

Review Essays

Hamilton: An Act of Justice—in Two Acts

Robert Begley
Independent Writer

1. Introduction

“Every other founding father story gets told. Every other founding father gets to grow old.” By the time the audience hears these words—at the end of the Broadway show *Hamilton: An American Musical*¹—they have experienced joy, sorrow, pride, anger, and the life-giving values that made the United States the greatest country in world history.

At present I’ve seen the show several times both off and on Broadway. My plan is to see it as often as time and money allow. This is simply a matter of refueling the spirit. Each time I leave the theater I want to go right back in and see it again. I want to emulate the best elements of Alexander Hamilton—in writing, thinking, and action—because heroes inspire, and this musical superlatively portrays heroism.

To tell the story of someone so controversial—who has been maligned, misrepresented, and derided—and to tell it dramatically and convincingly, is a challenge. In his 2004 biography, *Alexander Hamilton*, Ron Chernow succeeds in that challenge.² Even if he gets some of the facts wrong,³ it is still an astonishing book. Chernow’s biography inspired American composer Lin-Manuel Miranda to create this magnificent work, which is worthy of the subject and by far my favorite portrayal of my favorite founder. That is an act of justice.

But what is justice? It is a moral concept—the act of judging people’s actions based on evidence, neither seeking nor granting unearned rewards. Most people believe that justice means punishing the bad for their

¹ Lin-Manuel Miranda, *Hamilton: An American Musical* (New York: Richard Rodgers Theatre, 2015).

² Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004).

³ Such as Hamilton’s birth date. All statues of him as well as postage stamps list his birth year as 1757. Michael Newton persuasively argues at length that Hamilton’s birth date is 1757 rather than 1755; see Michael E. Newton, *Alexander Hamilton: The Formative Years* (Eleftheria Publishing, 2015), pp. 19-30.

wrongdoing, such as the death penalty or life imprisonment for a murderer. However, it is more important to praise and reward the virtuous—especially life-enhancing innovators—because they are the ones who lift us out of the cave and make the world go 'round. We see a lot of that in *Hamilton*, which explains its inspirational power.

Because Hamilton was such a prolific and often polarizing figure whose life was cut short, his opponents had decades to misportray his story. Since Hamilton usually was the smartest guy in the room, he was often envied. Because he was an immigrant son of an unwed mother, he was taunted as a “Creole bastard,” and his patriotism was doubted. These misrepresentations of his character and impact are a theme in the musical, captured by the verse, “Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?”

A biography of Alexander Hamilton is perfectly suited for the stage. Hamilton was larger than life. Dramatic, brilliant, confrontational, striving for moral perfection, and overcoming more obstacles than anyone in his era, he was particularly heroic. Let us look at some facts: Hamilton was born on the island of Nevis, out of wedlock and into poverty. His father abandoned him when he was young. A few years later his mother died in bed next to him. Now an orphan, he worked as a clerk, mastering various business skills. When a hurricane devastated his island, he “wrote his way out” of poverty by penning a description of the event which was so profound that local merchants collected funds to send him to the mainland for schooling. In New York City he studied at King’s College (now Columbia University), but dropped out in order to fight in the Revolutionary War. He became George Washington’s principal and most trusted aide. Then Hamilton became a battlefield hero during the British surrender at Yorktown. After the war was won, he served as a lawyer, defending freedom of speech and representing the accused during America’s first murder trial. Most of New York lay in ashes after seven years of British occupation, but Hamilton helped turn around his war-torn city. In 1784, he helped to found the Bank of New York—the oldest existing bank in America—to get the city literally back in business. A staunch abolitionist, the following year he helped to found the New York Manumission Society, which eventually led to the abolition of slavery in New York. Next, he was a primary organizer of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, where he spoke out in favor of the U.S. Constitution. He spearheaded a principled pro-Constitution defense, writing fifty-one of the eighty-five *Federalist Papers*, which ensured ratification of the Constitution. Called on by Washington a second time to be his right-hand man (this time as the country’s first Treasury Secretary), his pro-business, pro-banking policies set up America to service and reduce its huge war debts. He saw industrialism and commerce as leading factors in the country’s future ascent. He advocated a foreign policy of American self-interest by recommending neutrality during the French Revolution, as opposed to becoming entangled in senseless foreign wars. He also got caught up in the country’s first sex scandal. He was a pivotal factor in the first four presidential elections. Then he was killed in a duel with Aaron Burr. Consequently, he did not live to see American glory that came by applying his principles.

In this essay, I will distinguish and explain five aspects of justice that are dramatized in *Hamilton: An American Musical*:

(a) Hamilton is an unabashed hero. The greatest heroes use their mind as a tool and take action based on thinking. They overcome obstacles, such as prejudice, envy, and poverty, and they emerge victorious.

(b) Hamilton and Washington form the best duo in American history. Their theory and practice, thought and action, were in sync. Together they fight and win the war, and then they build a new nation.

