SETDECOR

IN THE HEIGHTS

December 21st, 2021 by Karen Burg, Editor

Set Decorator **Andrew Baseman SDSA**

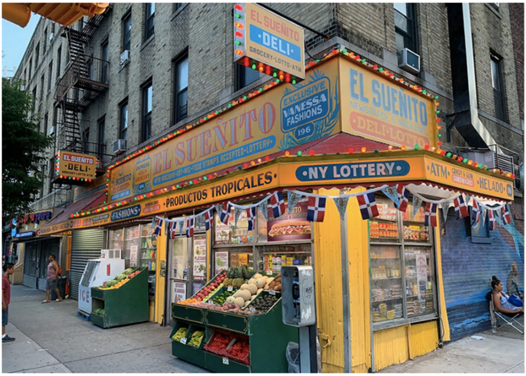
Production Designer **Nelson Coates**

Warner Bros.

With their collaboration on the film CRAZY RICH ASIANS so successful, Director Jon Chu teamed up again with Production Designer Nelson Coates and Set Decorator Andrew Baseman SDSA for the engaging summer musical spectacle IN THE HEIGHTS, which brought a much-needed joyful opening to the summer, for those who were able to get the full experience in a theater and those who caught it in the streaming window.

But no worries if you haven't, because it is streaming and now available for you to purchase, if you are like many of us and want to see it again and again...a perfect way to enjoy the holiday season!

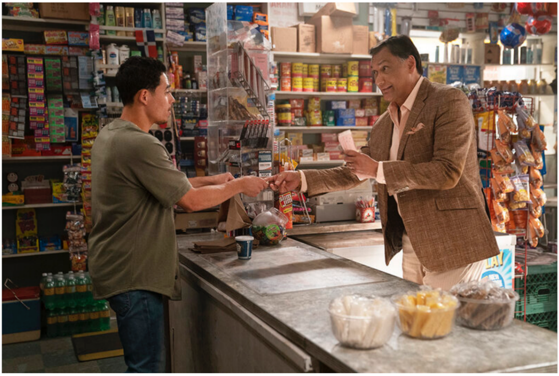
Before you do, take a moment to enjoy going behind the scenes with some notes from the always fascinating Andrew Baseman, who lets us in on a few details behind some of the choices he and Coates and Chu made.



El Sueñito bodega. The cornerstone of the community. Courtesy Warner Bros.

While the key interiors were built onstage, many exteriors and some interiors were actually filmed in the "Heights", the Washington Heights district of NYC, populated by various immigrant cultures over the decades, now home to many families of Puerto Rican, Dominican, Cuban and Afro-Latinx heritage.

For the film, a main intersection serves as an ersatz neighborhood square, anchored by ***El Suеńito,*** the corner bodega owned by the central character *Usnavi* [Anthony Ramos], ***Rosario's Car Service cab & limocompany***, and ***Daniela's salon***, while the apartments above are home to families and their dreams.



El Sueñito bodega. Usnavi [Anthony Ramos] greets one of his regular morning customers Kevin Rosario [Jimmy Smits], with his standard order of cafécito caliente and a lottery ticket. Photo by Macall Polay ©2019 Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. All Rights Reserved.

From Warner Bros…*"The scent of a cafecito caliente hangs in the air just outside of the 181st Street subway stop, where a kaleidoscope of dreams rallies this vibrant and tight-knit community… IN THE HEIGHTS fuses Lin-Manuel Miranda's kinetic music and lyrics with director Jon M. Chu's lively and authentic eye for storytelling to capture a world very much of its place, but universal in its experience."*

SETDECOR: We know collaboration is key to fine filmmaking. Tell us about this experience...

Baseman: Working with Jon Chu has been a total joy. Our collaboration on IN THE HEIGHTS allowed us to deepen the bond we created on CRAZY RICH ASIANS. [Editor's note: See Film Decor article on that amazing film!]

IN THE HEIGHTS was Nelson's and my fourth collaboration over the course of 17 years. We work well together, and our bond strengthens with each new project.

Lin-Manuel Miranda is one of the most important voices in theatre today. He is wise beyond his years and has an encyclopedic knowledge of musicals, which as a lover of musicals, I appreciate. I especially appreciate his references to the classics, from Cole Porter to Sondheim, and as a homage to him, I've scattered a few Easter eggs with musical theater references among the set dressing.

