

Feature: The Importance of the Quiet Revolution of ‘In the Heights’

Submitted by [JonHC](#) [1] on June 20, 2021 - 2:22pm

- [Anthony Ramos](#) [2]
- [Corey Hawkins](#) [3]
- [Daphne Rubin-Vega](#) [4]
- [Dascha Polanco](#) [5]
- [Film Review](#) [6]
- [Gregory Diaz IV](#) [7]
- [Hamilton](#) [8]
- [HBO MAX](#) [9]
- [HollywoodChicago.com](#) [10]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [11]
- [In the Heights](#) [12]
- [Jimmy Smits](#) [13]
- [Jon Espino](#) [14]
- [Jon M Chu](#) [15]
- [Leslie Grace](#) [16]
- [Lin-Manuel Miranda](#) [17]
- [Marc Anthony](#) [18]
- [Melissa Barrera](#) [19]
- [Movie Review](#) [20]
- [Olga Merediz](#) [21]
- [Stephanie Beatriz](#) [22]
- [Warner Bros](#) [23]



Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO - When I used to have cable television (when I lived with my parents and they paid for it), there was this section of one hundred or so music channels, each with a different music style to explore. I remember stumbling across it one day when I was younger, in complete awe that there was even that variety of music in the world. I remember getting to the “Latin music” section and strolling through each type, feeling the distinct rhythm, beat, and vocals of each channel. The experience I had while watching *In the Heights* reminded me of that feeling as a child, experiencing nationalities that I had naively once considered too similar to differentiate, now bursting to life with their own proud heritage.

I grew up, explored my Mexican roots, and in doing so, grew to admire the sense of community and uniqueness every Latin American culture had at its core. I was lucky enough to see a stage production of “In the Heights”, and it would be an understatement to say that I had never witnessed a single show (TV or otherwise) that perfectly encapsulated the immigrant experience I had come to know so well. No, we didn’t always break out into song and dance, but the number of times we actually did would probably surprise you. While it is nowhere near a perfect representation of the American immigrant experience or the diversity that exists within it, it is the closest thing we’ve gotten in mainstream film in the last few decades.



Photo credit: Warner Bros

I'll start by applauding Lin-Manuel Miranda on the adaptation of his hit play because there are some major differences between the two, the soul of it shines through as it tries to address some more recent social and political obstacles. While a straight reproduction from stage to the screen would have also been powerful, by removing/adding some characters, restructuring the narrative and musical numbers, and tweaking the overall message makes this not only more representative of the people it's about but also more palatable for the people that need to see it the most. This play (and to an extent, this film) is arguably Miranda's most important contribution to Broadway to date. While "Hamilton" might be the thing that ends up engraved on his tombstone, the sheer amount of representation and cultural relevance in "In the Heights" automatically reached peaks that even the ambitious Alexander Hamilton could never hope to reach.

Those going into this film thinking it will be the definitive work on the current immigrant experience will be sorely disappointed. That's like saying that *West Side Story* was an accurate depiction of how street gangs fought in New York. This film is meant to be a discussion starter on topics like immigration, DREAMers, the unattainability of the American dream, and other difficult things people shy away from. You are meant to follow the lives of these people, becoming invested in their struggles and dreams, all while reconciling that just because of their skin color they start off in a hole of a disadvantage compared to every other person. This story is meant to help you put a face to a problem many people would rather remain ignorant about. I can tell you that while seeing all of this representation on screen is an ecstatic joy I can't even verbalize, it is not truly meant for me because I know the harsh reality of it.

When Abuela and her mother work their whole lives only to realize that they were doomed to that end because of the way America and white Americans treat immigrants, you were meant to feel that. When you find out Sonny's future is limited for reasons outside of his control, despite being in a country where you're told that the sky's the limit if you work hard enough, you are meant to feel that. When Nina, who has used her intelligence and drive to pull herself up by her bootstraps (as Republicans often like to say), only to still be judged by the color of her skin, you were meant to feel that. There is a sugarcoating to *In the Heights* that makes it easy to digest, not wanting to overwhelm the people who this was created to educate. They didn't show how families are being ripped apart, put into cages, and even just murdered on the streets by law enforcement that should be protecting them. You won't find any sign of how demoralizing their experiences can be while they are just trying to exist in a world that refuses to see them as a person because they don't fit the American-Aryan ideal. You're not even ready to talk about the mental health of these hardworking people who can't afford a day off or even proper medical care, many of whom find that their only chance at freedom is death/suicide or incarceration.