(c) America is born out of the Enlightenment. All of the Founders deserve credit, initially for declaring independence from Britain and later for framing the U.S. Constitution. However, the controversial practice of slavery—that was in tension with Enlightenment values—could (and should) have been better handled.

(d) America—at its best—is Hamiltonian. Industry, commerce, banking, free trade, agriculture, and paid military service are all based on merit. These principles oppose the feudal, racist, slave-based, agrarian, Jeffersonian system of the antebellum South. Hamilton’s own life and policies enshrine the self-made man, who can come from anywhere and succeed based on ability and effort. Because Hamilton’s meritocracy principles were applied in New York more than anywhere else, it would become the greatest city in the world.

(e) Hamilton’s story is told. It includes romance, family life, blackmail, friendship, war, and duels—and it all gets told in a tightly woven musical theater medium that perfectly integrates lyrics, music, dance, staging, and costumes.

2. Doing Justice to Hamilton

a. Hamilton is an unabashed hero

The greatest heroes use their mind as a tool and take action based on thinking. They overcome obstacles, such as poverty, prejudice, and envy; have extraordinary ability; possess strong moral character; and ultimately succeed. From the show’s opening number, “Alexander Hamilton,” we see the seeds of all this.

The show’s narrator and Hamilton’s future nemesis, Aaron Burr (sympathetically and superbly portrayed by Leslie Odom, Jr.), introduces us to our hero (performed by the inimitable Lin-Manuel Miranda): “How does a bastard, orphan, son of a whore and a Scotsman, dropped in the middle of a forgotten spot in the Caribbean by providence, impoverished, in squalor, grow up to be a hero and a scholar?” This long opening sentence is actually a question, which is later answered in part (in “Helpless”), when Hamilton tells his future wife, Eliza Schuyler (Phillipa Soo), “All I have’s my honor, a

tolerance for pain, a couple of college credits and my top-notch brain.” Honor, endurance, and intelligence can go a long way in the new world. The song continues with my favorite verse: “The ten-dollar founding father without a father got a lot farther by working a lot harder, by being a lot smarter, by being a self-starter. By fourteen, they placed him in charge of a trading charter.” We get a clear picture of how important thought and action are if one is not only to survive, but also flourish.

How would you react, at age eleven or twelve, if your mother died right next to you, and then you move in with a cousin who commits suicide? Hamilton introspects and hears his voice, “Alex, you gotta fend for yourself”. He started retreatin’ and readin’ every treatise on the shelf.” While these words are being sung, cast members don glasses to read books while dancing. Then we see a very young Hamilton conducting business, measuring weights, signing documents, and giving orders. It’s only five minutes into the show and we already see Hamilton’s drive, competence, persistence, and independence.

We next see Hamilton, still a teenager, carrying his few sacred possessions draped over his shoulder, embarking on a new life: “The ship is in the harbor now, see if you can spot him. Another immigrant comin’ up from the bottom.” Do you remember being at a crossroads in your life, when your future seemed full of promise and idealism? What one location in the entire world is so perfectly suited for such an ambitious soul? “In New York you can be a new man.” Here we get a glimpse of another theme of the show: Miranda’s love for New York—past, present, and future.

Hamilton prepares us for what is to come in the next two hours with the verse, “There’s a million things I haven’t done, but just you wait!” We are on the edge of our seats, ready and waiting to see what those million things are.

b. Hamilton and Washington form the best duo in American history

The bond forged between the wise, experienced leader Washington (brought to life by the commanding presence of Christopher Jackson⁴) and the young, skillful Hamilton was synergetic, sometimes volatile, and successfully lasted twenty-two years. This indispensable relationship that created America is my favorite aspect of the show.

As we see British soldiers killing Americans, the ominous music of “Right Hand Man” prepares us for the next steps of Hamilton’s ascent: “As a kid in the Caribbean I wished for a war, I knew that I was poor. . . . If they tell my story, I am either gonna die on the battlefield in glory or . . . Rise up!” One can imagine a young Hamilton reading stories of Achilles, who chose a short, glorious life over a longer, more pensive one. A tragic seed is thus planted.

The subtle buildup becomes more intense: “I will fight for this land but there’s only one man who can give us a command.” The chorus answers,

⁴ George Washington was my first hero, and for my entire life I have searched for someone to portray him as well as Christopher Jackson does.

“Rise up! Here comes the general!” The moment we’ve been waiting for arrives. In full military regalia, a tall, proud George Washington strides front and center, exclaiming, “We are outgunned, outmanned, outnumbered, outplanned. We gotta make an all out stand. Ayo, I’m gonna need a right-hand man.” We sense the desperation and futility at the present situation, as the British are about to take over New York City—for the next seven years.