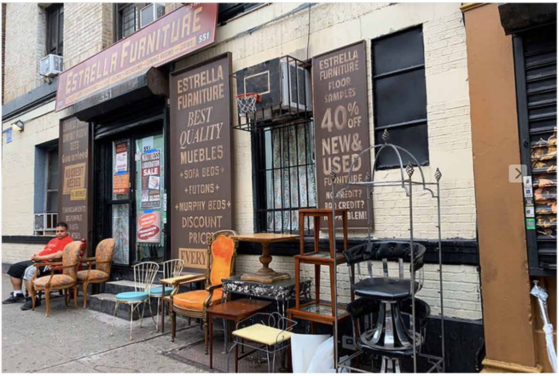
The height of summer in the Heights! Courtesy Warner Bros.

From Warner Bros...
"*Most of the actual businesses around the intersection...were 'recast.' Built facades, dressing and signage were added to the equivalent of four city blocks*."

SD: Most viewers don't realize that set decorating a street *exterior* is also about depicting *interior* of each window...and the "tiny" details, from trashcans to street signs to benches...the individual stores and small businesses you create to give the real sense of the neighborhood...

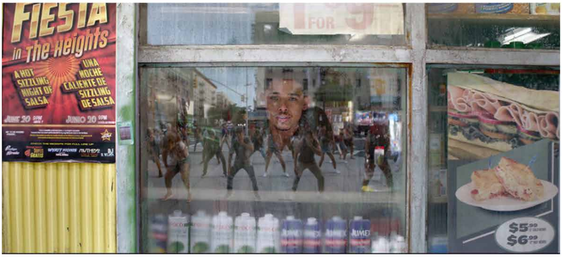
AB: Yes! Because IN THE HEIGHTS takes place in a real neighborhood, one could assume that we brought our cameras and shot the neighborhood as is. If only that were so!

To get the right balance of shops, markets, cafes, services, and restaurants lined up in proper order with our key sets, we turned a nail salon into a *bakery*, a restaurant into a *dollar discount store*, a barber shop into a *market*, and an electronics repair shop into a *used furniture store*.



Estrella Furniture store is one of many, many storefronts, restaurants and business entrances created along the 4-block area of the actual Heights. Courtesy Warner Bros.

We set up a *produce truck* with fruit and vegetables, which we moved many times to camera, as well as our “street kit”, consisting of fliers in Spanish and English, phone booths (standing empty), fire alarm boxes, water hydrants, newspaper boxes, folding mismatched chairs, and folding game tables.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El Sueñito bodega. Usnavi [Anthony Ramos] feels unfilled, trapped with this responsibility. Courtesy Warner Bros.

Gulf of Mexico
North Atlantic
Caribbean
PLANTAIN CHIPS

ROZEN FOOD ALIMENTOS CONGELA
FROZEN FOODS

El Sueñito bodega, with map of the Dominican Republic. The bodega's name means "The Little Dream"—Usnavi's "Little Dream" is to open a beach "shack" there. Courtesy Warner Bros.

SD: The huge difference in terms of your work with this film, other than the cultures and setting you were depicting – which is huge in and of itself, but the addition of musical numbers and choreography...and sets that needed to accommodate those!

AB: I have loved musicals since being mesmerized by THE WIZARD OF OZ and MARY POPPINS at an early age. Working on a screen musical has always been a dream of mine and being a part of a joyous movie such as IN THE HEIGHTS was a dream come true.

The rest is collaborative with the other departments, essentially working with each other on the physical practical needs and then turning that into a combination of realism and art, a joyful process on this film.

SD: Tell us a bit about the special requirements for these scenes, particularly:
...The streets, including *Nina & Benny* dancing along the side of a building!
AB: We built that set on the same stage as the *Bodega*, inspired in part by Fred Astaire dancing on the walls and ceiling in the MGM classic musical ROYAL WEDDING. It was the last thing we shot, so we were able to have it ready for rehearsal prior to shooting. In fact, we had the cast and crew photo taken on the "side" of the building! Since the wall moved up and down, we had to adhere all elements seen inside of the windows, as well as stiffen the curtains, so that nothing would move when the wall tilted.

