

In the Heights @ Stages St. Louis

Music and Lyrics by Lin-Manuel Miranda

Book by Quiara Alegria Hudes

Running July 22 - August 21, 2022 @ The Kirkwood Performing Arts Center

Published August 17, 2022

In the Heights was the first musical Lin-Manuel Miranda ever wrote, eight years before his magnum opus, *Hamilton*. Right out the gate, audiences were hailing Miranda as a musical genius, with *In the Heights* winning the Tony Award for Best Musical and eventually being adapted into a feature film. Many critics were confounded by this, seeing how reviews for the Broadway production were rather mixed. However, after the premiere of *Hamilton*, folks began to re-evaluate *In the Heights* and see it for what it is rather than what it wasn't. The current production of the show from Stages St. Louis does the exact same thing: taking what people thought wouldn't work on Broadway and proving that, in fact, it can.

The confusion people have over the show's success comes from its deceptively simple plot. *In the Heights* is a slice of life story set in Washington Heights, a majority Latino neighborhood in Upper Manhattan. Our narrator and protagonist is Usnavi de la Vega, the son of two Dominican immigrants. After his parents died, Usnavi was raised by the neighborhood's kindly matriarch, *Abuela* Claudia. Now an adult, Usnavi runs a small bodega with his teenage cousin Sonny. Usnavi tells us the story of how his life and the lives of others from around the neighborhood became intertwined during a sweltering 4th of July weekend.

Across the street from the bodega is a taxicab service run by the husband-and-wife team of Kevin and Camila Rosario. One of their drivers, a young Black man named Benny, is smitten with the Rosario's daughter, Nina, the gifted "pride of the corner" who has just returned home from her first year at Stanford University with the unfortunate news that she dropped out. I will not spoil the events that unfold after she reveals this information to the block.

Next door to the bodega is a beauty salon run by the ever-gossipy trio Daniela, Carla, and Vanessa. The salon is preparing to move their location to the Bronx due to increasing rent hikes. Vanessa is the object of Usnavi's infatuation; she's an aspiring fashion designer trying to move out to Greenwich Village and make a name for herself.

Two other characters that liven up the block and help advance the main stories are the *Piraguero* who serves shaved ice treats while trying to compete with the local Mr. Softee truck, and Pete, Sonny's street artist best friend who can always be found spraying graffiti on the walls of the block.

In the Heights is very much an episodic story where the high-stakes conflict comes from everyday life, and the heroes and villains are ordinary people. Despite the fact that all we are seeing on stage is an eventful 4th of July weekend on a tiny corner of Washington Heights,

everything that happens on that corner means the world to our characters, and this production treats it as such. Every aspect of this show is high-energy, big-hearted, and full of life. Stages St. Louis crafted this production as an homage to the original Broadway production down to the last detail, and everyone involved does a fantastic job of making it look like a labor of love. Thanks to the leadership of director and choreographer Luis Salgado, the cast and crew took this recreation and straight-up owned it.

Ryan Alvarado as Usnavi is a perfect match for Lin-Manuel Miranda's rapid-fire, literary, hip-hop vocal stylings, while also bringing his own amiable charm to the forefront. His scenes with Luis-Pablo Garcia as Sonny allow for some really fun physical comedy, and his chemistry with Amanda Robles as Vanessa sparkles with warmth and determination. Tami Dahbura as *Abuela* Claudia radiates pure motherly love towards everyone she shares a moment with; under Dahbura's portrayal, Claudia's influence over Washington Heights is made clear right from the beginning. Edward Juvier as Kevin, Tauren Hagans as Camila, and Isabel Leoni as Nina accurately portray the pressures and fears that come from being a gifted family, as well as the struggles of trying to run a family business. Leoni's Nina and Jahir Lawrence Hipps as Benny play their relationship and conflicts with an impressive depth of feeling. Ariana Valdez and Marlene Fernandez as Daniela and Carla, respectively, are show-stoppers that deliver incredible comic turns. Michael Schimmele as the *Piraguero* and Christian Rodriguez as Pete round out the cast beautifully, getting a few moments to shine that earn just as many big reactions from the audience. All of the main cast members and the ensemble are incredible singers, and they capably perform Luis Salgado's jaw-dropping choreography, with some numbers based on the Broadway choreography by Andy Blankenbuehler.

The musical direction by Walter "Bobby" McCoy is superb, conducting a small but lively band that balances excellently with the singers, thanks to sound designer Bethany "Beef" Gratz. Anna Louizos, the scenic designer from the original Broadway production, was brought on board to recreate her design for Stages, and she does so with stunning, lively, and vivid detail, making Washington Heights a character all its own. Contributing to the visual splendor are Sean M. Savoie's dazzling lights and Brad Musgrove's colorful costumes.

In the Heights is a musical that definitely deserves to be seen right now: a story about the importance of following your bliss, of celebrating who you are, of taking pride in where you come from, and of fostering a community who will support and be with you no matter what. Stages St. Louis' production has been hailed as the best the company has ever put out. Personally, I have never seen any one of their productions before they moved into the Kirkwood Performing Arts Center. If this was their best work, I cannot wait to see how they will top themselves. ¡*Paciencia y Fe!*