Miranda pays homage to W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan⁵ through Washington: “Now I’m the model of a modern major general. The venerated Virginian veteran whose men are all lining up to put me on a pedestal, writin’ letters to relatives embellishin’ my elegance and eloquence, but the elephant is in the room, the truth is in ya face when ya hear the British cannons go . . . boom!” Washington observes many soldiers abandoning their posts and asks, “Are these the men with which I am to defend America? We ride at midnight, Manhattan in the distance. I cannot be everywhere at once, people. I’m in dire need of assistance.” In contrast, we see Hamilton leading his small troop, stealing cannons at Battery Park. Hamilton is summoned to appear before Washington, who advises, “It’s all right, you want to fight, you’ve got a hunger. I was just like you when I was younger. Head full of fantasies of dyin’ like a martyr? Dying is easy, young man. Living is harder.” Then the General presents the issue eloquently, “We are a powder keg about to explode. I need someone like you to lighten the load. So?” He holds up a quill pen for Hamilton to sign on as his aide-de-camp. In Hamilton’s brief life this is the most important decision the young man has ever made. Hamilton accepts and offers some tactical solutions to being outgunned, outmanned, outnumbered, outplanned—“a mind at work”—as the chorus sings “Rise up! Here comes the General!” Washington, seeing his and the nation’s chances now much improved, concludes: “And his right-hand man!”

In an effort to “Stay Alive,” we reach rock bottom during the Revolutionary War. Hamilton reflects, “I have never seen the General so despondent. I have taken over writing all his correspondence. Congress writes, ‘George, attack the British forces.’ I shoot back, we have resorted to eating our horses.” Here we see why Hamilton and Washington agreed that a Congress with thirteen separate, free, and independent states could not remain united, effective, or free. The two agree that a stronger central, federal government (with a specific purpose—to protect individual rights) was necessary. Seeds have now been planted for the U.S. Constitution and the *Federalist Papers*. Washington advises, “Alex, listen. There’s only one way for us to win this. Provoke outrage, outright. Don’t engage, strike by night. Remain relentless ’til their troops take flight.” Hamilton, ever the practical financial advisor, replies, “Make it impossible to justify the cost of the fight.”

⁵ W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, “I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major-General,” in *The Pirates of Penzance* (New York: Fifth Avenue Theatre, 1879).

This strategy of patient armed resistance was devised several years earlier by a teenaged Hamilton in his pamphlet *A Full Vindication*.⁶

Tensions flare as Hamilton is itching to “fight, not write” and rise above his station after the war, which he believes can happen only by success on the battlefield. After being frustrated about not being given that opportunity, he heatedly confronts Washington, who knows the value of keeping Hamilton alive and counters, “Go home, Alexander. That’s an order from your commander.” Hamilton goes home dejected, and then discovers that Eliza is pregnant. Though he fears he will not be able to provide for his family, Eliza sings about their future in “That Would Be Enough”: “And if this child shares a fraction of your smile or a fragment of your mind, look out world! That would be enough. I don’t pretend to know the challenges you’re facing. . . . But I’m not afraid. I know who I married. So long as you come home at the end of the day, that would be enough.” For the time being, it would be enough for Hamilton to await the birth of their son. But not for long.

The somber mood prevails until Burr poses the question at the opening of “Guns and Ships”: “How does a ragtag volunteer army in need of a shower somehow defeat a global superpower?” This sets us up for the quickest rapping dialogue in the show—more than six words per second—when the Marquis de Lafayette (perfectly portrayed by Daveed Diggs) demonstrates his “practical tactical brilliance.” He tells Washington that there is one man needed to succeed. The General agrees and answers, “I need my right-hand man back.” Washington writes a letter and hands it from one person to another, so that everyone on stage (except Eliza, who prepares her husband’s military coat) touches that letter before it lands in Hamilton’s hand. The note reads, “Alexander Hamilton, troops are waiting in the field for you. If you join us right now, together we can turn the tide . . . the world will never be the same, Alexander.”

When Hamilton rejoins Washington on the battlefield, he is handed a sword and military commission by the General, who recounts his own previous failures with his young counterpart. Washington then describes in “History Has Its Eyes on You” the endless criticism that he’s endured under the spotlight: “Let me tell you what I wish I’d known, when I was young and dreamed of glory: You have no control: Who lives, who dies, who tells your story. I know that we can win. I know that greatness lies in you. But remember from here on in, history has its eyes on you.” That inner greatness drives action that leads to victory, and to the emergence of a new nation.

Virtually every scene with Washington demonstrates his dignity, none more so than his famous Farewell Address of 1796. Having served under Washington’s presidency for two terms as Treasury Secretary, Hamilton is asked to write it. Washington knows that it is important for him to set a precedent by stepping aside, and lists in “One Last Time” some aspects of his

⁶ Alexander Hamilton, *A Full Vindication of the Measures of Congress*, December 15, 1774, accessed online at: <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-01-02-0054>.

legacy: “I wanna talk about neutrality. I want to warn against partisan fighting. Pick up a pen [he instructs Hamilton], start writing. I wanna talk about what I have learned. The hard-won wisdom I have earned. . . . One last time, the people will hear from me one last time. And if we get this right we’re gonna teach ’em how to say goodbye, you and I . . . If I say goodbye, the nation learns to move on. It outlives me when I’m gone.”

