Rising to New Heights- It's easy, at times, for young, buzzing actors and actresses to blissfully dance in the aromatic and tingly fog of their early success for too long, but Rayniel has a plan and a solidified strategy in place to realize his dreams to "become a household name, do the films I want to do, and keep creating."

Nestled snugly beneath the towering iron arches of the Henry Hudson Parkway's underbelly, La Marina Bar and Restaurant is making a name for itself as an opulent uptown hotspot for NYC Hispanic foodies and night owls. The restaurant's host neighborhood of Washington Heights isn't typically known as a NYC "destination," however, the tide is quickly changing and Rayniel Rufino is ready
for the surge.

On a bright, chilly Sunday afternoon, we met the 26-year old Dominican actor at La Marina for a photo shoot and to chat about his blossoming filmography. Rayniel was accompanied by Jonathan Ulman - the director of his latest film, Trouble in the Heights- - and a modest host of his neighborhood friends. While each shot's garments and accessories were carefully prepared, Rayniel was quick and eager to discuss the development of his short but exciting acting career. His first feature film, Liberty Kid, came about when his childhood friend invited him along to an audition in Harlem. Undaunted by his lack of acting experience, Rayniel fed off his friend's energy during their audition and succeeded in wowing the film's director. Both were cast in the film, at which point he caught what he referred to as "The Bug." He began networking, studying the art of acting, and preparing mentally to embrace acting as a career, because as he put it, "Manual labor has never been my thing." For most people, that comment would immediately project a premature and misguided sense of entitlement, but somehow it just sounded right coming from him. Maybe it's his calm, collected demeanor, or perhaps it's his decision to approach acting as an actual occupation rather than merely an artistic whimsy. Whatever the case be, there is no denying that the charismatic actor from Washington Heights is taking his profession and passion seriously. It's as if Rayniel heeded Dame Dash's advice to Kanye West as the prolific rapper prepared to drop his debut album, The College Dropout. On the album's closing track, Last Call, Dash says to West, "You got a deal with Capital? Okay man, just make sure it's not wack. You don't want to catch a brick." Similarly, our cover's front man is committed to avoiding bricks or blunders that could derail his career. "When your break comes, you have to be ready. You need to be ready. You need to know what you're doing. People want to take short cuts, but your audience can tell when you're not ready.

It's easy, at times, for young, buzzing actors and actresses to blissfully dance in the aromatic and tingly fog of their early success for too long, but Rayniel has a plan and a solidified strategy in place to realize his dreams to "become a household name, do the films I want to do, and keep creating." His strategy is rooted in opting for independent films - at this point in his career, those may be the only opportunities he is afforded, but he provides a strong rationale for continuing to do so. He appreciates the opportunity to be involved in the production of the actual film from beginning to end, for what better way to shepherd a budding acting career to the next level than to fully partake in and directly contribute to the successful development of each and every project? The hands-on approach comes easily, since he involves himself only in films that are real and tell great stories, ones about which he feels truly passionate. Those are the projects that will allow him to shine, independent of the film's other attributes.

We were given a glimpse into how this strategy is paying off during our discussion of Trouble in the Heights, a film featuring Rayniel as he portrays Diego, a young Dominican teen working as a sous-chef who must protect his younger teenage brother, Javy, from a drug kingpin in their Washington Heights neighborhood. He said he chose the script because it spoke to him through its strong focus on family and loyalty. While the film's turn of events were predictable and too often opted for best case scenarios, Rayniel's character, Diego, felt real. He really owned his character, demonstrating great range when his loving-brother persona believably morphed to bravado and machismo. In one such scene, nefarious criminal, Nevada (Raúl Esparza), threatens Diego, hoping to force the two brothers to work for him. A viewer might expect the tender and loving sous-chef to be pissing his pants, so to speak, during such an encounter, especially since Nevada is fresh from ordering his henchmen to murder an adolescent boy (Javy's neighborhood friend) by throwing him down onto the railroad tracks as a fast-moving train approaches. Although the film could've made the interaction between the two polar opposite characters more believable, Rayniel masterfully evolved into the predator and enabled the film to progress and resolve. Equipped with a keen eye for strong characters and stories, we can expect Rayniel to continue selecting films that showcase his dynamism as an actor.

Whatever the future holds for Rayniel, it's safe to say that he won't have to summit the Hollywood mountain unaided. It seems like Washington Heights or "The Heights" is at the tip of everyone's tongue these days. If The Uptown Collective, a popular blog dedicated solely to life in the predominately Dominican neighborhood wasn't enough of an indication of mass interest, then our national readers will surely have heard of MTV's new reality series, Washington Heights. The show follows nine Washington Heights residents as they embark on their personal journeys to achieve their dreams of becoming professional baseball players, musicians, artists, fashion designers, etc. Whether the show becomes MTV's next cash cow or not seems to be of little interest to the bustling neighborhood's residents, but the social dynamics brewing are truly a sight to behold. As our friends at The Uptown Collective write,

We couldn’t agree more. From the impressive list of Downtown-quality restaurants that masterfully blend traditional Hispanic cuisine with other culinary influences to the thriving nightlife scene that has gárgolas venturing uptown on the A train to Dyckman Street. Supporting all these initiatives, is the entrepreneurial spirit of its residents, which will only increase as first-generation college graduates return home and build upon the legacy of their parents. And let’s not forget the beautiful women inhabitants that seem to make every block you traverse that much more pleasant. A wonderful place, really.

Like Williamsburg in Brooklyn and Harlem before it, the Washington Heights area is poised to evolve into another cultural capital of our beloved New York City. Be on the lookout for an exciting year from The Heights and from our actor friend Rayniel Rufino in 2013!

Words by TBA