

Published April 19th, 2017

SMC performs 'In the Heights', a slice-of-life play From Lin-Manuel Miranda

By A.K. Carroll



Saint Mary's students perform "In the Heights," by Lin-Manuel Miranda. Photos Matthew Cohen

These days it's hard to scroll through social media without seeing a photo or post about a recent performance of "Hamilton." The rap-happy musical about U.S. founding father Alexander Hamilton won a Pulitzer Prize, Grammy Award, and 11 of its 16 Tony nominations in 2016. It's still a hot ticket, with premium seats going for over \$1,300 in San Francisco and hitting \$1,900 a pop in New York City. But while "Hamilton" may be the best-known of Lin-Manuel Miranda's creations, it isn't his first award-winning work.

When Miranda was a college sophomore at Wesleyan University, he punched out a first draft of "In the Heights," a slice-of-life story that hit Off-Broadway in 2007 and went on to win four of 13 Tony nominations in 2008. Though the show left New York in 2011, it's about to hit the stage of the Lefevre Theatre at Saint Mary's College, thanks to a dedicated cast of students and the expert guidance of guest director Nick Gabriel, artist and educator at San Francisco's American Conservatory Theater (A.C.T.).

"I remember admiring (Lin-Manuel Miranda) even before he broke through with 'In the Heights,'" said Gabriel, who saw the show when it first hit Broadway. "It felt as significant as any landmark piece that defines an art form."

Although Gabriel was impressed by Miranda's fresh and innovative approach to the musical format, what really drew him in was the show's depiction of community. "All of the characters have a little moment, but it's largely about their relationships with one another despite their different aspirations and goals," said Gabriel. "They're all trying to connect with one another."

Choreographer Deb Leamy describes Miranda's "In the Heights" as a modern-day "West Side Story." Set in the Manhattan neighborhood of Washington Heights and told from the perspective of Usnavi, a young Dominican-American bodega owner (originally played by Miranda), the story unfolds over the course of three days, during which the audience is privy to the joys and struggles of Usnavi's Latino community.

"I was so thrilled to come on board," said Leamy, who joined SMC's production team at the invitation of Gabriel, and who boasts a substantial Broadway career. "I have a personal connection to the original choreographer, Andy Blankenbuehler; we worked together on 'Fosse.'"

Bringing her high-caliber training to the undergraduates of SMC was both a challenge and an opportunity, for the students as well as for Leamy. "Anytime you work with young people as opposed to professionals it's at a different level, but that doesn't mean they're not as capable," she said. "It's just different. Their caliber has been quite high, and it has risen through the process, which has delighted us. They're young and still quite green in a lot of ways, but knowing in a lot of ways too."

"We worked really hard to find students with a passion for the material and who love performing," said Gabriel, noting that most of the cast is comprised of nontheater majors. "Theater is not their life the way it is for a lot of aspiring actors. But they're so committed to getting it right and to authenticity. The caliber of the work is kind of extraordinary."

The 16-member cast includes freshmen to seniors who are studying psychology, sociology, political science and other subjects. "They have really stepped up to meet the level of the musical theater majors in very surprising ways," said Leamy. "It wasn't easy, but I think they have all risen to the occasion."

During the performance, attendees can expect to see music, song, dance, and spoken word via rap. The form is akin to that of "Hamilton," but the story is one that is far more familiar - a story of home and identity and community.

"It's not based on source material," said Gabriel. "It's based on personal experience, which seems to be really important to the students."

While the story is riveting and the music and lyrics are Tony-award-winning, what really sets this performance apart, according to Gabriel, is the cast. "In the end they really understood the importance of

being present and available and expressing themselves with compassion and generosity and flexibility," he said. "It's been one of the more exciting directorial experiences I've had."

Performances of "In the Heights" take place April 27-30. Tickets are \$8-18, and can be purchased at the box office or online at www.stmarys-ca.edu/in-the-heights. Information only: 925-631-4670.

The public is invited to a free pre-show event on Friday, April 28, during which Professors Jos Feito and Raina León will reflect on growing up in immigrant families from the Caribbean. The conversation starts at 7 p.m. in the Delphine Intercultural Center, and will end prior to the 9 p.m. performance.



"In the Heights" is a modern "West Side Story."

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