Next, Hamilton begins to read aloud the words he has written, and is joined mid-way through by Washington, reading together as the dynamic duo that they are: “After forty-five years of my life dedicated to its service with an upright zeal . . . I promise myself to realize the sweet enjoyment of partaking, in the midst of my fellow-citizens, the benign influence of good laws under a free government, the ever-favorite object of my heart, and the happy reward, as I trust of our mutual cares, labors, and dangers.” The long-range vision that both shared is applied here yet again. Two magnificent leaders—opposite in social status, upbringing, and demeanor—provide a rock-solid foundation for history’s greatest country.

The deserved respectful awe of America’s finest general, first president, and greatest leader is captured as the company sings that “George Washington’s going home.” This is underscored as Washington—head held high—strides calmly off stage to the company’s hushed closing words: “Teach ’em how to say goodbye one last time.”⁷

c. America was born out of the Enlightenment

One of the first things we can tell about *Hamilton* is that this is a distinctive historical era. Radical ideas, such as individualism, liberty, and the power of man’s reasoning mind, were being deployed to smash stale notions of monarchy, oppression, superstition, church-state authority, and conformity. The call for independence is in the air, embellished with bright, colorful costumes and musical instrumentation of the harpsichord, piano, and strings, as well as the use of counterpoint and waltz time that were typical of the classical period.

The show also portrays women embracing these fresh ideas and new way of life. In “The Schuyler Sisters,” we meet Eliza, Angelica (Renée Elise Goldsberry), and Peggy (Jasmine Cephas Jones)—daughters of wealthy landowner, war general, and New York congressman Philip Schuyler. Angelica tells Eliza she is “lookin’ for a mind at work.” She then rejects

⁷ Even though this is my favorite scene in the musical—and it brings me to tears—part of me always recalls seeing a former version of it at the Public Theatre. In that off-Broadway version, Miranda had included the Whiskey Rebellion, where Washington (accompanied by Hamilton) dons his uniform for “One Last Ride.”

I will add a fitting postscript here to these two heroes who carried the American Revolution and Founding on their shoulders. Although it is not dramatized in the show, the last letter Washington ever wrote was to Hamilton, praising him for the idea of forming a military academy that would eventually become West Point; see Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton*, p. 600.

flirtation from the scoundrel Burr: “I’ve been reading *Common Sense* by Thomas Paine. Some men say that I’m intense or I’m insane. You want a revolution? I want a revelation, so listen to my declaration. We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal. And when I meet Thomas Jefferson, I’m ’a compel him to include women in the sequel!” The three sisters are joined by the company to rejoice at these exciting new ideas: “Look around, look around at how lucky we are to be alive right now! History is happening in Manhattan and we just happen to be in the greatest city in the world!” Meanwhile, ensemble members wearing glasses move fluidly, dancing about, reading books, and dramatizing minds at work. From Benjamin Franklin’s key and kite to Betsy Ross’s flag and the Liberty Bell ringing, the glory of American lore is showcased.

“The Story of Tonight” has a *Les Miserables* feel, with young idealists willing to fight for rational convictions: “I may not live to see our glory! But I will gladly join the fight! And when our children tell our story, they’ll tell the story of tonight. . . . Raise a glass to freedom, something they can never take away, no matter what they tell you. Raise a glass to the four of us. Tomorrow there’ll be more of us.” The four friends and comrades who sing this rousing song—Hamilton, Lafayette, Hercules Mulligan (Okierete Onaodowan), and John Laurens (Anthony Ramos)—are willing to die for the cause of genuine liberty.

Before America was created, the individual lived on his knees, as a subject of the church, state, king, or ethnic tribe. The Founding Fathers recognized the individual as a sovereign entity who possessed rights; they urged individuals no longer to kneel before anyone. In “My Shot,” we see this particularly American theme: “Rise up! When you’re living on your knees, you rise up. Tell your brother that he’s gotta rise up. Tell your sister that she’s gotta rise up. When are these colonies gonna rise up?”

Although *Common Sense* and the *Declaration of Independence* permeate the intellectual atmosphere, unfortunately some institutions were held over from antiquity, including slavery. One could certainly say that the most prominent slaveholders among the Founders, such as Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Washington (who freed his slaves in his will), did not invent slavery but inherited it. That said, if one extols individual rights, as the *Declaration* does, slavery is an unacceptable contradiction.

