

## HOLYOKE

# Community takes center stage 'In the Heights'

The theme of Lin-Manuel Miranda's "In the Heights" is home, and home is where theater professor and director Patricia Sandoval, '84, found inspiration for the Holyoke Community College production of the Tony Award-winning musical.

She found inspiration in the rich Latino culture of Holyoke, drawing on the city and nearby communities for a cast ranging from local high schoolers to HCC students and alumni to community members and professional dancers.

"I believe there is a lot of talent at HCC and in the community, and I wanted everyone to celebrate that," she said.

But there is more to it.

"I hope the audience takes away an appreciation of the Latino community and a better understanding of the issues involved (such as) gentrification, immigrants' rights ... and the struggle to succeed in college," she said.

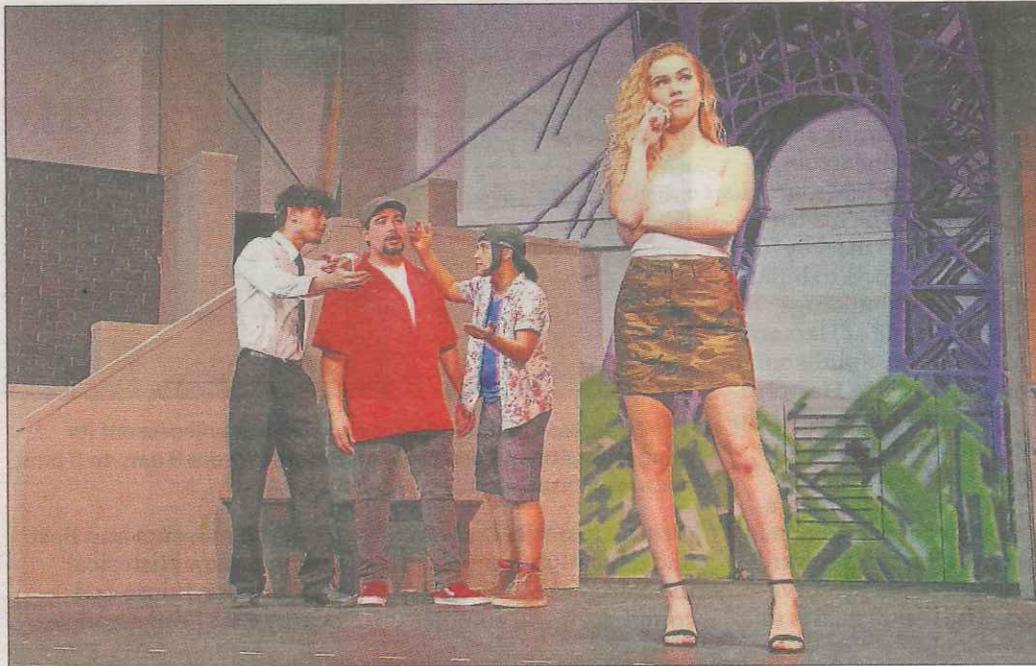
"In the Heights" follows a bodega owner named Usnavi (played by HCC student Michael Borges of Springfield) and other residents of a Latino community in the Washington Heights neighborhood of upper Manhattan over three days.

The show blends salsa, hip-hop, rap and Broadway ballads, and according to Sandoval, is challenging because Miranda tells the story through the music rather than in dialogue and song like a traditional Broadway musical.

"The interest for the young people is it speaks to them; it is their story," Sandoval said. "Everyone (in rehearsals) is enjoying the music and the dancing and the celebration of the Latino community."

HCC music professor and college chorale director Ellen Cogen serves as musical director for the production and plays piano along with a nine-piece orchestra comprised mostly of HCC faculty.

She said the show has a



HCC student Ashley Morris, front, of Chicopee, plays Vanessa in the Holyoke Community College production of the Lin-Manuel Miranda musical "In the Heights." Behind her is, from left, Michael Luciano, from Springfield, as Benny the dispatcher, HCC student Michael Borges as bodega owner Usnavi, and Melina Garcia, from Holyoke, as Sonny.

