Q & A with Lin-Manuel Miranda

Lin-Manuel Miranda is the funny, irrepressible, Tony Award-winning composer and lyricist of *In the Heights*, which he initially conceived while studying at Wesleyan University. The show, which follows a close-knit community of immigrants living in New York’s Washington Heights, moves to the beat of Latin and hip hop music, and won the 2008 Tony Award for Best Musical. *In the Heights* was directed by Thomas Kail, choreographed by Andy Blankenbuehler – who also received a Tony Award – and features a book by Quiara Alegría Hudes. The musical opened off-Broadway at 37 Arts Theater on February 8, 2007, and a revised version opened on Broadway on March 9, 2008. The national tour was launched/launches in October, 2009.

Q: Although you’ve brought a new sound to musical theater, it’s very clear that you’re a Broadway baby.

A: Absolutely.

Q: How did you get interested in musicals?

A: Through cast albums. My mom used to blast the *Camelot* cast album in her car. Every year after we had a party, the clean-up music was *Man of La Mancha* – I have no idea why. Broadway, for me, was what it was for most people: something you went to on special occasions, for a birthday or when you got good grades. The first show I saw was *Les Mis*. I fell asleep: I was in second grade. But my parents brought home the CD, and I remember my mom bawling every time “Bring Him Home” came on. So at a really young age, I saw how theater music affected people. And then I saw *Phantom*, which is, at the end of the day, about an ugly songwriter. And I said, “Oh, this is about me.” I was at the cusp of puberty at the time. I related very deeply. And then I got a couple of parts in our sixth-grade play. We had this very ambitious music teacher who had us do 20-minute versions of six musicals. So I got a lethal dosage. I was Bernardo, Captain Hook, a son in *Fiddler*. The sixth-grade play was a big tradition at our elementary school, and they’d sort of run out of age-appropriate musicals by the time I was 12. So we did abbreviated versions of the previous six years.

Q: Did you continue to act in high school?

A: I got to play the Pirate King in *The Pirates of Penzance* when I was in ninth grade. It was a big deal to get the lead in ninth grade. I ended up learning behind the scenes. Our school
productions were entirely student run. We had adult advisers, but our shows weren’t faculty
directed. So I began learning about every aspect of the process, and actually moved into
directing. I assistant directed *A Chorus Line*, and directed *West Side Story* in my senior year. I
also had a wonderful English teacher, Rembert Herbert, who really encouraged my writing. I
would do these very far-out projects for his class, and actually wrote two one-act musicals in
high school. I also wrote an essay on Stephen King’s *It* – we could write an essay on a book of
our choice – and I remember him writing, “This essay confirms what I’ve been feeling for some
time now: you’ve been hibernating in the back of my class.” He really pushed me.

*Q: And then, of course, you wrote *In the Heights* when you were a sophomore at Wesleyan. How did this come about?*

A: To this day, I ask myself how it came about, because it has so much to do with the rest of my
life. But a couple of things happened. My high school sweetheart was going abroad to study in
the Dominican Republic, and I was very conflicted about it. We’d been together for about four
years, and this was my first time on my own. I started writing *In the Heights* the day after she
left, and finished it two weeks later. It was all about the angst I had over the relationship.

The other thing is that when I was directing *West Side Story* in high school, a musical opened on
Broadway called *The Capeman*, written by Paul Simon. I truly believed that it was going to be
the greatest musical in the history of the universe, because it featured two of my heroes, Marc
Anthony and Ruben Blades, and had a score by my third hero, Paul Simon, who to this day has
never written a bad song. But it was about a Puerto Rican gang member, and Latinos in the
show were portrayed as knife-wielding murderers from the ’50s – and this was 40 years after
*West Side Story*. How specific a subset can you get? I had a very conflicted relationship with the
musical. I saw it three times in previews and loved the score. But it didn’t work as a show. It
works as a concert. And it broke my heart because the critics ripped it up. It sort of began this
curse that Latino musicals can’t succeed on Broadway. I spent two years in my head trying to fix
*Capeman*. But I couldn’t. So this was the other reason I wrote *In the Heights*.

*Q: But you didn’t actually grow up in Washington Heights*

A: I lived just north of the cutoff. I grew up on 200th Street in Inwood. But I would walk to the
Cloisters all the time; I took piano lessons on 181st Street. My parents were very involved in the
Washington Heights community, so I know it as well as I know my own neighborhood. It’s very
close by. Anyway, they say write what you know, so the first version of the show was a very
angst-ridden love triangle that takes place in Washington Heights. It’s not called Inwood
because the hook “In Washington Heights” got into my head, and that was it.