Hamilton clearly dramatizes the hero’s profound opposition to slavery. Most people assume that such opposition originates in the abolitionist movement of the 1830s with William Lloyd Garrison and the like. However, it originated with the Federalists of the eighteenth century, including Hamilton, Franklin, and John Adams. Hamilton’s counterpart and best friend from the South, Laurens, sings, “But we’ll never be truly free until those in bondage have the same rights as you and me. You and I. Do or die. Wait till I sally in on a stallion with the first black battalion.” Hamilton shows his willingness to join Laurens in the battle for these new ideas of liberty and individualism (which rejects the collectivism on which racism is based): “Poppin’ a squat on conventional wisdom, like it or not. A bunch of

revolutionary manumission abolitionists? Give me a position, show me where the ammunition is!” When America defeats Britain at Yorktown, some wonder aloud whether this means freedom for all. “Not yet,” is the ominous answer from Washington—a costly mistake, for which the United States paid with the Civil War, and still pays to this day.

d. America—at its best—is Hamiltonian

Contrary to popular belief, July 4, 1776, although a pivotal moment in history, was not the birth of America. It was simply a divorce from Britain by thirteen “free and independent states.” It was in 1789, after ratification of the U.S. Constitution, that the states were united and thus the country was born. But what kind of country would America be? That answer comes in Act II, when we see America’s two intellectual fountainheads square off.

It has been noted in many places, and I believe it is true, that Hamilton and Jefferson are the foremost intellectual Founders of America. At the opening of the second act, we get to see the latter for the first time (brilliantly played by Daveed Diggs). With a gospel-like chorus of worship for a savior who has returned, the company tells us in “What’d I Miss” that “Thomas Jefferson’s coming home.” The sage of Monticello appears in frilled shirt and purple crushed velvet jacket. Touted as a man of the people, he preens upon his return from several years in Paris. He is happy to be back home—not in America, but in Virginia. While his subjects bow obsequiously to him, he asks, “What’d I miss? Virginia, my home sweet home, I wanna give you a kiss.” James Madison (Okierete Onaodowan) enters the scene and responds, “Thomas we are engaged in a battle for our nation’s very soul. . . . Hamilton’s financial plan is nothing less than government control.” While I submit that Madison’s characterization of Hamilton’s plan is inaccurate, this sets up a contrast between two fundamentally different systems.

Next, George Washington greets us by stating, “Ladies and gentlemen, you coulda been anywhere in the world tonight, but you’re here with us in New York City. Are you ready for a cabinet meeting???” This breaks the fourth wall (of the New York audience) into rousing applause. Miranda here dramatizes the contrasting views of American domestic and foreign policy in this first of two Cabinet meeting “rap battles.”

Jefferson notes at the opening of “Cabinet Battle #1” his “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” fame, and proceeds to challenge Hamilton’s financial plan: “If New York’s in debt why should Virginia bear it? Uh, our debts are paid, I’m afraid. Don’t tax the South cause we got it made in the shade. In Virginia, we plant seeds in the ground. We create. You just wanna move our money around.” But Jefferson’s “land of the free” includes slaves who toil under his own hand. The South’s “got it made in the shade,” Hamilton points out, only through a feudal, agrarian, slave-driven system: “A civics lesson from a slaver. Hey neighbor, your debts are paid cuz you don’t pay for labor.”

After criticizing Jefferson’s hypocrisy, Hamilton turns to a related economic issue: the proposed national bank. His pro-business, pro-banking

stance clarifies this complex topic: “If we assume the debts, the union gets a new line of credit, a financial diuretic. How do you not get it? If we’re aggressive and competitive the union gets a boost. You’d rather give it a sedative?” If anyone at that time understands the perils of financial disunity and a weak economy for the fledging nation, it’s Hamilton. His Bank of New York had already proved that at the state level.

In “Cabinet Battle #2,” Jefferson wants to uphold the prior treaty with France, regardless of the French Revolution’s current reign of terror. However, Hamilton explains, “We signed a treaty with a King whose head is now in a basket. Would you like to take it out and ask it? ‘Should we honor our treaty King Louis’ head?’ ‘Uh . . . do whatever you want, I’m super dead.” Washington becomes frustrated with his fellow Virginian, whose idealism “blind[s him] to reality,” and asks Hamilton to draft the Proclamation of Neutrality. Why? Because the two Revolutionary War heroes knew that for centuries European powers fought each other and would likely continue to do so because they did not understand individual rights. America’s best strategy in that context would be to avoid entanglement.

