

In the Heights: Film version of Lin-Manuel Miranda's musical about life in New York City neighborhood

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Directed by Jon M. Chu; screenplay by Quiara Alegría Hudes; based on the musical by composer-lyricist Lin-Manuel Miranda and librettist Quiara Alegría Hudes

The film adaptation of composer-lyricist Lin-Manuel Miranda's Tony Award-winning musical *In the Heights*, directed by Jon M. Chu, was released on HBO Max and in movie theaters in June after having been delayed for a year due to the pandemic. Miranda, of course, also created and starred in *Hamilton*, the immensely successful musical about American politician, statesman and economist Alexander Hamilton. *In the Heights* opened on Broadway in 2008, *Hamilton* in 2015.

The new film takes place in New York City's Washington Heights, a largely working-class neighborhood in upper Manhattan, as rising rents and gentrification threaten to displace residents and small businesses. An unusual and in some ways refreshing musical film about modern existence in America's most populous city, *In the Heights* contains vivid, entertaining and moving sequences that give life to the predominantly Latino and immigrant population that passes through the neighborhood bodega (a small corner grocery store) at the center of the film.

But there are also many unsatisfying or unappealing features of the movie, which updates the Broadway production to suit the fashions and concerns of present-day identity politics, crudely sketched out in unconvincing dramatic scenes that bridge the generally more rewarding musical sequences.

And to the film's significant detriment, the story is primarily driven by an insufficiently critical treatment of the "American Dream," and specifically the central characters' petty bourgeois dreams of business success and professional advancement, which is not the best basis for enduring art.

In spite of these problems and weaknesses, however, some genuine and compelling pictures of life do emerge.

Much of the songbook is written in the traditional Broadway showtune style, but with compositions and orchestrations blending the different kinds of music one might hear from the stereos in Washington Heights—the Latin music (salsa, merengue and boleros) of the older generations mixed with the rap and reggaeton of the younger ones.

In the film's energetic opening musical number, the young owner-operator of the corner bodega, Usnavi (Anthony Ramos), introduces us to the central characters, starting with himself:

Usnavi emigrated from the Dominican Republic as a child (Washington Heights has one of the largest Dominican populations in the US). He inherited his parents' bodega when they died, but his dream is to purchase his late father's old bar in the Dominican Republic and move back to the Caribbean island nation permanently with his teenage cousin Sonny (Gregory Diaz IV), who works at the store, and Abuela Claudia (Olga Merediz), a retired maid who, as Usnavi tells us, is not really his abuela (grandmother) but who "adopted the whole block as her own."

Kevin Rosario (Jimmy Smits) runs a car service on the block. He's had to sell half of his business property in order to pay for the first year of tuition at Stanford University for his intelligent and promising daughter Nina (Leslie Grace), the first member of her family to attend college.

Nina returns to Washington Heights feeling dejected after having decided to drop out of Stanford, where she was the victim of racial profiling by a resident advisor. She catches up with an old flame, Benny (Corey Hawkins), an employee at her father's car service, and the

young couple rekindles their romantic relationship.

Vanessa (Melissa Barrera) works at the neighborhood hair salon, but she dreams of working as a fashion designer and moving out of the neighborhood to live further downtown. The object of Usnavi's romantic affections, Vanessa reciprocates those affections as she starts to date the bodega owner.

As the story unfolds, Usnavi's bodega sells a winning lottery ticket to someone in the neighborhood, the block struggles through a blackout and a heat wave, and Sonny's future in his beloved hometown becomes precarious, as it's revealed that he's undocumented. Finally, as the block as he knows it all but disappears, Usnavi comes to find his place in Washington Heights after all.

There are genuinely appealing elements of *In the Heights*—above all, the setting of Washington Heights itself, where the film was shot, and the people who live and work there. By the film's musical finale, Usnavi comes to see himself as a streetlight that illuminates “the stories of the people in the street.” And the strongest and most compelling of these stories is that of Abuela Claudia, powerfully performed by the original Broadway cast's Olga Merediz, whose big musical number is the highlight of the film.

In this evocative song, “Paciencia y Fe,” Claudia remembers what life was like in her neighborhood of La Víbora, “the Washington Heights of Havana” in Cuba, which she left as a child with her mother in 1943: “I remember nights, anger in the streets, hunger at the windows, / Women folding clothes, playing with my friends in the summer rain. / Mamá needs a job, Mamá says we're poor, one day you say / ‘Vamos a Nueva York!’ / And Nueva York was far, but Nueva York had work, and so we came...”

As she sings these lines, Claudia appears in a dream version of the New York City subway in which her decades-old memories are brought to life by period-dressed dancers who evoke scenes of Cuba and her early experiences in the United States, which take on a nightmarish quality as Claudia remembers the hardships of life as a maid in New York City in the mid-20th century, “scrubbing the whole of the Upper East Side,” as she sings.

We discover the darker reality behind Claudia's optimistic mantra “Paciencia y fe!” (“Patience and faith!”) when she repeats that phrase in anguish, covering as an angry and overbearing chorus of American bosses bombards her: “You better clean this mess! / You better

learn Inglés! / You better not be late! / You better pull your weight!” It's an extraordinary sequence that was done with genuine sensitivity, and from which one gets a strong sense of the experiences of millions of immigrant workers.

But the film's real weaknesses need to be addressed as well. The changes from the 2008 Broadway production are revealing. In the original stage show, Nina's decision to drop out of Stanford stemmed from her having to work two jobs to pay for books she didn't have time to read, resulting in her grades falling so low that she lost her partial scholarship.

In the film version, Nina feels isolated because of the supposed lack of a Latino “community” at Stanford, which screenwriter Quiara Alegría Hudes describes as a “predominantly white space” in a comment quoted in the *Los Angeles Times*. Hudes reimaged the character of Nina for the film, the *Times* piece notes, after having “observed the national conversation about microaggressions at schools.” This is a genuine concession to the reactionary race-and-gender obsession of the upper middle class. As is Miranda's response to criticisms that *In the Heights* features “dark-skinned Afro-Latinos in background and dance scenes but not in main roles” (CNN). He apologized for the latter, asserting that in “trying to paint a mosaic of this community, we fell short ... I'm truly sorry.” The identity politics industry is insatiable and its demands relentless.

On the other hand, the decision to make Sonny an undocumented student is a positive story revision, although it's not developed with a great deal of depth. Miranda told the *Los Angeles Times* that he hopes this new plot thread “puts a humanizing face on undocumented folks in the United States.”

With so much of American cinema dominated by lifeless fantasy worlds, it's refreshing to see a new film about a city block populated by characters who resemble human beings. But we should not mark films “on the curve” that take one step forward and two steps back.



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