Hot summer day relief! Note the specific elements of set dressing that the dancers interact with! Inset: Stephanie Beatriz as Carla, Dascha Polanco as Cuca & Daphine Rubin-Vega as Daniela. Photo by Macall Polay. © 2019 Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. All Rights Reserved.

...The heartrending "*Paciencia y Fe*" sequence for the community's endearing matriarch *Abuela Claudia...*

AB: Chris Scott developed the choreography for this number weeks before filming, but made some minor, and not so minor, changes during development. The first obstacle was shooting in an actual NYC subway station with many restrictions. A major hurdle was not being allowed to bring anything flammable into the station. Eventually we compromised and used mostly non-flammable items, and fire-proofed the wood subway benches, vintage luggage and other necessary pieces of set dressing.

*Editor's note: See gallery for photos of *Abuela Claudia's* home

...The Highbridge Pool for the song/dance sequence "*96,000*" ...

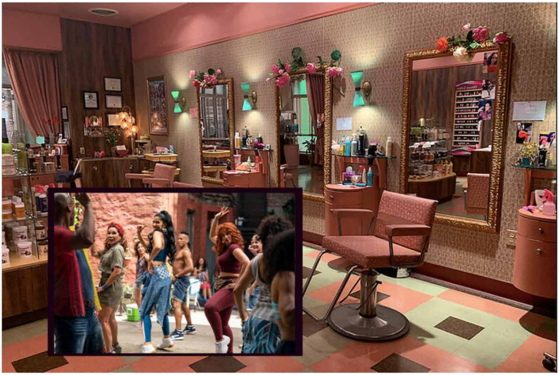
AB: The script did not specify that we were to shoot the "*96,000"* sequence in a pool! After scouting locations in the Washington Heights neighborhood, Jon discovered that the Highbridge Pool was just down the block from the intersection of our *Bodega, Hair Salon*, and *Cab Company*. The only way we could shoot at the pool was to get in before the summer season began, so on a very chilly spring day, hundreds of actors, dancers, and extras jumped into the frigid water.

And in solidarity, Jon joined them.

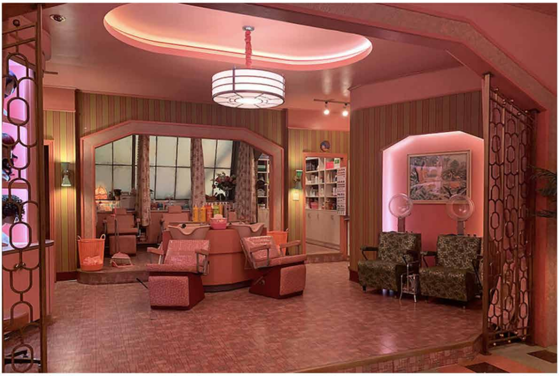
Editor's note:

The ebullient Anthony Ramos, who stars as Usnavi, says of Director Jon Chu, "*He leads with love, and you don't learn that in film school...full of love and brilliance. He's cool, calm, collected, and he brought it every day... like handing out bags of love*."

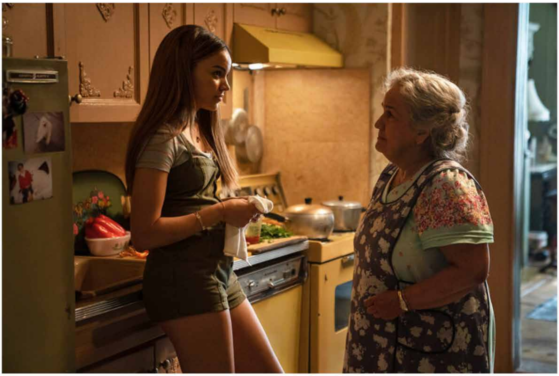
A nice note to end the year...now go watch the film!



Daniela's salon. Daphine Rubin-Vega as Daniela, Stephanie Beatriz as Carla, & Dascha Polanco as Cuca brought their energy from the dance floor to the salon. Photo by Macall Polay. © 2019 Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. All Rights Reserved.



Daniela's salon. Set Decorator Andrew Baseman made great use of the set's configuration, as once again, he had to consider dancing and choreography as well as creating a stylized realism. Image courtesy of Warner Bros.



Abuela Claudia's kitchen. Abuelita [Olga Merediz] shares her wisdom with Nina [Leslie Grace]. Photo by Macall Polay. ©2019 Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. All Rights Reserved.