

Director draws inspiration and talent from area's vibrant Latino community

HOLYOKE – 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.

Sandoval found it 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," Sandoval 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.

The show opened Thursday, Nov. 8 and will be performed seven times over the next two weeks on the stage of HCC's Leslie Phillips Theater. The story 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]



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HCC student Ashley Morris, front, of Chicopee plays Vanessa in the HCC Theater Department's production of the Lin-Manuel Miranda musical "In the Heights," Nov. 8 through Nov. 10 and Nov. 15 through Nov. 17. Behind her is HCC student Michael Borges in the red shirt as bodega owner Usnavi and Michael Luciano of Springfield as Benny, a dispatcher, and Melina Garcia of

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

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, who had been a student of Sandoval Sanchez at Mount Holyoke, said his involvement helped students understand the play's significance, and the culture behind it. "I am always paying attention to their body language," he said. "Most important, I pay attention to their Spanish. There are many words in Spanish and phrases. I work with pronunciation and enunciation. I want them to feel the Spanish."

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."

Performances are Nov. 8 through Nov. 10 and Nov. 15 through Nov. 17 at 7 p.m., with a matinee at 2 p.m. on Nov. 10, in HCC's Leslie Phillips Theater. The Nov. 16 performance will be ASL interpreted. Tickets are available at hcctheater.brownpapertickets.com and are \$10 for general admission, \$8 for students and seniors, and \$5 for members of the HCC community. If not sold out, they will be available at the door.

"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 Sanchez, professor emeritus at Mount Holyoke College and expert in Latino Studies, served as a consultant for the production and scholar-in-residence at HCC. "I saw 'In the Heights' a few times on Broadway.