

Remarkable, truthful 'In the Heights' springs up in Aurora



Liz Lauren



By **Chris Jones** · Contact Reporter

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The main character in the 2008 Broadway musical "In the Heights" is not a person at all — it's the neighborhood, mostly Dominican-American, that sits atop Manhattan in the shadow of the George Washington Bridge. Although it's only an A-train ride away from Midtown, Broadway had never paid attention to Washington Heights before the career of one of its favorite sons, Lin-Manuel Miranda, exploded atop a funky, exuberant musical (the sheer joy within that first Broadway company lives with me still) celebrating the streets of his youth and the courageous, aspiring people who built their bodegas and their lives on its corners.

Washington Heights, you might think, is a long way from Aurora, Ill., but, in fact, the second most populous city in Illinois now is about one-third Latino. You do not generally find that proportion in the audiences at the [Paramount Theatre](#), but diversity in the performing arts usually follows the

programming, and the word just will need to get out. It's already old news that the Paramount's audacious notion that it could produce its own Broadway musicals — using mostly Chicago talent, more effectively than the cheap split-week tours it had been previously been booking — has given forth remarkable fruit. "In the Heights" is no exception. I've seen this show four times and, while there is no replacing Miranda as the lead storyteller, in some ways I enjoyed this one the most of all.

Director Rachel Rockwell has found some remarkable — truly remarkable — young talent, deftly balanced between singers and dancers. And, forged away from the hierarchical world of Broadway, the company coalesces better as a true ensemble, a common story in Chicago. As Rockwell has staged the piece, you'd struggle to delineate the leads. In the lead role of Usnavi, Nick Demeris does not grab the show by the scruff of its neck and take charge. That bothered me at first, but as Rockwell's production spun on, I came to appreciate the way Usnavi melded more into the ensemble, a character whose aspirations and difficulties certainly are no greater than those faced by his neighbors.

Backed by a full-size orchestra using the original Broadway orchestrations (one could not say that of the last touring production to come through Chicago), the performances here really are first-rate. Christina Nieves, a far better singer than most people in town know, adds more depth to the typically milquetoast Nina, the character who attempts to carry the dreams of the neighborhood to Stanford University. Nina's troubles at Stanford have always struck me as a major flaw in the book by Quiara Alegria Hudes (nobody ever thinks about just calling up the school about that lost scholarship before trying to raise money), and nothing in Aurora changed my mind about that. But I believed in Nina — and Caitlainne Rose Gurreri's lovable Vanessa, Jonathan Butler-Duplessis' charming Benny, Lillian Castillo's Carla and Luis Herrera's Sonny — more intensely than ever before. Keely Vasquez, a fine actress who has been off touring for years, is back in town, thank heavens, playing Daniela. And while you wouldn't necessarily imagine Paula Scrofano playing an old Latina, she pulls off the neighborhood icon Abuela Claudia quite beautifully. Even the Piragua Guy, played by David Baida, arrives with a bleeding heart as he creams his rival, Mister Softee.

Katie Spelman's admirably varied choreography is generally less frenetic than the original, and it helps contribute to the show's sophisticated ebb and flow, wherein dancers have time to relate to one another and flesh out their characters, rather than being consumed by the need to execute. There really is something exceptional about this cast, and it won over its audience in a notably intense way. Everybody around me was skeptical at first, but the sense of communal warmth only grew. The big ensemble numbers, under musical director Tom Vindafreddo, sound lush and full.

About the only significant disappointment here is the set from the second national company. Certainly, "In the Heights," which uses a kind of romantic realism, is a tricky design challenge, but to see Chicago designers execute such a challenge is why some of us jump on the [Ronald Reagan Expressway](#). Inevitably, this set pushed Rockwell and Spelman closer to the original staging, when history would

suggest their creativity would have come up with a fresher solution of their own inventions. This particular version of the eye-popping original Anna Louizos design was cut back for the cheaper tour and undersized: the original use of perspective for the upper reaches had become cheapened and diminished, so that it feels as if the actors inhabit some kind of miniature version of Washington Heights. The Paramount did not need to replicate that. Demonstrably, it can do better on its own.

cjones5@tribune.com

Twitter @ChrisJonesTrib

When: Through Oct. 6

Where: Paramount Theatre, 23 E. Galena Blvd. Aurora

Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes

Tickets: \$36.90-\$49.90 at 630-896-6666 or **paramountaurora.com**

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