

'In the Heights' offers viewers a dose of high-energy fun

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: ««««

out of «««««

Running Time: 143 minutes

This film opened at theaters and became available for streaming on HBO Max on June 10.

Tony Award-winning playwright and songwriter Lin-Manuel Miranda is known for creating the musical *Hamilton*, but fans will know that he has also helped create other successful stage productions. His first creation was *In the Heights*, which premiered on Broadway in 2008 to great acclaim. This week, the story is being given the Hollywood big screen treatment. Like any adaptation from another medium, there are a few minor issues present in the translation.

However, it's difficult not to find this high-energy film anything but punchy and fun.

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Usnavi de la Vega (Anthony Ramos) is a young man running a convenience store in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan. Born to now-deceased immigrant parents, he dreams of returning to the Dominican Republic and opening a beachside business. Through song and dance, we learn about his life and those who frequent his shop. For Usnavi, the most notable customers are Vanessa (Melissa Barrera), a salon employee whom he has a crush on, along with elderly "Abuela" Claudia (Olga Merediz), who has acted as surrogate mother for the lead and other locals.

There is also Nina (Leslie Grace), a Stanford University student arriving home for the summer with unexpected news, as well as Usnavi's good friend Benny (Corey Hawkins). Over the next few days, the various characters interact and share their hopes and desires.

Of course, there are other story threads, other characters, and a winning lottery ticket, which results in a very lengthy narrative. However, the film makes up for the numerous introductions with an array of impressive musical numbers performed with vigor. In fact, the movie does its best to make each one more impressive. Initially, there are lengthy takes following Usnavi and the other characters around his store as they sing, but things become even more elaborate as others get involved.

This includes a big performance at the hair salon (even mannequin heads and wigs get involved), and another using the water at a public pool. The songs hit gravity-defying heights, making them engaging and dynamic to watch.

The catchy musical numbers and photography are a blast, but Ramos and the rest of the cast are the real selling point. They are all extremely likable, belting every number out with brash confidence, which is an asset. While there are some noteworthy points made about the difficulties immigrants face on a daily basis, the personal drama presented is very simple and familiar. Will Usnavi leave his neighborhood and will he get together with Vanessa?

Will Benny find happiness with Nina and will she return to Stanford for the following term? The plights of the central characters aren't always high-stakes, but at least the enthusiasm on display carries viewers over these formulaic elements.

Another minor issue has to do with there being so many storylines that when the end of the

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second act arrives, it's a full ten minutes featuring multiple performers having earnest discussions about their dreams and debates about the future. Naturally, all of this material needs to be addressed, but seeing one scene after another, dealing with the same kind of choices, does lend an on-the-nose feeling to the material and begins to slow the pacing down.

Still, when the characters ultimately turn a corner, their big smiles and charm take over. If you're a fan of musicals, this cast and its numbers will keep viewers absorbed through the more predictable story passages. While the characters may not show as much complexity as they could have, *In the Heights* is still an enjoyable and well-intentioned sugar rush that'll please anyone looking for upbeat entertainment at the cinema.

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