## IF YOU GO

**Event:** "In the Heights"  
**When:** Tomorrow-Saturday, 7 p.m.; ASL interpreted performance on Friday.  
**Where:** Leslie Phillips Theater, Holyoke Community College, 303 Homestead Avenue  
**Cost:** \$10 general admission, \$8 students and seniors, \$5 HCC community  
**Tickets:** Online at [hcctheater.brownpapertickets.com](http://hcctheater.brownpapertickets.com) or purchase tickets at the door.

similar vibe to "Hamilton," winner of 11 Tony Awards and the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

"The accessibility of our show is incredible," Cogen said. "Ten dollars is the most expensive ticket. The level of the talent is strong, and so is the energy. People will get so much more than their money's worth."

Alberto Sandoval Sánchez, professor emeritus at Mount Holyoke College and expert in Latino studies, served as a consultant for the production.

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Patricia Sandoval

"I saw 'In the Heights' a few times on Broadway. It was spectacular — a hip-hop musical for a new generation. This was the first Broadway show with a full cast of Latina/o actors, singers and dancers," he said in an email. "Although it was a box-office success on Broadway, I always wondered what it would be like to bring it to a community-based theater."

Sandoval, the director (no relation to Sandoval Sánchez except for having been his student at Mount Holyoke), said Sánchez's involvement helped students understand the play's significance — and the culture behind it.

"I am always paying attention to their body language," Sánchez said. "Most important, I pay attention to their Spanish. There are many words in Spanish and phras-

es. I work with pronunciation and enunciation. I want them to feel the Spanish."

Miranda grew up in the Inwood section of Manhattan, north of Washington Heights. His parents were born in Puerto Rico and met in graduate school at New York University.

He started writing the musical in 1999 during his sophomore year at Wesleyan University in Connecticut. It premiered in 2005 at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Waterford, Conn., before moving off-Broadway in 2007 and then to the Richard Rodgers Theatre in 2008, where it won four Tony Awards, including one for best musical.

"A lot of the show comes out of the theme of home, and what we define as home," Miranda told "Playbill" at the

time. "It's especially a struggle for those of us who were born here and have parents who speak nostalgically of where they came from. What do we take with us? What traditions do we pass on to our kids?"

Tiffany Joseph, an instructor at The Center dance studio in Amherst, choreographed the HCC performance (and plays Graffiti Pete), drawing on the theme of home — as in cast members' roots — to elicit authentic movement from the non-professional dancers in the cast.

"Each character has specific feelings and emotions and they bring that out in dance," she said. "Since most are Latino, when they're doing salsa and meringue they feel it in their bodies."

The "In the Heights" cast includes HCC students Michael Borges, of Springfield; Ashley Morris, of Chicopee; Rochelli Smith, of Springfield; Nanette Mendieta, of Holyoke; Rose Soucie, of Westfield; Zachary Martins, of Holyoke; Joseph Ramah, of Chicopee; Jerannchris Rivera-Heredia, of Springfield; Chestina Thrower, of Springfield, high school students Michael Luciano, of Springfield; Adriel Berrios, of Holyoke; Melina Garcia, of Holyoke, HCC alumni Adriana Piantedosi, of Northampton; Axel Cruz, of Chicopee, HCC staff member Shannon Sarkisian, of Holyoke, as well as community members Adrianelys Sanchez, of Springfield; Tiffany Joseph, of Amherst and Maya Kirsti, of Northampton. Professional dancers involved in the production are Steve Bailey, of Easthampton; Roxanne Labato-Bailey, of Easthampton; Waleska Santiago, of Springfield and Junior Lozada, of Northampton.

The show opened Nov. 8 on the stage of HCC's Leslie Phillips Theater and will be staged again tomorrow through Saturday at 7 p.m., with an ASL interpreted performance on Friday.