



Audio Description Pre-Show Notes: In the Heights

The Venue

In the Heights will take place in the Drama Theatre, one of the Opera House's smaller theatres located in the Western Foyer. The theatre has about 540 seats, arranged in 19 straight rows sloping down toward the stage. The concrete walls are painted black, the floor is carpeted in a deep blue, and the chairs are made of a white birch wood with orange upholstery.

There is no permanent orchestra pit in the Drama Theatre. For this performance, the musicians will be tucked at the back of the stage, hidden behind the set so that they will be heard but not seen by the audience.

The Set

The setting on stage is a city block in Washington Heights, New York - an area populated mainly by Hispanic people of Caribbean and Latin American origin. The whole area is a bit run down and a bit shabby and grimy.

In a curved row around a central square is a mixture of residential buildings and small businesses. The buildings are all made of red-brown bricks, some lighter-coloured than the others. The brick building façades are simply painted onto individual long screens which hang down from metal scaffolding. The scaffolding enhances the idea of the area being a little industrial and run down.

There are four tall brick buildings – two on the left of stage and two on the right. In the centre of these at the back of the stage is a small New York style corner shop, or bodega, looking a little like a caravan. It is half the height of the other buildings.

The buildings especially do not look as they would in real life. The shops have their inside areas on show in front of the façade. Actors simply walk in and out of them at will, moving seamlessly between the inside and outside spaces on stage. There are no doors or shop windows to separate them from the street.

The back of the set is a screen, showing a blue sky with the Brooklyn Bridge stretching from left to right in the distance. The bridge has two large stone pylons in the foreground. These support a road and a span of iron in a concave arch.

The stage floor is painted like an intersection of a city road: black with a few white lines, including a zebra crossing.

Strings of electric wires with light bulbs loop across top of the stage. Various Latin American flags are scattered about the set, hanging behind the bodega counter and draped over parts of the scaffolding.

The Buildings

The main character, Usnavi, runs a bodega which is situated in the middle at the back of the stage. It is a small building, a bit like a caravan, with a roll down shutter that he calls a "grate". The bodega is coloured pink, and the shutter is silver with the word Pete graffitied on the top right.

In front of the shop is a long, wheeled counter, covered with a white sheet. When uncovered, the bodega is open for business. The counter consists of two deep shelves containing soft drink cans, sweets, potato chips and household goods such as detergent and washing powders. On top is a coffee machine.

On the left of this shop is Abuela Claudia's house. It is a two-storey building a bit smaller than those surrounding it – about three-quarters their height, with bare metal scaffolding extending out the top to the heights of the surrounding buildings. It is made of brick, but has pale stone edging on the sides.

There is a tall door in the middle. It is made of frosted glass with brown timber borders and frame. A large round light hangs down over the top of the door.

A set of two concrete steps with concrete railings leads from the door down to the street. A comfortable armchair is placed to the left of the stairs. It has short side-wings, plump seat cushions and is in a grey patterned fabric. It has clearly seen better days.

On the left of this and closest to the audience, there is a building with a white sign saying “Rosario’s Car and Limousine” in red and black writing. There is a white shuttered window above the sign.

This is one of the shops where the inside is situated in the front of the façade. There is a timber desk stretching from the left of the stage to halfway across the shop front. It is the dispatch desk. On the desk are a baby photo, a family photo, a telephone, and an old dispatch radio set, with a handheld microphone and large pair of headphones.

Now back to Usnavi’s bodega at the centre back. The next brick building to the shop’s right has fire escape steps leading up from the stage to a small landing or balcony with a railing around it. The steps then continue up the brick wall behind the landing. There are two windows – one at the top of the stairs and one to the right. Plastic soft drink crates are scattered underneath the landing.

To the right of this, and closest to the right-hand side of the stage and the audience, is the Hair Salon. It has a sign with red and black writing proclaiming, “Dominican Style Hair Salon”. There is a single long window above the sign.

