

By Julie McHale, *Waukesha Freeman*

A combination of energy, electricity and heart characterizes Skylight's production of "In the Heights," a Tony favorite from 2008. Since its inception, this saga of a Latino community living in Washington Heights in northern Manhattan, NY, has entertained and educated audiences regarding immigrants from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Cuba and the struggles they encountered in settling here. Though there is a dark side when anyone tries to adapt to a different culture with its own language and customs, there is also joy in community, and this show captures both.

The beautiful set designed by Misha Kachman gives us a glimpse of the George Washington Bridge, which spans the Hudson River from the Heights to Fort Lee in New Jersey (a bridge which has certainly been in the news lately). The barrio is realistically depicted with its tenements and small commercial buildings. Very effective backdrop for the feel of this conclave.

This is basically a tale about dreams, people wanting something better for themselves. In particular we follow the aspirations of seven main characters – Usnavi, the owner of a small bodega; Nina, the promising young woman who has a scholarship to Stanford; Nina's parents, who own a taxi company; Vanessa, who works at the local beauty salon and yearns to get away from her alcoholic mother; Reuben, a black man who loves Nina and is trying to assimilate into the Latino culture; and Abuela, Usnavi's grandmother, who raised him when his parents died and who is a compassionate, unifying character for the whole community.

All these characters are well rendered. We grow to care about all of them, along with many others who comprise their tight-knit community. Especially affecting members of the cast include Usnavi (Tommy Rivera-Vega), Nina (Rana Roman), Nina's parents (David Flores and Ericka Wade), Vanessa (Katherine Brady) and Abuela (Christina Aranda). Usnavi's nervous energy and lovability, Nina's poignantly sweet voice, her parents' angst, Vanessa's power and passion and Abuela's soul are all standouts for moving the audience.

The mix of music from rap to salsa, well directed by Jeff Schaetzke and choreographed by Claudia Sol Morgan, is definitely one of the highlights of the experience. We almost want to jump up on stage and join their infectious music-making. Katherine Brady's voice and dancing skills stood out among many talented performers.

Several of the solos that brought me to tears are "Useless" by David Flores (Nina's father), "Patience and Faith" by Christina Aranda (Abuela), "When You're Home" by Rana Roman (Nina), and "It Won't Be Long Now" by Katherine Brady (Vanessa). The finale number with the whole cast of 18 brought this stunning production to a soulful conclusion. Hope comes shining through, which is always comforting.

Well directed by Ragnar Conde, "In the Heights" by composer/lyricist Lin-Manuel Miranda and playwright Quiara Alegria Hudes, is a well-conceived modern musical that is both relevant and entertaining. It richly deserves your attendance.

The show runs through February 23 in the Cabot Theatre in the Broadway Theatre Center at 158 N. Broadway in Milwaukee. Call 414-291-7800 or visit their website at [www.skylightmusictheatre.org](http://www.skylightmusictheatre.org)

