

El Sol Latino

Un Periódico Diferente / A Different Kind of Newspaper



IN THE HEIGHTS

at Holyoke Community College



From Transformation to In the Heights

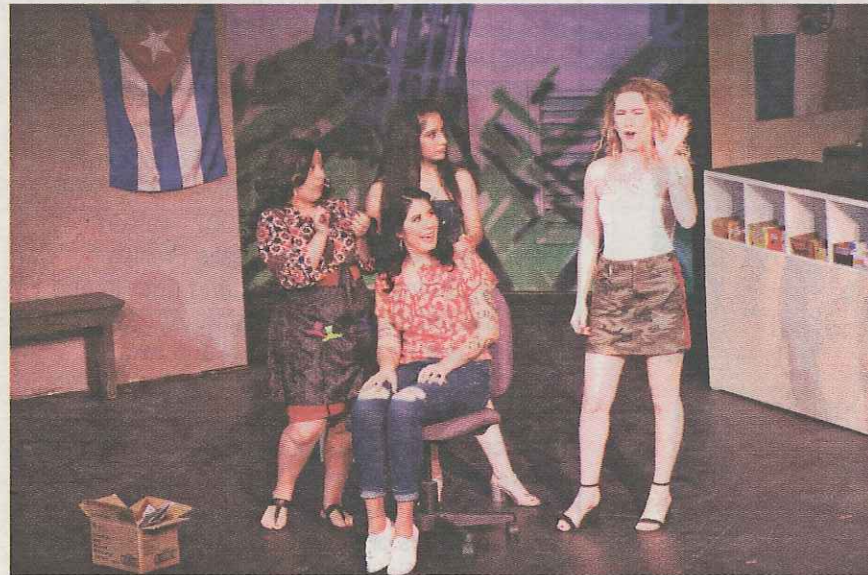
by MANUEL FRAU RAMOS

Twelve years after the official unveiling of 'Transformation', the groundbreaking 40-foot long canvas Latino themed mural at Holyoke Community College (HCC), one of the most outstanding musical plays celebrating the Latinx experience in New York City took center stage at HCC. * See article about the 'Transformation' mural at HCC that was initially published in 2006. We are republishing it in this edition.

The HCC production of *In the Heights*, conceived by Lin-Manuel Miranda, with music and lyrics by Lin-Manuel Miranda, and a book by Quiara Alegria Hudes, quickly became one of the most successful plays ever in the Pioneer Valley with seven sold-out performances.

The diverse cast, featuring HCC students, faculty, alumni, Holyoke High School students, and community members, vividly reflects the demographic diversity of our region.

In the Heights is a three-day story, set around the Fourth of July during an extreme summer heat wave in Manhattan's Washington Heights neighborhood in New York City. The lives of three generations of Latinx characters - Dominican, Cuban, and Puerto Rican - are showcased as they come together to mourn their losses and rejoice in their triumphs in *el barrio*. The play addresses contemporary issues such as first generation college students, poverty, and gentrification. The musical numbers blend hip-hop, rap and salsa with lyrics in both English and Spanish. The residents of *el barrio* are hard working and ambitious. As their neighborhood is in the brink of change, they sing about their daily struggles as well as celebrate the Latinx experience.



Daniela, Carla, Vanessa and Nina (seated) (photo MFR)

Usnavi (Michael Borges), the narrator, is a first generation Dominican-American and bodega owner who is fighting to keep his business open as the neighborhood faces gentrification. He dreams of going back to the Dominican Republic to reconnect with his roots. Usnavi was raised by Cuban-born **Abuela Claudia** (Shannon Sarkisian), after his parents passed away. Abuela is the surrogate grandmother to many in *el barrio*. **Vanessa** (Ashley Morris) is Usnavi's love interest. She works at the local beauty salon and dreams of getting out of *el barrio*. **Sonny** (Melina García), Usnavi's sassy, lazy yet ambitious cousin, works with him in the *bodega*.

Nina (Maya Kirsi) is **Kevin's** (Axel Cruz) intelligent and ambitious daughter. He wants her to go to Stanford to finish her education but she is in love with **Benny** (Michael Luciano), who is not from *el barrio* and doesn't speak Spanish. Kevin is not in favor of this relationship and is prepared to sell his car-service business to pay for his daughter's education. He soon discovers that Nina has dropped out of school. **Camila** (Adriana Piantedosi), Nina's

strong-willed mother who is typically tolerant of Kevin's control issues, this time confronts him regarding their car family business and his over-protectiveness of Nina.



El Piragüero (photo MFR)

Daniela (Rochelli Smith), owner of the hair salon that is gossip central, **Carla** (Nanette Mendieta) who works at Daniela's salon along with Vanessa and is Daniela's close friend, **El Piragüero** (Adriel Berríos) owner of a small piragua stand, and **Graffiti Pete** (Tiffany Joseph) a graffiti artist who is good friends with Sonny and one of the few characters who acknowledges Sonny's dreams round up the cast.

The story of *In the Heights* hits close to home for the cast, the production team, and the greater Holyoke community. As of 2016, 319,042 Puerto Ricans live in Massachusetts, the fifth largest Puerto Rican population in the United States after New York, Florida, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. The state's Puerto Rican population has grown by 60% since 2000, and 20% since 2010.

