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MOVIES & SHOWTIMES

'In The Heights' lifts spirits

BY MAKENZIE WHITTLE • The Bulletin

“**I**n the Heights” feels like every summer movie should: It’s bright and colorful, with peppy songs, a strong heart and a powerful message at its core. But it’s not perfect. The film is rich in its details, letting each character’s story have ample (sometimes too much) time to develop in front of our eyes, and is filled with powerful performances shining a light on the Latino community and their stories in a beautiful way.

The story comes from Broadway, and the musical earned its lyricist and star, Lin-Manuel Miranda, his first of many Tony Awards (the play won four Tonys in 2008). The film version is tackled by the original book writer, Quiara Alegria Hudes, who does an impressive job adapting for the screen.

Set in the Manhattan neighborhood of Washington Heights, a predominantly tight-knit Latin community, and specifically around the corner bodega run by the “almost-thirty” Usnavi (Anthony Ramos) and his cousin, Sunny (Gregory Diaz IV). Usnavi dreams of returning to the Dominican Republic, which he and his parents left when Usnavi was young, and reopening El Suenito, his father’s bar. He even goes so far as to purchase the place, which had been pretty much ruined by a hurricane.

Meanwhile, Vanessa (Melissa Barrera) longs to leave Washington Heights for a fancy downtown address and follow her dreams of fashion design. Usnavi crushes hard on her but lacks the skills necessary to ask her out, as indicated by his best friend and taxi dispatcher, Benny (Corey Hawkins).

Benny has a thing for his boss’s daughter, Nina (Leslie Grace), who has come home from Stanford, the first of her family to go to college and who carries the weight of the dreams of the entire neighborhood on her success there.

Hearing that Nina has come home, Abuela Claudia (Olga Merediz), a woman who had no children of her own and therefore adopted the entire neighborhood, decides to host a dinner in her honor.

All of this is laid out in the first few minutes of the film, along with the idea that gentrification is slowly eating away at the neighborhood with a new, expensive dry cleaner moving in, the beauty salon moving out and with an overarching feeling of the



Macall Polay/Warner Bros.

Anthony Ramos, center left, and Melissa Barrera in a scene from “In The Heights” (2021).

community at large being ignored or forgotten about.

With dialogue straddling both English and Spanish seamlessly, the heartfelt stories are threaded through immigrant families and first-generation children who feel torn between their own dreams and that of their community. Firmly, the film is about dreamers.

Hudes and director Jon M. Chu weave the tapestry of these stories together through its smart writing and thoughtful characters, but not everything gels, mostly with how many stories there are within the one film. Because each one is given the time to develop the film feels long at times, most notably parts of the Nina/Benny story and the piragua vendor (played by Miranda).

Where the film really hits is with its overall story and performances. Mostly told through song in Miranda’s now-signature hip-hop/Broadway mash-up style, there are

only a few moments of straight dialogue from the characters. The choreography also flows well on-screen, with dashes of magical realism thrown in.

More Information

“In the Heights”

143 minutes

Rated PG-13 for some language and suggestive references



There are strong performances throughout, but it’s Merediz’s portrayal of Abuela Claudia, which she originated on Broadway, that hits you in the heart. Her gentleness, kindness and ultimate swan song paint the strongest picture of what immigrant women like her and her mother must endure in order to survive.

“In The Heights” shines brightly on the Latino community and the struggles and dreams within it. It tells their story effectively, though not without a few missteps, but it is a story for anyone with a dream.

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