grew up in Orange County and attended UC Irvine, which he credits with giving him the bravery to go to New York to try his hand on the “Great White Way,” a nickname for a stretch of Broadway in Midtown Manhattan.

“UCI was a really great training ground for me,” Baida said. “I actually went to UCI as a voice major, so I studied classical voice for two years, and it was an amazing experience. It wasn’t really what I wanted to do, opera; I wanted to go into theater. So I switched to drama and loved it, and the great thing about UCI is that they have a great musical theater program there, so I did that and found that it was a perfect mix. “They have a program where you

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**David Baida**  
actor

study in New York for a month. Basically, I worked it out that I would graduate while I was there. I worked with amazing Broadway choreographers, dancers and voice teachers. That actually gave me the courage to audition there. I decided that if I got a job, I would stay. Thankfully, I did. I’ve been there 15 years.”

Baida grew up in Cerritos. His parents have since moved to Lake Elsinore.

“This show is my parents’ story, and I when I saw it, I knew that my parents were going to have a very gut-like reaction to it,” Baida said. “They didn’t get to see it until we opened in L.A. I wanted them to see me onstage at the Pantages. I wanted my parents to see that all their sacrifice for their kids were worth it.”

“To come back to Orange County and play the Performing Arts Center is a huge dream, and it’s a validation for me. That’s where I’m going to be turning 40, while I’m in town. My professors have written to me to say they’re coming, and some students from UCI came to see me at the Pantages.”

Baida said “In the Heights” has served to break down the barriers as to what defines a typical musical, as it’s full of average people as characters, as well as traditional Puerto Rican music and genres like hip-hop, meringue and salsa.

“You’ve never seen a Broadway

show that has that kind of songs,” Baida said. “It’s the same music I hear when I walk into the bodegas in Washington Heights. The music is part of the storytelling; it’s just brilliant the way it brings different kinds of Latin music into the show. I think it’s eye-opening for people who aren’t familiar with a lot of different types of music, who don’t even know what they’re listening to. That’s wonderful for us.”

“I think also that the most important thing for me, as far as breaking barriers, is that you get to see real Latin people portrayed on stage. What’s great about this show is that it’s full of recognizable people — beauticians and shaved ice salesmen. Nobody’s ever seen these kinds of characters onstage before. They’re everyday people who happen to be Latin in a Latin neighborhood.”

And for Baida, the fruits of his piraguero labors are evident every night.

“There have never been parts for me before,” he said. “To be featured in this way is wonderful. The kids come up to us after the show and go, ‘Thank you,’ or people say, ‘Oh my God, she looks like me; I could do that.’ That’s all they need; they see you’ve done it, so why can’t they? This is changing the game for me, and bringing me to a huge leap in my career. I’m very curious to go back to New York and see if people treat me differently because of this.”