*Q: It’s quite a leap to take a musical from college to Broadway. How did that happen?*

A: The show did extraordinarily well in college. We had lines around the block. And by a total
fluke, I wound up with a cast album. The weekend we were scheduled to do the show was the
same weekend as the 2000 Millennium Concert at Wesleyan. All the good musicians were
playing the concert. So I used my sound budget to get some musicians into a studio – literally a
barn – and we recorded tracks. While we were there, we had the cast perform the vocals on
the tracks. So we had two versions of the music – the version the cast sang to during that
original Wesleyan production, and the one that they sang over. We sold copies of the album –
that was the only way I was going to make back our sound budget. Two seniors, Neil Stewart
and John Mailer, told me they were going to start a theater company and that they wanted to
help bring the show to New York. I thought, “Yeah, sure.” But they started Back House productions with Tommy Kail and Anthony Veneziale, and it happened. And Tommy was able to hear the music, all because we didn’t have a band.

The credit for this show getting from Wesleyan to Broadway really goes to Tommy Kail. He’s an incredible director. He’s excellent at making sure that everyone’s writing the same show, which is one of the hardest things to do in musicals. Even before we had producers, he had us meet every Friday, bring in songs, bring in scenes, and pick them apart. There have been five different plots, and 60 cut songs. Writing this show was like my grad school degree.

Q: In the opening number, “In the Heights,” you honor the past with references to Duke Ellington’s “Take the A Train” and to Cole Porter’s “Too Darn Hot.” My guess is that you saw those as important signposts for the audience. Is that true?

A: One of the things we try to do in the opening number is say, “Hey, you may be somewhere you’ve never been before, but it’s fine, you’re going to like it.” We’re trying to make the audience feel as taken care of as possible. What’s great is that when people catch that Cole Porter reference, you can literally see them relax. There’s another reference in the show that no one seems to have gotten. I wrote the song “Enough,” after Priscilla Lopez [the original Diana Morales in A Chorus Line] was cast. At the end of the song, there’s a trumpet line that’s cribbed straight from “What I Did for Love.” It’s our in-joke, and acknowledgement that Priscilla Lopez was back on Broadway.

Q: There’s a considerable amount of Spanish spoken in the show. Are you at all concerned that audiences who don’t speak Spanish will have trouble understanding what’s happening at certain moments?

A: Most of our audience is your typical, theater-going audience. It’s wonderful that we’ve become an event show for Latinos on Broadway, but the overwhelming majority of people who come to see our show – and this was particularly true off-Broadway – don’t speak a word of Spanish. And they come away loving it. They understand it. We’ve taken great care to make sure you get everything in context. We sneak in Spanish little by little at the top of the show, and by the end, we’re giving whole dollops of it. People are with it, they’re nodding their heads. We’ve tried to use Spanish in the way that Jerome Robbins used dance: when we get to a point where English won’t suffice, we break into Spanish.

Q: You also use a number of Yiddishisms in the show. Is that a way of paying homage to earlier immigrants, or is it just part of your experience as a New Yorker?

A: It’s a little of both. Musical theater’s roots are in vaudeville, which is a Jewish tradition. So we’re honoring that. But I grew up in New York, and it’s part of who I am as well. I think I went to more bar and bat mitzvahs than anyone. We also have an amazing Jewish population in Washington Heights; it’s home to Yeshiva University. So it’s all of those things. But mainly it’s a part of my upbringing.

Q: What do your parents do?

A: My dad is a political consultant. When I was growing up, he was the assistant to Mayor Koch for Hispanic affairs, and then he founded the Hispanic Federation. But now he works in political consulting. And my mom is a clinical psychologist. They met at NYU, post doc for psychology.
My dad came here from Puerto Rico on a scholarship when he was 18, met my mom, and never went back home.

**Q: You were saying that your mom cries whenever she hears the song “Bring Him Home.” Does she cry through In the Heights as well?**

A: My mom cries if you bring up the show. If you say to my mom, “Did you know your boy . . . ,” she’ll interrupt and say, “I’ve known since he was a little boy.”

**Q: As a newcomer to Broadway, were you welcomed by the community?**

A: That was the happiest surprise in this entire process – how welcoming the community is of new voices and new talent. It’s really remarkable. Over the course of the past couple of years, I’ve gotten a chance to befriend my heroes in a very real sense. One of our earliest supporters was John Kander, who saw the show off-Broadway. He and I have lunch once a month now. He’s always talking about process – he loves talking about the stuff you can’t talk about with anyone else, in terms of writing a song and how it works. And I got to work with Arthur Laurents and Stephen Sondheim on *West Side Story* [translating some of the lyrics and dialogue into Spanish], and I got to work with Stephen Schwartz on a new version of *Working*. Everyone’s been so welcoming. It’s quite humbling.

**Q: In the Heights, among other things, is about hopes and dreams. Are you a dreamer?**

A: I don’t know where I’d be if I weren’t. More often than not, musical theater doesn’t work. There are a lot of bad musicals in the world. But when it works, it’s more transporting than anything else. It’s magical. I don’t know how you work in musical theater if you’re not a dreamer.

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