

Theatre Review: 'In the Heights' at Aurora Theatre/Theatrical Outfit



(photo by Christopher Bartelski)

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By Manning Harris

"In the Heights," Lin-Manuel Miranda's joyful paean to life in Upper Manhattan's Washington Heights, is now holding forth at Aurora Theatre through Aug. 28; a co-production between Aurora and Theatrical Outfit, the show will transfer for a run at Atlanta's Rialto Center for the Arts, running there Sept. 8-18.

I'm sure you know that Mr. Miranda has become a cultural touchstone, probably the biggest name in show business, due to the phenomenal success of Broadway's megahit "Hamilton." If you can get a ticket, you're either very rich or very well-connected; in either case, I want to be your friend.

But before “Hamilton,” there was the completely charming “In the Heights,” which I was fortunate enough to see in its Off-Broadway incarnation in 2007, before it moved to Broadway and won a Tony for Best Musical, before Lin-Manuel Miranda was a household name.

It’s a sunny look in life in the Latin-American barrio in Washington Heights, with an infectious Latin-pop score by Mr. Miranda, who also wrote the lyrics. The book is by Quiara Alegria Hudes, who has become a playwright of note; I well remember her moving “Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue,” done a few years ago at the Alliance Theatre’s Hertz Stage.

I’ll say at the outset that the Off-Broadway “In the Heights” was hard to resist, a warmhearted light entertainment that had a casual, almost improvised feel to it.



(photo by Christopher Bartelski)

The show now playing at the Aurora has a highly polished, Broadway sheen to it in every way; the sound, the look, the crackling hip-hop, salsa, pop choreography by Ricardo Aponte—this production could transfer to The Big Apple right now, and I think Mr. Miranda himself would lead the cheering.

In other words, “In the Heights,” under the masterful direction of Justin Anderson and music direction by Ann-Carol Pence, with a dream cast, has become a thrilling show, and you must not miss it.

Usnavi is the prince of the barrio, played by Diego Klock-Perez in a performance as smooth as the café con leche Usnavi dispenses at his bodega, where many gather throughout the day to meet, greet, and get a little sustenance.

He and the company get things rolling in the snazzy opening number “In the Heights.” Usnavi has a major crush on the beautiful Vanessa (Julissa Sabino), who works in the beauty salon owned by the sassy Daniela (Lillianguina Quinones). Next door is the cab company run by Camila and Kevin Rosario (Maria Rodriguez-Sager and Anthony Rodriguez, whose daughter Nina (Diany Rodriguez) has just returned from Stanford University; Nina is worried about the economic stress her university life is causing her parents. But she’s the pride of the barrio: the first person to make it to a major university.

Abuela (which means “grandmother”) Claudia (Felicia Hernandez), the neighborhood matriarch, raised Usnavi, whose parents both died when he was a young child. Abuela is much loved, and she has a secret involving a lottery ticket she purchased at the bodega. You’ll have to see the show!

Benny (Garrett Turner) is the only character in the play who doesn’t speak Spanish; he’s also in love with Nina, whose parents (especially Kevin) would not approve for their daughter.

Ms. Hudes’ book may sound a tad convoluted, but in its live playing, “In the Heights” is crisp and clear; more than that, thanks to Mr. Miranda’s songs and a terrific cast (as mentioned), the show becomes a fortissimo explosion of joy and vitality.

There are no small parts, as you’ve heard. For example, Sonny (Christian Magby), Usnavi’s cousin; the Piragua Guy (Juan Carlos Unzueta); and Graffiti Pete (Joseph Pendergrass) all make the most of every second they’re onstage.

The leading players, whom I’ve mentioned above, give definitive performances. I shall single out Ms. Rodriguez and Ms. Sabino, simply because I’ve seen these actors in the past, and they are here giving breakout performances. Their singing and acting are exciting and moving. Shannon Robert’s great set is perfection; Courtney Flores’ costumes are witty and colorful.



(photo by Christopher Bartelski)

If you're looking for big city violence and despair, you won't find it here. The outlook is sunny and people, for the most part, care about each other. Mr. Miranda, who grew up "in the heights," has spoken of his happy childhood. It's on view here.

I saw "In the Heights" in the middle of the week, and it was completely sold out: a word to the wise; get tickets. You may even forget "Hamilton," for awhile.

For tickets and information, visit auroratheatre.com or theatricaloutfit.org.