Photo credit: Warner Bros

What you do get is a fairly uplifting story about the family you choose, the community you create, and the tiring chase of a dream your parents died hoping to achieve. If it were told less fantastically, the true bleakness would create a disconnect with the people who truly need to see this, since most of us shy away from staring directly into the harsh realities that surround our lives. This is where Jon M. Chu uses his affinity for creating different atmospheric moods with sound and stage design to tell the story in a dynamic and exhilarating way. His work on the *Step Up* films greatly contributed to the visual success of adapting something created for a small stage and upgrading it to fill the big screen. Even including homages to the colossal big studio musicals of old, especially the mostly brown-face *West Side Story*, comes off as fresh when put through a Latino lens. There is a plethora of diversity in the people represented, so it only makes sense that they would include that same diversity and variety in the different dance styles for the musical numbers. Almost every single one is directly inspired by a popular style from their respective cultures, giving the appearance of being disjointed, but providing us another reason this film is important.

Often overlooked cinematically, Hispanic and Latino representation tends to skew towards the stereotypical, bordering on offensive. If a Latino character grew up in a major city, they are likely portrayed as a gang member. If the character is near the southern border, they're very likely to be a drug dealer. If their story is even halfway decently developed, they are very likely to get killed off as a way to boost the development of a different, often white, character. It is refreshing to see representation that isn't just essentially trauma porn, and why it is infuriating that this film didn't get the attention it deserved. Knowing this isn't being measured by the same metrics as past films, partly because of the pandemic and partly because of studio laziness for dumping it into a streaming service, is completely maddening. The lack of financial success in the box office is something that will keep more films like this from being made, which is a shame because it just feels like force majeure is at play with the terrible series of events that have worked against this film.



Photo credit: Warner Bros

So what can you do? If you feel comfortable, go see it in theaters. If not, keep watching it regularly on HBO Max. If that also proves to be a problem, tell everyone you know to watch it the way they find most safe and comfortable. The film that should have been the Latino equivalent of *Crazy Rich Asians* needs our help to be seen, and the extremely timely message heard. Even removing any concept of race or nationality from the equation, as a musical this is what Hollywood should strive for. There is no noticeable autotune to be found because every main character can sing, most of which have done so on Broadway. This cast is so stacked, that even when Marc Anthony makes his cameo, his vocals are never used because they aren’t needed around so many talented people. *In the Heights* emphasizes the message that we all need a storyteller to pass along the stories of our lives, struggles, and a memory of how far we’ve come. In this case, the story needs your help to be told. I’m enlisting your help to be storytellers, passing along the importance of this film in a time where being any other color than white automatically paints a target on your back. All I can have now is “paciencia y fe” that this film reaches the people that are in dire need of it, and that it is only the beginning of showing a more realistic and positive representation of people that look like I do.



[24]

By [JON ESPINO](#) [25]
Film & Television Show Critic
HollywoodChicago.com
jon@hollywoodchicago.com [24]

© 2021 Jon Espino, HollywoodChicago.com

Source URL (retrieved on **Mar 28 2024 - 5:19am**):
<http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/35840/feature-the-importance-of-the-quiet-revolution-of-in-the-heights>

Links:

- [1] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/users/jonhc>
- [2] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/anthony-ramos>
- [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/corey-hawkins>
- [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/daphne-rubin-vega>
- [5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/dascha-polanco>
- [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/film-review>
- [7] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/gregory-diaz-iv>
- [8] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/hamilton>
- [9] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/hbo-max>
- [10] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/hollywoodchicagocom>
- [11] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/hollywoodchicagocom-content>
- [12] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/in-the-heights>
- [13] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/jimmy-smits>
- [14] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/jon-espino>
- [15] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/jon-m-chu-0>
- [16] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/leslie-grace>
- [17] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/lin-manuel-miranda>
- [18] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/marc-anthony>
- [19] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/melissa-barrera>

- [20] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/labels/review.html>
- [21] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/olga-merediz>
- [22] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/stephanie-beatriz>
- [23] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/warner-bros>
- [24] <mailto:jon@hollywoodchicago.com>
- [25] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/about#JON>