



*In the Heights* is available in theaters and on the streaming service HBO Max. Photo: Macall Polay

SET DESIGN

# Bringing *In the Heights* to the Big Screen

The director, production designer, and set decorator behind *Crazy Rich Asians* reunited for the film adaptation of Lin-Manuel Miranda's tribute to his beloved neighborhood

By Cathy Whitlock  
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Manhattan is easily the world's most identifiable movie set. Sophisticated, cosmopolitan, and always authentic, the city's celebrated neighborhoods have captured the eye of many filmmakers.

At long last, the Washington Heights area gets its time in the spotlight with the Tony Award-winning musical turned film *In the Heights*. Writer, producer, composer, and star Lin-Manuel Miranda's tribute to his beloved neighborhood tells the story of three scorching summer days (culminating with a blackout) in the life of the neighborhood's first-generation residents with backgrounds hailing from Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic. The cast of characters includes a Dominican American bodega owner Usnavi (Anthony Ramos), his honorary grandmother a.k.a. "Abuela" Claudia (Olga Merediz), and a local car service operator Kevin Rosario (Jimmy Smits) in search of the American dream. Last but not least, Miranda makes an appearance as the affable "piragua guy" who pushes a shaved ice cart for a living.



Corey Hawkins as Benny (far left), Gregory Diaz IV as Sonny, and Anthony Ramos as Usnavi. Photo: Macall Polay

The dream team behind 2018's *Crazy Rich Asians*—director Jon M. Chu, Emmy-nominated production designer Nelson Coates, and set decorator Andrew Baseman—once again weave their movie magic to create a home for the tight-knit community. "What we did with Jon for the Asian community with *Crazy Rich Asians*, we really wanted to do for the Latino community as far as representation goes," says Baseman.

The sets are a mix of street scenes, bodegas, apartments, a hair salon, public parks, and even a swimming pool (perfect for a Busby Berkeley-style dance number) filmed on location and at a soundstage in Brooklyn that capture the sights, sounds, and flavors of the community. Since the area has seen its share of gentrification with the addition of "Chase Banks, Targets, Chipotles, and people lining their spaces with LED lights," as Coates notes, "we took it back a notch, without making it feel period and allowing you to see the cultures."



Baseman sourced fabrics and items from local shops in the Washington Heights neighborhood, such as C&E Fabrics. Shown here is Abuela Claudia's apartment that he notes "pays homage to the old country" with a green palette and romantic florals. Courtesy of Andrew Baseman



The film's scenic department created a historic map of the Dominican Republic for the bodega. Coates also designed a painted mural on the side of the market with an image of a man in a boat dreaming of the day he returns to the island. Courtesy of Andrew Baseman

The interiors of the families are represented with three different styles and color palettes. "The trick for me was to make sure the Dominican characters' interiors were different from the Cubans, which looked different from the Puerto Ricans," says Baseman. "To keep things straight, I made a poster of the three different flags with the three characters of that nationality."

Perhaps the most prolific quote comes from Abuela Claudia, who says in the film, "Little details tell the world we are not invisible." For the designers, this translates into character-oriented elements known in the industry as "Easter eggs" or "set blessings" that Coates felt strengthened the story. Look for little things such as park rocks in the shape of the Dominican Republic and Miranda's favorite sports jersey and video games in Usnavi's apartment. Baseman paid homage to Miranda's love of musicals by creating posters of *Merrily We Roll Along* and *Kiss Me Kate*.



No neighborhood would be complete without a corner bodega. Re-created with products suggested by the father of producer and star Lin-Manuel Miranda, tin ceilings and fake grime were added for an authentic aged quality. Courtesy of Andrew Baseman

One of the more prominent sets is something familiar to all New Yorkers: the local corner bodega. The designers pulled out all the stops for authenticity, down to the cardboard on the grocery store's floor to soak up the water from the freezers, the old-school fluorescent lights, and the stains on leaky cans. Designed by Coates, a scenic painted mural of the Dominican Republic is a key set piece, and Baseman and his crew sourced everything from cans of condensed milk to subway MetroCards and a list of items recommended by Miranda's father.



"We wanted to make the salon feel feminine," says production designer Nelson Coates of the Art Deco meets '60s-style set. "Andy [Baseman, set decorator] found different fabrics that had seen a brighter color in their past, and we found a company who could print an old Formica patterns to place on the tabletops." Courtesy of Andrew Baseman

Since this is a musical, making sure the sets were equipped for the kinetic dance numbers was paramount. The '60s-style Art Deco-infused hair salon "was probably a jewelry or a dress store" in a previous life, says Baseman, "so we kept some of the things, such as big, round concentric-circle lights, wall sconces from the '50s, a checked linoleum floor from the '30s or '40s, and floral wallpaper. We also made sure the manicure table was on castors, as everything had to move and be incorporated into the big dance."



Standing, from left: Melissa Barrera as Vanessa, Stephanie Beatriz as Carla, Daphne Rubin-Vega as Daniela, Dascha Polanco as Cuco, and (seated) Leslie Grace as Nina. Photo: Macall Polay

The musical, delayed for a year due to the pandemic, is a welcome summer gift. "The whole thing is a love letter to this incredible neighborhood. It's the first chapter in so many stories—American stories start here," says Miranda.