Once again the inside of the shop is in front of the façade. There is a standalone counter which is waist high with padded black leather on the front. On top of the counter is a small sign with the shop’s name, photos, bottles of hair products and a small Puerto Rican flag. In front of the counter there are two high barstools with round, black, padded leather seats, small, curved back rests and stainless-steel circular footrests. The chairs can be wheeled around. Occasionally, a small movable three-draw trolley with scissors and shampoos is wheeled out.

A garbage can is laying on its side between the salon counter and fire escape landing.

The Cast and Characters

Twelve main cast members and seven ensemble members make up the vibrant inhabitants of Washington Heights. They are mostly of Latin American and Hispanic heritage, reflecting the real, modern-day communities of this New York neighbourhood or *barrio*. They are dressed in a variety of summer clothes, work uniforms, and streetwear.

Spanish-Australian Ryan Gonzalez, who uses they/them pronouns, is an actor in their late 20s with an average build, light olive skin, and dark hair. They will be playing the role of bodega owner **Usnavi De La Vega**, who will be referred to using he/him pronouns. Usnavi wears his hair short under a black flat cap, with a full dark goatee and moustache framing his mouth. At the beginning of the musical, he is wearing baggy, faded blue jeans and well-worn white sneakers. A mustard yellow, short-sleeved button-up is worn open over a clean white singlet that bulges slightly around his paunchy belly.

Usnavi is an unhurried but active presence on the stage, always finding odd jobs to do around the bodega. He saunters about with a relaxed, sometimes tired air. He will at times address the audience directly, and will often accompany his communication with large, energetic gestures.

Usnavi employs his younger cousin **Sonny** in the bodega. Sonny will be played by Steve Costi, who uses he/him pronouns. He is in his 20s with olive skin, a slim build, and dark hair cut short on the sides and a little longer on top. At the start of the show, Sonny is wearing knee-length grey denim cargo shorts, white Nike sneakers, and an open grey hoodie over a black and white patterned t-shirt. He has a silver whistle on a chain around his neck, and is often seen with a tea towel slung over a shoulder or in his hands. Sonny is full of beans, always on the move with a bounce in his step.

Filipina-Australian Lena Cruz, who uses she/her pronouns, plays **Abuela Claudia**, a grandmother-figure to Usnavi and much of the neighbourhood (“Abuela” is the Spanish word for “Grandmother”). She has olive skin and a slight build. A grey wig tied back in a short, low ponytail makes Lena Cruz appear several decades older than she is offstage.

When Abuela Claudia is first introduced, she is wearing a short-sleeved blue midi housedress patterned with yellow and white daisies, a white apron around her waist, a red and yellow sleeveless woollen cardigan, and slip-on yellow loafers patterned with blue flowers. She moves about the stage stiffly and carefully, hunched slightly over.

Young Latina Australian Olivia Dacal, who uses she/her pronouns, will be playing the role of college student **Nina Rosario**. She is in her early 20s and fresh-faced, with an average build, fair skin, and long, curly dark hair.

When we meet her, Nina is wearing low-rise boot-cut blue jeans with a thin, pale-coloured belt, white sneakers, and a sleeveless pink button-up blouse with two longer ends tied in a decorative knot at the front. Nina is a gentle soul who doesn't like to take up much space on the stage. She stands with shoulders a little slouched, arms hanging limp at her sides.

Nina's parents are middle-aged Car Service owners **Kevin and Camila Rosario**, played by Colombian-Australian performers Alexander Palacio and Angela Rosero.

Alexander Palacio, using he/him pronouns, is tall with a solid build and slightly protruding belly. He has lightly tan skin with a bald head, thick dark eyebrows, and a well-trimmed dark stubble beard flecked with grey. At the beginning of the musical, Kevin Rosario is dressed for work in a white business shirt, red tie, long dark trousers and brown patent leather shoes.

Angela Rosero, using she/her pronouns, is average height and slender with olive skin and long, curly black hair. At the beginning of the show, Camila Rosario is wearing a sleeveless red blouse tucked into a flowing ankle-length white skirt with green and red vertical stripes and a green belt. She wears simple beige heels and carries a brown leather handbag slung over one shoulder.

