

under the peel

Everyone's barrio

Modern, fast-paced 'In the Heights' tackles universal themes with gusto

BY ELENA FERRARIN
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Aside from world-renowned hits like "West Side Story" and "Evita," the tradition of Latino-themed musicals on Broadway is pretty scant.

But with "In the Heights," that tradition took a giant leap forward in the form of a modern, fast-paced musical set in the Washington Heights neighborhood of New York, where Cubans, Dominicans, Mexicans and Puerto Ricans share their everyday joys and frustrations.

The themes may be familiar — generational conflict, racial tension and the ubiquitous love story — but the colorful urban framework feels fresh, with a high-octane soundtrack that melds hip hop, salsa, rap, merengue and soul with classic Broadway sounds.

The national tour of "In the Heights" is in Chicago until Jan. 3. Cast members Natalie Toro and Yvette Gonzalez-Nacer said this is not only a great professional experience, but also a gratifying personal one.

"I'm so thrilled to be able to embrace my own culture and put it out there for the world to see," said Gonzalez-Nacer, who plays Vanessa, who works in the neighborhood's beauty shop but can't wait to get out of the barrio.

"This show to me feels so relevant because it's about now, it's a contemporary piece," said Gonzalez-Nacer, whose previous experience includes the national tour for "3 Mo' Divas."

Toro's extensive resume include "A Tale of Two Cities," and "Les Misérables" on Broadway, and the national tours for "Jesus Christ Superstar," "Evita," "Cats" and "West Side Story."

Her experience with "In the Heights,"



ELISE SANTOR and Kyle Beltran co-star in the national tour of "In the Heights."

however, is unique, she said.

"This is not a stereotypical Latino show. There are no drug dealers or murderers that we see in Hollywood. It really does focus on a lot of goodness," she said.

The nearly all-Latino cast has formed



THE 2008 Tony Award-winning musical "In the Heights" plays in Chicago through Jan. 3.

strong bonds thanks to a shared passion for their culture, both Gonzalez-Nacer and Toro said.

But the musical reverberates with universal themes that can be shared by people of any culture, they said. "You can take the story and put it in any Italian or Irish neighborhood because it's not about stereotypes, it's about people's hopes and dreams, and (the question of) where they belong," Toro said.

Compared to the Broadway show, the national tour has a few new elements, including new jokes and short lyrics, says New York-based book writer Quiara Alegria Hudes, who along with composer and lyricist Lin-Manuel Miranda took part in the tour's rehearsals.

The characters are all based on reality in some way, Hudes said. The character of Sony, the neighborhood's comic relief, is based on her younger brother, and the rest "are all a different part and side of me," she said.

"I was the first to go to college in my family, and I was scared of it," she said of the similarity with Nina's character. "I am a mother, so now I ponder, what future is there for my children?" which is what Camila grapples with on stage.

So what is the future of Latino musicals on Broadway?

Hopefully bright, Hudes said. "Getting a musical onto Broadway is so baffling difficult. It's so much about hard work, but also being in the right place at the right time," she said.

Temas universales en 'In the Heights'

A parte de éxitos de renombre mundial como "West Side Story" y "Evita", la tradición de musicales con temática latina en Broadway es muy escasa.

Pero, con "In the Heights," esa tradición da un paso gigante adelante en la forma de un musical moderno y ágil que se desarrolla en el barrio de Washington Heights en Nueva York, donde cubanos, dominicanos, mexicanos y puertorriqueños comparten sus alegrías y frustraciones cotidianas.

Los temas son familiares — conflicto generacional, tensión racial y la omnipresente historia de amor — pero el colorido fondo urbano es fresco, con un fondo musical de alto octanaje que mezcla hip hop, salsa, rap, merengue y soul con clásicos ritmos de Broadway.

La obra se presenta en Chicago hasta el 3 de enero.

Las actrices Natalie Toro e Yvette Gonzalez-Nacer dijeron que ésta no es solo una gran experiencia profesional, pero también una gratificación personal.

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A Q&A with Lin-Manuel Miranda

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New York City native Lin-Manuel Miranda is the creative mind behind "In the Heights," which he conceived a decade ago.

He is also the show's composer and lyricist, and earned a Tony Award for Best Musical and Best Original Score in 2008, and a Grammy for Best Musical Show Album in 2009.

He answered some questions via e-mail last week. Here is the edited version.

Q. You also played Usnavi on Broad-

way. What was it like to "live" this from such different angles?

A. During the initial rehearsal process, I just never slept. I'd do eight hours of singing and dancing rehearsal, and the director and choreographer were great about stealing me time to go off and write whenever I wasn't immediately needed. The cast quickly got used to me mumbling to myself in the corner; That's what writing looks like in action.

Q. Do you see your own story reflected in the musical?

A. It's not autobiographical (I'm Puerto

Rican, my parents are still alive, and I've never owned a bodega), but there are certain traits within each character that have shades of both book writer Quiara Alegria Hudes and myself, and the families that raised us. As a kid, I never felt like I fit in anywhere, and in writing this show, we've all forged a community we can call our own.

Q. What about this musical resonates so much with audiences?

A. Everyone here is from somewhere else, Latino or not. Every family goes through generations of success and tragedy.

If you have a family, you have either benefitted from someone else's sacrifice (your mother working second shift; Your grandfather staying up to help you finish a project) or sacrificed for your family (giving up that dream job to pay the bills; dropping everything when your child is sick).

Q. What are the challenges and open doors for Latino musicals and theater?

A. More Latinos must write in order to create opportunities. Right now, there's a Latino kid watching "In The Heights" for the first time. That kid may love it or hate it. Either way, if it inspires that kid to write from a personal place, I'm happy. I was very inspired by John Leguizamo's solo shows ("Mambo Mouth," "Spic-O-Rama") as a kid.