

# LATIN SCORCHER

**Marianka Swain** is fired up by *In the Heights* at Southwark Playhouse on May 15

**T**hose fearing the imminent demise of the musical can rest easy. The West End may be alive with the sound of early closures, but Tony Award-winning *In the Heights*, which combines creative authenticity and thematic universality, is flying high.

Lin-Manuel Miranda drew on his experience of New York's multicultural Washington Heights to create this rich tapestry of intersecting lives: Usnavi, bodega vendor and community linchpin; swaggering cousin Sonny; honorary abuela Claudia; Nina, the Stanford scholar returning home; struggling gypsy cab company owners Kevin and Camila Rosario; African-American employee Benny; salon owner Daniela, priced out of the neighbourhood; and debt-laden Vanessa, dreaming of escape.

There is a certain sanitisation – no drugs, gangs or violence, just artistic graffiti and one instance of petty theft. However, book

writer Quiara Alegría Hudes does convey the bracing economic hardship and challenges of immigrant life.

The fast-paced tale takes place over three days, one of which is Independence Day; no coincidence for a show addressing the tension of identity shaped by both heritage and adopted nationhood, and the lure of the American Dream. It does tend towards soap opera – or telenovela – but is mostly delivered with enough conviction to win our investment.

Luke Sheppard's dynamic company threatens to burst from the stage, and eventually does, with performers carrying their easy banter and passionate singing out into the stands. Miranda's strikingly original score fuses articulate rap, salsa, pop, rock and traditional show tunes, underpinned by a pulsating percussive heartbeat.

It's meaty fare for Drew McOnie, and he does it justice

with his freewheeling, spontaneous choreography. Whether athletic hip hop or fiery club salsa, his work is breathlessly daring while maintaining its grounded, urban vibe.

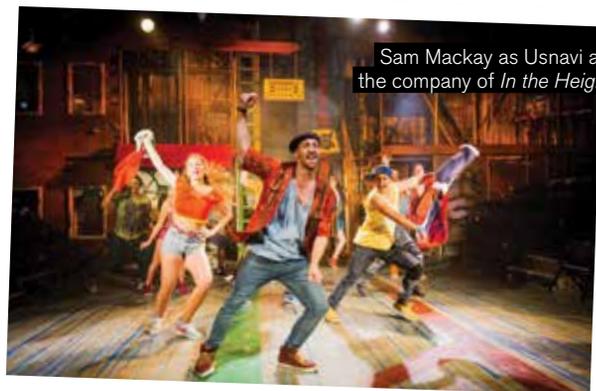
The ballads, which sometimes lack urgency, are given an extra dimension with engaging movement that also illustrates central themes, such as the conflict between communal bonds and individual expression. Big set-piece numbers build organically, layering in flying lifts and silky-smooth partnering, to a storming climax.

Sam Mackay is a sincere, affecting Usnavi, Damian Buhagiar's Sonny

amusingly naïve and an impressive mover, Wayne Robinson a soulful Benny, and David Bedella commanding as Rosario.

But it's the women who rule the roost, both in the story and the cast. Christina Modestou and Emma Kingston bring soaring, yearning vocals to Nina and Vanessa respectively; Eve Polycarpou is a gutsy Claudia; Josie Benson relishes Camila's sensual strength – "I dance best when I'm angry!"; and Victoria Hamilton-Barritt as brassy bombshell Daniela steals the show with her pin-sharp comic timing.

*In the Heights* may fall victim to predictable plotting, with a second act largely free of suspense, but this committed company ensures their vibrant production is a real summer sizzler. ●



Sam Mackay as Usnavi and the company of *In the Heights*