



Review: Aurora, Theatrical Outfit deliver a dazzling ‘In the Heights’

ARTS & THEATER

By Wendell Brock - For the AJC



Diego Klock-Perez plays Usnavi in Aurora Theatre’s “In the Heights.” In the rear are Lillianguina Quinones, Julissa Sabino and India Tyree. The show is a co-production with Theatrical Outfit, which will stage it at the Rialto Center for the Arts in September.
CONTRIBUTED BY CHRIS BARTELSKI

In its 20 seasons in Gwinnett County, Aurora Theatre has put on a bunch of seriously good musicals, and a few that felt like a stretch.

“**In the Heights**,” the show that introduced Lin-Manuel Miranda to Broadway before “**Hamilton**” made him a household name, is a whole new ballgame for this theater.

It’s the musical Aurora has been waiting to do all its life: a dazzling, near-perfect achievement where the end

product lives up to the ambition that drives the theater's leadership, and where the hopes and dreams of a community are mirrored onstage.

It left me choking with emotion and swept up with joy.

Directed by Justin Anderson, it stars Diego Klock-Perez as Usnavi, a poetry-spouting, cool-rapping Washington Heights homeboy who is the soul of the 'hood.



Diany Rodriguez as Nina and Garrett Turner as Benny in Aurora Theatre's "In the Heights." CONTRIBUTED BY CHRIS BARTELSKI

Assisted by his younger cousin Sonny (Christian Magby), Usnavi runs the bodega that keeps the whole block caffeinated. He lives with Abuela Claudia, his Cuban grandmother (Felicia Hernandez), and pines for the eye-catching Vanessa (Julissa Sabino), who works in a beauty shop run by the sassy Daniela (Lillianguina Quiñones).

Just down the street, Kevin and Camila Rosario (Anthony P. Rodriguez and Maria Rodriguez-Sager) run a taxi company and are the (perhaps too) proud parents of Nina (Diany Rodriguez), who has been studying at Stanford University. When Nina returns home with disappointing news, then goes to fall for her father's employee, Benny (Garrett Turner), tensions arise that threaten to upset not only the family, but the entire community.

If there's a flaw with "In the Heights," which features music and lyrics by Miranda and a book by Quiara Alegria Hudes, it's that it is overloaded with characters and attempts to paint too broad a portrait of a place. The storyline zigs and zags, but it also introduces delightful minor characters — like a piragua (Puerto Rican

shaved ice) vendor (Juan Carlos Unzueta) and a graffiti artist (Joseph Pendergrast) — who turn out to be more than just window dressing.

Time and time again, I have observed well-meaning Atlanta theaters falter when they mix performers of wildly different levels in the same show. Experienced actors command higher salaries, and many small and midsize companies can't afford to hire the best.

Happily, that's not the case here.

Klock-Perez nails the smooth-rhyming style of Miranda, who originated the role of Usnavi. Sabino, Turner, Diany Rodriguez, Hernandez and Magby are all quite good, too. Quiñones gives a deliciously outsize performance as the hair-salon diva, and just when you think Unzueta exists only to push his piragua cart around the stage, he turns up the volume to deliver a virtuoso performance.

Some of the most heartbreaking material here comes from Hernandez's abuela ("Paciencia y Fé"), and the big ensemble numbers that capture the soul of the neighborhood, in moments of joy ("Carnaval del Barrio") and loss ("Alabanza").

Choreographer Ricardo Aponte's dances mine the vocabulary of hip-hop and street beat, salsa and ballet, and the company performs them with energy and panache. On the design side, Shannon Robert's set is a fastidiously detailed replica of an upper Manhattan streetscape. The characters' home and work spaces, the building exteriors and balconies: They are all coated with the patina of time and texture. Very well done.

Likewise, Courtney Flores' costumes are appropriate to the working-class milieu in the heat of summer. As Nina's mother, for instance, Rodriguez-Sager wears the sort of simple, elegant dresses you'd expect of a middle-class lady. Camila carries herself with dignity, while kids trot out lots of shorts, cutoffs, T-shirts and tanks.

All this gives the production authority and authenticity. So even if the plots feel a little gimmicky and improbable at times, the show packs a punch that is affecting and real.

Like last year's "Memphis," Aurora's "In the Heights" is a co-production with downtown's Theatrical Outfit, which will stage it at the Rialto Center for the Performing Arts in September. For my money, it's better than the Broadway version and national tours I saw. It's exactly the kind of theater Atlanta needs, at exactly the right time.

THEATER REVIEW

"In the Heights"

Grade: A

8 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays; 2:30 p.m. Saturdays-Sundays. Also 10 a.m. Aug. 10 and Aug. 17. Through Aug. 28. \$20-\$65. Aurora Theatre, 128 E. Pike St., Lawrenceville. 678-226-6222, auroratheatre.com. Theatrical Outfit's production runs Sept. 8-18 at the Rialto Center for the Performing Arts, 80 Forsyth St. N.W., Atlanta. 678-528-1500, theatricaloutfit.org.

Bottom line: Deeply resonant.