On a personal note, from adolescence I had admired Jefferson. However, in recent decades not only did I come to disagree with his ideas (outlined above) as I learned more about him, but I also abhorred how he treated Hamilton and Washington in both life and death. This injustice is dramatized by the Democratic-Republicans—Burr, Madison, and Jefferson—leading a witch hunt against Hamilton in “Washington on Your Side.” Jefferson plots with his cronies: “This prick is askin’ for someone to bring him to task. Somebody gimme some dirt on this vacuous mass so we can at last unmask him. I’ll pull the trigger on him, someone load the gun and cock it. While we were all watching, he got Washington in his pocket.” Then together they all sing, “This immigrant isn’t somebody we chose. This immigrant’s keeping us all on our toes. . . . Let’s follow the money and see where it goes. Because every second the Treasury grows. If we follow the money and see where it leads, . . . look for the seeds of Hamilton’s misdeeds.”

Here we see the fear, envy, and racism of the first Democratic-Republicans. They fear Washington’s popularity and envy Hamilton because Washington applies many of his well-reasoned arguments. But they also despise Hamilton as an immigrant, viewed as barely better than their own slaves. Consequently, they must scheme to bring Hamilton down, so that the feudal, agrarian, slave-based Southern system can be preserved. This is the polar opposite of the pro-business, pro-immigrant, pro-Wall Street commercial center of New York City, which they disparaged as “Hamiltonopolis.”⁸

Although Hamilton and Jefferson differ on fundamental outlook, on occasion they work together. For example, they compromise about moving the U.S. capital from New York City to a swampland in northern Virginia, as

⁸ Ibid., p. 325. It is also worth noting that Hamilton is appropriately buried on Wall Street (at Trinity Church).

Jefferson wished, in exchange for getting sufficient votes to have the federal government assume the states' debts, as Hamilton wished. After this plays out, Hamilton tells a befuddled Burr in "The Room Where It Happens," "we'll have the banks, we're in the same spot. I wanted what I got. If you got skin in the game, you stay in the game. . . . Oh, you get love for it. You get hate for it. You get nothing if you . . . wait for it. . . . God help and forgive me. I wanna build something that's gonna outlive me." Here is the essence of Hamilton's character: principled, long-range thinking, which is neither pragmatic (Burr) nor parochial (Jefferson), and that sets up a system of banking, commerce, industry, and rights that was most realized in the post-Civil War, pre-World War I era of countless inventions and progress. This was the freest and most productive period in world history, where people came from all over the globe to the land of opportunity. Hamilton's America vaulted over other countries in terms of industrial production, innovation, and increased standard of living.

e. Hamilton's story is told

Perhaps the greatest act of justice is that Hamilton's story finally *does* get told—and in such a powerfully dramatic medium by a brilliant storyteller. But who is Hamilton's story originally told by? Since he had many enemies, several of whom outlived him by decades, they largely rewrote his story, portraying him as a "bastard brat of a Scotch peddler," a monarchist, or an embezzler of treasury funds, thereby belittling his achievements. We can thank his wife, Eliza, who outlived him by fifty years, for rectifying this injustice. She witnessed the distortion of his character and ideas, while simultaneously seeing the country increasingly divide over slavery in the South and industrialism in the North. Eliza went through Hamilton's papers, interviewed associates who served with him in war and in peace, and did her best to set the record straight.

Inspired by Chernow's biography, Miranda masterfully seizes the reins, taking the next step in doing right by Hamilton. He re-tells Hamilton's story in America from the beginning. From a theatrical standpoint, the timeline of this epic is set with vocal guideposts, the first being "1776. New York City." This is where the two future enemies first meet, with young, naive Hamilton grateful to track down Burr. After a barrage of words and ideas from the excited upstart, Burr offers this advice: "Talk less. Smile more. Don't let them know what you're against or what you're for." A stunned Hamilton replies, "You can't be serious." The stage is literally set: two rivals with different philosophies—one sitting on the fence, waiting to see which direction the wind blows, the other standing on principle and acting on first-handed judgment, regardless of how unpopular that might be.

In "My Shot," we meet three of Hamilton's friends, whose names should be taught in every American classroom. The company one keeps speaks volumes about one's character, so we see Hamilton's good judgment here. "America's favorite fighting Frenchman," Lafayette, sings, "I dream of life without a monarchy. The unrest in France will lead to 'onarchy? . . . When I fight, I make the other side panicky.'" Next we see Mulligan. He is a tailor's

apprentice, but states, “I’m joining the rebellion cuz I know it’s my chance to socially advance, instead of sewin’ some pants!” And then there is southern abolitionist Laurens, who claims, “But we’ll never be truly free until those in bondage have the same rights as you and me. You and I. Do or die.” Like Hamilton, these are men of courage and honor. The lifetime bond of friendship between Hamilton, Lafayette, Mulligan, and Laurens has been cemented. In a cleverly multi-layered scene in a tavern, the four take a shot of liquor as they sing about taking their shot at freedom, with Burr warning them from the sidelines that they just might get shot.