According to the Boston Planning & Development Agency 2016 report, the Puerto Rican population living in Hampden County (Chicopee, Holyoke, and Springfield) is 90,002, 19.2% of the total population. In Chicopee, 16% of the total population is Puerto Rican, in Springfield it is 35.2%, and Holyoke has 46%. The largest Puerto Rican population, per capita, of any city in the United States outside Puerto Rico is in Holyoke, where 80% of the student population in the public school is Latinx, mostly Puerto Rican.

The rapidly changing demographics have helped both Holyoke Community College (HCC) and Springfield Technical Community College (STCC) to be recognized as Hispanic-Serving Institutions. According to Director and HCC professor Patricia Sandoval, *In The Heights* is definitely intended "to celebrate HCC as a Hispanic Serving Institution and to acknowledge, honor and celebrate the population in this city."

Alberto Sandoval-Sanchez, Scholar in Residence, summarized his thoughts about this production, "I am delighted to participate in this musical production. I want to thank the cast for all their inspiration and hard work. I congratulate Holyoke High School Latina/o performers for all their talent and terrific performances. This is a dream come true! HCC gracias for making me feel at home."

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'Transformation' At Holyoke Community College*

By **MANUEL FRAU RAMOS** | June 2006

On May 10, 2006, the Holyoke community in general, but especially the Puerto Ricans living in Holyoke, witnessed the official unveiling of the long-awaited Latino mural at Holyoke Community College (HCC).

'Transformation', the 40-foot long canvas mural of the Latino Mural Collaborative Project that depicts daily life in the city of Holyoke, is the product of 16 Latino youth, most of the Boricuas residing in Holyoke that worked under the direction of painter Deborah Savage.

The mural's images and message undergo a transformation, from the negative to the positive. To the left, the intense colors, and the dark, poorly defined images appear to represent and transmit a negative message about the experience of growing up in Holyoke. The colors and the figures become lighter and better defined as the transformation towards the positive unfolds. The transformation ends in a note of hope with an angelical figure, and Latino youth looking towards a better future.

The inclusion the Puerto Rican flag in the positive section of the mural highlights the message of 'transformation' with more than one interpretation: a better future for the city of Holyoke, and a new phase of Holyoke Community College as an educational institution for all.

It pleases us to see how the mural symbolically replaces what seemed to be an "invisible wall" that separated the college from the Puerto Rican community of Holyoke. The fact that the mural was placed in the Campus Student plaza, a highly visible place that represents the "common" or the "heart" of the building complex that makes up the college, reinforces the message of transformation and inclusion. The mural faces South Holyoke, where most of the Puerto Rican community resides; the "marginalized" are now part of the "center." The image of the Puerto Rican flag on the right sends a clear message to the Puerto Rican community. Just as the cultural symbols of other ethnic groups are displayed, it

was time for the Puerto Rican cultural symbols to be visible in the Holyoke "landscape."

In the past, the political discourse of welcome and inclusiveness on the part of the administrators did not translate into realities. The lack of Latino students, faculty and administrators, especially Puerto Ricans, demonstrated this rhetorical abyss. As Heriberto "Herbie" Flores, HCC trustee, pointed out not too long ago, "As a Puerto Rican, I have to ask, where has the College been for years? This College at this point does not reflect the African American community or the Puerto Rican community."

We hope the Latino Mural Project marks the beginning of a real transformation at Holyoke Community College.



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From Transformation



Usnavi and Nina (photo MFR)

In the Heights is a co-production of HCC's Theater and Music Departments, with musical direction by Ellen Cogen. HCC Professor Patricia Sandoval directed the play, and Mount Holyoke College Professor Emeritus Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez was the Advisor and Scholar in Residence. Tiffany Joseph choreographed the play. Financial support was provided by MassHumanities, and the Massachusetts International Festival of the Arts (MIFA).

In addition to the play, an new version of the successfully *Nuestras Abuelas* Exhibition, originally presented at the University of Massachusetts Amherst in 2007, was on display in the lobby of the Leslie Phillips Theater during intermission, and prior to and after the performance. *Nuestras Abuelas: Paciencia y Fe* a photography and text exhibition curated by Waleska Santiago Centeno is a cultural and educational project honoring and celebrating the legacy of grandmothers as powerful female figures inspired by the grandmother character of *In the Heights*. The grandmothers of three Holyoke High School students, Adriel Berrios, Melina Anabel García and Michael Luciano, are the *abuelas* portrayed in this exhibition.



In Holyoke...

Eighteen months after Nueva Esperanza reopened its doors on Tuesday, June 20, 2017 with an

official ribbon cutting ceremony, the beloved

Holyoke community organization is again in the middle of another transition. Late this November, the Board of Directors accepted Nelson Román's letter of resignation as Executive Director, position that he occupied for a little over a year, first as its Interim Director and, since early June of 2018, as Executive Director. Nelson is moving to Chicago.

En Holyoke ...

a los 18 meses de Nueva Esperanza reabrir sus puertas el martes, 20 de junio de 2017 en una ceremonia oficial con corte de cinta, la querida organización comunitaria de Holyoke se encuentra de nuevo en medio de otra transición. A finales de noviembre, la Junta de Directores aceptó la carta de renuncia de Nelson Román como Director Ejecutivo, posición que ocupó por un poco más de un año, primero como su Director Interino y, a partir de principios de junio de 2018, como Director Ejecutivo. Nelson se muda a Chicago.