South African-born Barry Conrad, who uses he/him pronouns, plays **Benny**, an African American in his early 20s who is an employee of the Rosarios and friend of Usnavi. He is tall and slim with an athletic build, chiselled jaw, and brown skin. His dark brown hair is in a short, well-groomed afro style, close-cropped around the sides with tight curls on top.

Benny is keen to impress and takes pride in his appearance. At the beginning of the musical, he is neatly dressed for work at the Car Service, wearing a short-sleeved pale-coloured business shirt with black tie, trousers, and shoes. Benny is eager and restless, often shifting his weight between his feet when he stands still.

Olivia Vásquez, who uses she/her pronouns, plays the role of **Vanessa**, an employee at the local salon. She is in her late 20s, with olive skin, a curvy build, and long, dark curly hair in a half-up, half-down style. When we meet her, Vanessa is wearing a tight red camisole tucked into form-fitting light-coloured jeans that flare out slightly from the knee, and white sneakers. She accessorises with a decorative chain belt, a short, thin gold necklace, and a small white leather cross-body bag.

Vanessa is a confident, forceful presence on the stage; she plants her feet firmly apart when she stands still, and walks with a strong step, hips swaying slightly.

Also working at the salon are **owner Daniela and employee Carla**, played by American Janet Dacal and Latinx Australian Tamara Foglia Castañeda, both using she/her pronouns.

Janet Dacal is in her 40s and Tamara Foglia Castañeda is younger, in her 20s. Both women have tan skin and are of similar height and build. When they are introduced, both are wearing bold make-up, tight skinny jeans that accentuate their curves, and tall, strappy stiletto heels that cause them to walk with short, mincing steps. They flounce and sashay about with hips swinging.

Daniela has a voluminous shoulder-length mane of springy brown curls and wears a short-sleeved button-up blouse with a bold pink and green tropical print, a large gold tote bag hooked over an arm. Carla has straightened, waist-length hair with two little space buns on top, and wears a light pink, form-fitting strappy midriff top, carrying a small dark leather purse in one hand.

Peruvian Australian Richard Valdez, who uses he/him pronouns, plays the role of the **Piragua Guy**, who sells a Puerto Rican icy treat similar to an Australian snow cone or slushie. He is middle-aged, with light brown skin, an average build, a bald head and a very short beard of dark hair flecked with grey.

At the beginning of the musical, the Piragua Guy wears a white apron over blue jeans and a red shirt, with a green cap and dark trainers, a tea towel over his shoulder, and a whistle hanging from his neck.

He is often seen pushing his bright yellow wooden Piragua cart, which has the red, white and blue Puerto Rican flag painted on the side with the word Piragua. The cart carries shaved ice, bright-coloured plastic cones, and clear plastic bottles of coloured fruit syrups.

Jervis Livelo, who uses he/him pronouns, plays street artist **Graffiti Pete**. He is in his late 20s, with tan/olive skin and a slim, fit build. His dark hair is cropped in a short buzz cut and he has the faintest hint of a moustache. When we meet him, Graffiti Pete is wearing black tracksuit pants, white trainers, and an open grey-green hoodie over a red t-shirt. He wears a

black cap turned backwards and carries a black backpack full of spray cans and other contraband.

Other residents of the *barrio*, played by the ensemble, include a sporty youngster who enjoys tossing a baseball, a pink-clad Instagrammer who is always on her phone, a young couple, and a well-groomed young ladies' man whose retro-style shirt is partly unbuttoned to reveal a patch of his chest.

Throughout the show, the many residents of the Washington Heights neighbourhood create a hive of activity, often bustling about the stage interacting with each other as well as the different businesses on the block. They also love to dance! Their dancing is a high-energy and freestyle mix of Latin Salsa and Hip Hop.

The Salsa dance style is rhythmic and sultry, with rolling hips, quick-stepping feet, and fluid shoulders and arms. Dancers often gravitate toward each other to dance in pairs, twirling around each other and mirroring their partner's movements before drifting apart again.

The Hip Hop dance style is flashy and acrobatic. Dancers bounce, pop and lock, their arms and legs bending and extending, sometimes keeping low to the floor and other times popping up like springs. They perform break-dancing moves, flipping and spinning effortlessly in a flurry of feet, torsos, hands, and heads.