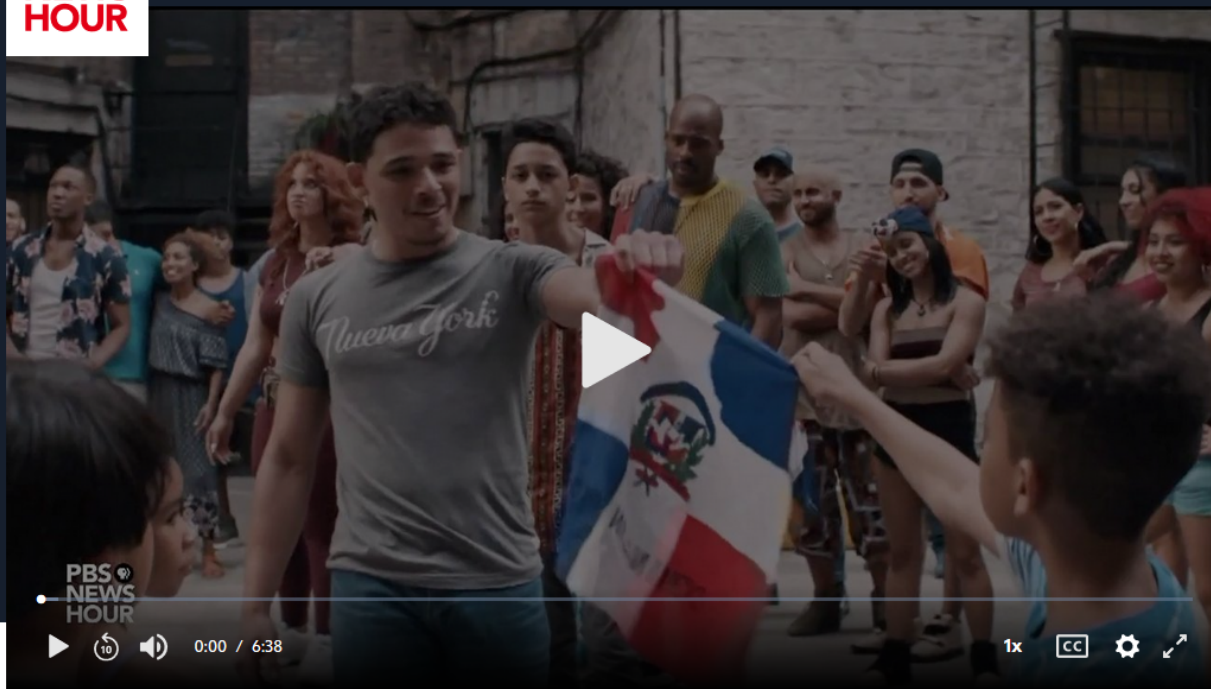




Menu



# 'In the Heights' uplifts a Latino community and helps reframe Hollywood roles

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**Transcript** **Audio**

Blockbuster films delayed by the pandemic are now hitting the big screen. Among the first of the summer season is “In the Heights,” which opened Thursday in theaters and streams on HBO Max. As Jeffrey Brown reports, the modern-day musical with a Latino cast set in a Manhattan neighborhood has high ambitions of shaking up Hollywood and beyond. It is part of our arts and culture series, "CANVAS."

## Read the Full Transcript

## **Judy Woodruff:**

As movie theaters begin to reopen nationwide, blockbuster films delayed by the pandemic are now hitting the big screen.

Among the first of the summer season, "In the Heights," which opens today in theaters and streams on HBO Max.

As Jeffrey Brown reports, this modern-day musical, with a Latino cast front and center, is set in a specific neighborhood, Washington Heights in Manhattan. But it has high ambitions of shaking up Hollywood and beyond.

The story is part of our ongoing arts and culture series, Canvas.

## **Actor:**

Barrio called Washington Heights, where the streets were made of music.

## **Jeffrey Brown:**

It's a big-budget, big song and dance film about little dreams, or suenitos, in a community often overlooked in life and in Hollywood.

**Leslie Grace:**

The specificity of the story is what made me feel so seen and so validated. I knew I wanted to be part of this.

