

Students use music to raise awareness of immigration issues



By Brock Weir

As so-called Dreamers in the United States wait for their futures to be taken out of limbo, local students are pooling their creativity to send a message that they are not alone.

Beginning March 1, King's Country Day School will raise the curtains on *In the Heights*, their production of the Pulitzer prize-winning musical by Hamilton creator Lin Manuel Miranda.

Inspired by his life growing up in the Barrio as a first generation American born to Puerto Rican immigrants, Miranda tells the story of a community on the brink of change, full of hopes, dreams and pressures, and everything it takes to be an American.

First staged in 2005, Country Day School is taking on the production at a time when its story and message is perhaps more relevant than ever before.

‘The real tipping point for us is that our student body is getting very diverse and, with the political climate being what it is in terms of how people see immigration, and maybe the lack of tolerance in the atmosphere politically around the world, made us think that this was something very important to address in our community,’ says teacher/director Scott Garbe, a resident of Aurora. ‘It is important not only in our school, but also York Region talking about the richness of diversity, why diversity is important, and why immigration is important.’

‘In the Heights basically dismantles every negative stereotype people have of immigrants and really shows how the community is very involved, close-knit, hard-working and striving and dreaming. There are a lot of lessons around resilience, tolerance, and empathy that we wanted to bring into our community.’

They are lessons the young actors are taking to heart as well.

Aurora’s Allyson Whitmell plays Nina, a young woman who is the first in her family, and quite possibly the first in her community, to go to university. While at university, Allyson says her character experiences significant pressure to succeed so, when she drops out, she had to face the reality of having let a lot of people down.

Amanda Malowney, on the other hand, plays Vanessa, the flipside of the coin. The Aurora student portrays a young woman who works her life at the neighbourhood salon, dreaming of the opportunities Nina enjoys but never having the wherewithal to get herself out of the Barrio.

‘She just works so hard for accomplishing her dream and that resonates with me, because if you focus on your dreams you can accomplish them if you really try,’ says Amanda.

Adds Allyson: ‘With everything that is going on in the world, there is just so much separation and everyone in this play just comes together and supports one another and it is definitely something the world in general just needs to have.’

‘You’re never alone,’ says Amanda.

Indeed, this is the message Country Day School hopes will get out to the wider community as well.

Through their production of *In the Heights*, CDS has partnered with the Hispanic Federation in New York City, a cause very close to the heart of Lin Manuel Miranda, to raise awareness of their Immigrants: We Get The Job Done Coalition, and Unidos: Disaster Relief and Recovery Program to Support Puerto Rico, a fund that was set up in the wake of last year's devastating hurricane. All ticket proceeds from the gala matinee performance of the musical on Saturday, March 3, will benefit both organizations.

"As a group, we have done a lot of research on the DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (Dreamers) policy)," says Mr. Garbe. "Every week, I would give the students a little assignment to go off and do some research."

The issue of DACA, where children of undocumented immigrants to the United States registered and were allowed to seek education and employment, and the fact that this policy could very well be rescinded, struck a particular chord amongst the participating students. He said to the students that each character they were taking on could be in the same situation as the Dreamers, they had to get themselves in the mindset that they might not be in the United States in a few months, "and everything you know and love could be taken from you."

"We tried to do a lot of homework in terms of getting ourselves rooted in the realities that community is facing and those issues are obviously universal as well," says Mr. Garbe. "[Musicals like this] are pieces of art and the more you work with it the more you discover, which is really appealing. I think students want to sink their teeth into things that have substance. They are not really interested in fluffy musicals that our generation or older might know. They want to engage the world in a meaningful way and [Miranda] does work that does just that."

In the Heights opens at Country Day School runs at Country Day School March 1 through March 3. For showtimes and ticket information, visit www.cds.on.ca/tickets. For more on the Hispanic Federation and how you can help either initiative, visit hispanicfederation.org.