In a further sharpening of the contrast between Hamilton’s and Burr’s characters, Miranda dramatizes the difference between taking risks and playing it safe. On the one hand, at the end of “My Shot,” Hamilton declares, “I am not throwing away my shot. Hey yo, I’m just like my country. I’m young, scrappy, and hungry, and I’m not throwing away my shot.” The song ends on a high as Hamilton marches to the front and center of the stage, with his left arm raised, ready to take a shot. This is the striking cover pose of the production’s promotional poster. On the other hand, Burr counsels caution: “Geniuses, lower your voices. You keep out of trouble and you double your choices.”

We also see an ode to Hamilton’s virtues of productiveness and integrity as Act I concludes. Burr’s uncontainable envy of Hamilton escalates in “Non-Stop”: “Even though we started at the very same time, Alexander Hamilton began to climb. How to account for his rise to the top? Maaaaan the man is non-stop.” Burr then continues, “Why do you always say what you believe? Ev’ry proclamation guarantees free ammunition for your enemies! Why do you write like it’s going out of style? . . . How do you write like you need it to survive? How do you write ev’ry second you’re alive?” When invited by Hamilton to join him in the mighty endeavor of defending the proposed U.S. Constitution—to share in the risk and the glory—Burr refuses to take the risk. Hamilton cannot understand Burr’s decision: “Burr, we studied and we fought and we killed for the notion of a nation we now get to build. For once in your life, take a stand with pride. I don’t understand how you stand to the side.” Producing something of lasting value requires taking a principled stand, which Hamilton repeatedly does—much to the benefit of his countrymen and their descendents.

The story also covers several pivotal moments in Hamilton’s personal life, ranging from his marriage to Eliza, his fondness for Angelica’s “mind at work,” his role as a father to Philip Hamilton (Anthony Ramos), and his lapse into an affair with Maria Reynolds (Jasmine Cephas Jones), the last of which led to blackmail first by her husband, James, then by Hamilton’s political opponents.

In one of my favorite soliloquies in stage history, Hamilton knows that his affair with Maria Reynolds will be exposed. He is charged with embezzlement, but proves that he did not break the law, since he used his personal funds to pay off James Reynolds. When Jefferson, Madison, and Burr confront him, they promise not to go public—since it is only a personal

breach, not a treasonous crime—but Hamilton fears that they will not keep their vow of silence. He pre-emptively strikes, effectively killing his political future by writing about it in the notorious “Reynolds Pamphlet.” Writing has always been his way out, as he explains in the climax of “Hurricane”: “I wrote my way out of hell. I wrote my way to revolution. I was louder than the crack in the bell. . . . I wrote about the Constitution and defended it well. And in the face of ignorance and resistance, I wrote financial systems into existence. And when my prayers to God were met with indifference, I picked up a pen, I wrote my own deliverance.” The Liberty Bell’s hypnotic ringing while he sings these lines is chilling.

In “The Election of 1800,” Hamilton’s two arch enemies face off for the presidential race. He chooses Jefferson over Burr because however wrong-headed, Jefferson has convictions, while Burr, the opportunist, has none. This is the final step (in the show) before Burr takes out all of his vengeance on Hamilton by challenging him to a duel, with full intent to kill—even though Burr was the sitting Vice President. On the early morning of the duel, Hamilton writes one last letter to Eliza, who asks him to come back to bed. In a last act of justice to his wronged wife, he salutes her as “Best of Wives and Best of Women.”

The duel finally takes place, with Burr narrating, “It’s him or me, the world will never be the same. I had only one thought before the slaughter: This man will not make an orphan of my daughter.” Burr continues describing the scene right up to firing the shot at Hamilton, whose trigger hand is raised to the sky. Hamilton has a death flash that includes seeing Philip, his mother, Laurens, Washington, and his beloved Eliza: “I imagine death so much it feels more like a memory. . . . Burr, my first friend, my enemy. Maybe the last face I ever see. What if this bullet is my legacy? . . . I’m running out of time. I’m running, and my time’s up. Wise up. Eyes up. . . . Raise a glass to freedom.” The chorus narrates, “He aims his pistol at the sky.” Burr’s shot strikes Hamilton right between his ribs. For the first time in the musical Burr shows remorse for an action he takes: “Now I’m the villain in your history. . . . I should’ve known, the world was wide enough for both Hamilton and me.”

The silent audience is gripped as President Washington is the first to step forward and speak, repeating a theme, “Let me tell you what I wish I’d known when I was young and dreamed of glory. You have no control: Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?” Next is President Jefferson: “I’ll give him this: his financial system is a work of genius. I couldn’t undo it if I tried. And I tried.” Then President Madison: “He took our country from bankruptcy to prosperity. I hate to admit it, but he doesn’t get enough credit for the credit he gave us.” Now Angelica steps forward: “Every other founding father story gets told. Every other founding father gets to grow old.” This is followed up by Burr: “But when you’re gone, who remembers your name? Who keeps your flame?” Each pronouncement is an act of justice, culminating with Eliza getting in the last word for her fallen hero. She says, “You could have done so much more if you only had time. And when my time is up, have I done enough? Will they tell our story?” Yes, Eliza, your story is told.