**Jeffrey Brown:**

For once, says 26-year-old Leslie Grace, born in the Bronx to Dominican parents, that specificity is about Latinos living ordinary lives, not stereotypical film roles.

Grace plays Nina Rosario, whose father has sacrificed all to send her to Stanford, with the weight of the entire neighborhood's hopes and expectations on her shoulders, a feeling she and others in this nearly all-Latino cast understood all too well.

As you were growing up, did you see people like yourself? And as you were thinking and becoming a young actor, did you feel like there were roles for you?

**Leslie Grace:**

I didn't. A lot of us didn't. A lot of us didn't have the fortune. That's why I think we all felt like Nina at a certain point, feeling responsible for this story and immortalize it in a way that would make people feel seen and would make little boys and girls feel like, oh, they look like me, and I can do that.

## Jeffrey Brown:

"In the Heights," the theater musical, opened on Broadway in 2008, and won a Tony Award for best musical.

It was Lin-Manuel Miranda first big show before the smash-hit "Hamilton," and he wrote it, with Quiara Alegria Hudes, in part to create new roles for Latino actors like himself.

This time, Anthony Ramos plays the lead character. Miranda has a small part as a street vendor and a large role as producer. And he and now-screenwriter Hudes have teamed with director Jon Chu of "Crazy Rich Asians" to turn the real Washington Heights into a grand stage, the bodegas and salons, apartment buildings and fire escapes, the hot summer days, a place where people from different islands, nations, and backgrounds can together build a new home.

Olga Merediz plays Abuela, or grandmother, Claudia, the matriarch of the block who encourages its young residents to remember their past while chasing their suenitos.

Merediz is a theater, TV, and film veteran, who remembers the days of being cast as maids and other marginal characters. Here, in the role she originated in the theater production, she's given a show-stopping number, "Paciencia Y Fe."



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**Olga Merediz:**

Lin-Manuel Miranda took this invisible character, this person that, maybe if she was walking down the street, you would not see her, and you would kind of say, move out of the way, I need to go wherever I need to go. I'm humbled to give her the platform that she deserves.

**Jeffrey Brown:**

In one scene, Abuela Claudia shows Nina some hand-embroidered napkins her mother had made. This, too, hit home.

**Olga Merediz:**

Sometimes, we have to find those little mementos, those things from our past. I have albums of pictures from my Cuban family, so I don't forget where I come from.

**Jeffrey Brown:**

According to a 2021 UCLA study of Hollywood diversity, while Latinos make up nearly 19 percent of the U.S. population, they account for 29 percent of movie tickets sold, yet still get fewer than 6 percent of all film roles.

"In the Heights" changes the picture in an interesting way, normalizing Latino life on screen, according to Chon Noriega director of the school's Chicano Studies Research Center.

**Chon Noriega:**

What really struck me just early on is just you get those details. And the details are not narrated to you.

You're hit with a lot of things that are just day-to-day life, the nature of exchanges, the types of products, the way people dress.

**Jeffrey Brown:**

The food, of course, that we're seeing.

**Chon Noriega:**

The food and the ways in which they interact with each other that are marked not by being a homogeneous population, but by being internally diverse within one of the most diverse cities in the world.

**Jeffrey Brown:**

Noriega cites past moments for Latinos on screen, Desi Arnaz in "I Love Lucy," the films "La Bamba," "Zoot Suit," and others, the more complicated example of "West Side Story," where, the great Rita Moreno aside, most Latino characters were played by white actors.

A remake by Steven Spielberg due out in December promises to change that. But bigger change?

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**Chon Noriega:**

You kind of pick up on a sense of doubt about it, because, over the long run, of the last 40 to 50 years, it hasn't changed. This is a great way to call that question.

It's good to be hopeful about it, and to see this as something that can be not the signal of change, but a launching pad for further change.

**Jeffrey Brown:**

Olga Merediz says now is exactly the moment for "In the Heights."

**Olga Merediz:**

This movie is a game-changer. I don't know if it's the timing of — we're finishing this pandemic, thank God, and people are just craving for joy and light and music and positivity.

**Jeffrey Brown:**

For the "PBS NewsHour," I'm Jeffrey Brown.

**Judy Woodruff:**

We could use a lot of joy. And can't wait to watch that one.