As the show closes, no one wants to leave. The profound lyrics, heart-felt vocals, multi-faceted varieties of music, graceful movements, and ultra-efficient staging all leave one drained and exhilarated. Now everyone can exhale.⁹

3. Conclusion: What Is a Legacy?

The essence of this musical is Hamilton's legacy.¹⁰ Early in Act I he ventures, "Don't be shocked when your hist'ry book mentions me. I will lay down my life if it sets us free. Eventually, you'll see my ascendancy." After Hamilton has ascended and achieved many of those "million things [he hadn't] done," he muses in the last moments of his life about the nature of a legacy: "Legacy. What is a legacy? It's planting seeds in a garden you never get to see. I wrote some notes at the beginning of a song someone will sing for me. America, you great unfinished symphony, you sent for me. You let me make a difference. A place where even orphan immigrants can leave their fingerprints and rise up."

That legacy is most prominent in Hamilton's city: New York. In 1835—right when his financial policies had paid off the national debt—merchants commissioned a fourteen-foot marble statue of Hamilton, which was placed on the rotunda of the stock exchange floor in lower Manhattan. (Unfortunately, that statue was destroyed in the great fire later that year. However, there are now four statues of Hamilton in New York City.) After his abolitionist dreams played out, post-Civil War, the United States enjoyed the Industrial Revolution, which, due to innovations in several industries such as transportation and communications, produced a level of prosperity never seen before in history. As the nineteenth century closed, a monument dedicated to the individuals who had the most positive impact was built: the Hall of Fame for Great Americans in the Bronx. Hamilton's was among the first names to be nominated. One of the catalysts who made the 1920s roar was Calvin Coolidge, who properly claimed, "The business of America is business." This statement could have been uttered by Hamilton. In fact, Coolidge admired Hamilton so much that he had his image printed on the ten-dollar bill. The "ten-dollar founding father" would have been proud to see these blossoms of the seeds he had planted so long ago.

Hamilton: An American Musical is poised to usher in another era of that legacy. With audiences—particularly 20,000 NYC high school students¹¹—who will learn about this hero, the future of America and New

⁹ There is one character who provides such humor and contrast to the rest of the show, that I will omit discussing him in this review. He is best experienced live.

¹⁰ It must be noted that this is not a documentary, but a work of art. Therefore, some facts have been changed by Miranda to maximize the drama. However, if there is one fact that I wish was included, it is that Hamilton fought not for a democracy, but a constitutional republic.

¹¹ The Rockefeller Foundation is partnering in 2016 with Miranda and the NYC

York City is looking brighter. The CD cast recording of the musical is a superb alternative for those who cannot attend the show live. On the heels of this smash hit, the New York Public Library went into its archives and put together a link where one can find the people and events associated with the musical.¹²

What will the legacy of *Hamilton: An American Musical* be? Some of the most powerful messages are: Do *not* throw away your shot. Put a pencil to your temple and connect it to your brain. Don't live on your knees; rise up. Stay alive. Look around at how lucky we are to be alive right now. If you stand for nothing, what will you fall for? Pursue non-stop achievement. Say *no* to temptation, since it will have disastrous consequences. Write love letters to your loved ones. Learn to manage every disadvantage. You gotta fend for yourself. Dying is easy; living is harder. Keep looking for a mind at work. Raise a glass to freedom, something they can never take away without your consent. Take a stand with pride. Teach them how to say goodbye with dignity. Work a lot harder, be a lot smarter, be a self-starter. Start reading every treatise on the shelf. Pick up a pen and write your own deliverance. In New York you can be a new man. Why? Because it's the greatest city in the world. Although you may not live to see your glory, join the fight. Build something that's gonna outlive you. And if you do that on a gigantic scale, history will have its eyes on you.¹³

Department of Education to make this possible. See "Hamilton: The Musical and The Rockefeller Foundation Announce Partnership," The Rockefeller Foundation, October 27, 2015, accessed online at: <https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/about-us/news-media/hamilton-the-musical-and-the-rockefeller-foundation-announce-partnership-to-provide-20000-nyc-public-school-students-with-tickets-to-hamilton-on-broadway-with-1-46-million-grant/>.

¹² See "Hamilton: The Archive," New York Public Library, accessed online at: <http://www.nypl.org/blog/2015/08/07/hamilton-archive>.

¹³ This act of justice closes with many thanks for telling this story, starting with everyone who took part in making this musical the incredible work of art that it is. Thank you, Eliza Hamilton. Thank you, Ron Chernow and other writers and speakers whose words have helped us gain greater awareness and understanding of this heroic figure. Thank you, Alexander Hamilton Awareness Society. Thank you, Lin-Manuel Miranda, for brilliantly telling the story of the ages. And most important, thank you, Alexander Hamilton.

