

Review Essays

Review Essay: Lin-Manuel Miranda and Jeremy McCarter's *Hamilton: The Revolution*¹

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1. Introduction

All revolutions start in the minds of individuals. The ideas are often rejected at first, then catch on and eventually are put into action on a massive scale. Whether it is daring to sail west across the Atlantic, inventing a light bulb, flying to the moon, or creating an iPhone, that can-do spirit with pride-in-achievement is distinctive of the American psyche. This theme is found in Lin-Manuel Miranda and Jeremy McCarter's *Hamilton: The Revolution*, as alluded to on the back cover:

This book does more than tell us the surprising story of how a Broadway musical became a national phenomenon: It demonstrates that America has always been renewed by the brash upstarts and brilliant outsiders, the men and women who don't throw away their shot.

I believe that the current Alexander Hamilton phenomenon,² of which this *New York Times* bestselling book is an example, demonstrates a sign of positive cultural change.

Whenever Hamilton's name was held in esteem, America flourished. His pro-Constitution, pro-finance, anti-slavery, anti-foreign entanglement ideas were most prevalent after slavery was wiped out, during the post-Civil

¹ Lin-Manuel Miranda and Jeremy McCarter, *Hamilton: The Revolution* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2016).

² Here is some background context about my participation in this phenomenon: I've seen *Hamilton: An American Musical* ten times, including opening nights, off- and on-Broadway. I wrote a book review of Ron Chernow's biography, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), long before I knew there would be a musical based on it. I've given many speeches on "Hamilton: The Man, the Myth, and the Musical."

War period, especially in the North. Immigrants flooded in from all over the globe to take part in the booming Industrial Revolution that he forecasted. Living standards and population skyrocketed. Hopefully, with the enthusiasm generated by Hamilton's example, we can usher in a renewed era of the liberty and prosperity that he envisioned.

Where can we see this cultural change? Roughly one year ago, there was a plan to remove Hamilton from the ten-dollar bill. Due to Hamilton's surge in popularity and to the joint efforts of fans and pro-Hamilton organizations, that terrible idea has been struck down.³ Museums in New York and across America have Hamilton exhibits, many of which are inspired by the musical.⁴ Ron Chernow's 2004 biography of this hero is back on the bestseller list and can be found at just about any airport. Thousands of high school students have attended the musical⁵ and can be heard on the streets and subways of Hamilton's very own New York City belting out the lyrics of songs from *Hamilton: An American Musical*. It remains to be seen whether this initial fascination with all-things-Hamilton leads to more fundamental social and political change.

Hamilton: The Revolution is also superb as a work of art. Its many full-page photographs, primarily done as nineteenth-century stills, put you right on stage with the actors. This book gives the reader insight into the details of the creative process by which the musical was made. It is pleasing that so many talented people—from Tommy Kail (direction) and Alex Lacamoire (orchestration) to David Korins (set design) and Paul Tazewell (costumes)—gain recognition and earn praise for their behind-the-scenes work. The book is an excellent substitute for those who have not seen *Hamilton: An American Musical*, yet a bonus for those who have seen it and want an “inside story” that makes it all the more transfixing. *Hamilton: The Revolution* perfectly complements the non-stop action of the musical's live performance as well as the cast recording.

³ See “An Open Letter from Secretary Lew,” accessed online at: <https://medium.com/@USTreasury/an-open-letter-from-secretary-lew-672cfd591d02#.to6im93d3>.

⁴ For example, at The New-York Historical Society's “Summer of Hamilton,” accessed online at: <http://www.nyhistory.org/exhibitions/summer-hamilton>, and the New York Public Library's “Alexander Hamilton: Striver, Statesman, Scoundrel,” accessed online at: <https://www.nypl.org/events/exhibitions/hamilton>.

⁵ By means of a generous grant from the Rockefeller Foundation; see “Broadway's ‘Hamilton’ Will Be Field Trip for 20K Students at \$10 a Pop,” accessed online at: <http://deadline.com/2015/10/broadway-hamilton-new-york-city-students-rockefeller-foundation-1201595040/>.

2. The Evolution of a Theatrical Masterpiece

As McCarter puts it,

this book tells the stories of two revolutions. There's the American Revolution of the 18th century, which flares to life in Lin's libretto, the complete text of which is published here, along with his annotations. There's also the revolution of the show itself: a musical that changes the way that Broadway sounds, that alters who gets to tell the story of our founding, that lets us glimpse the new, more diverse America rushing our way. (p. 10)

In the process of telling this revolutionary story, the reader gets insight into many of the goose-bump moments that those of us who are fortunate to have seen the musical have experienced. For instance, here's a description of what composer, lyricist, librettist, and star, Lin-Manuel Miranda, went through on opening night on Broadway:

He entered at the back of the stage and strode all the way to the front. 'What's your name, man?' asked Leslie [Odom, Jr., who plays Aaron Burr], and he replied, 'Alexander Hamilton.' The audience roared. For 27 seconds he stood there, bombarded by a crowd he couldn't see Finally he gave a slight nod to signal that they had better let him finish the song. (p. 276)

I and others who were present never experienced anything like this in a theater.

One innovative aspect of the musical is that the story-telling is done largely (though certainly not exclusively) in the Hip-Hop genre with minority actors portraying founders who were white. Regardless of whether one likes Hip-Hop, one definite advantage of that genre on Broadway is that you can say many words (and tell a long, complicated story) in a shorter period of time. Its fast pace also reflects Hamilton's sense of urgency in seeking to accomplish a tremendous amount in a brief period of time.

What makes a theatrical masterpiece? A great subject, a strong conflict, and a satisfying resolution, all structured logically with events pushing the story forward. In this book we also get a song-by-song description and learn how a musical is constructed. An excellent example comes early on:

'My Shot' is, in the lingo of musical theater, an 'I want' song. These are the numbers that appear early in the show, when the hero steps downstage and tells the audience about the fierce desire that will propel the plot. . . . Without a song like this, you wouldn't get very far in a musical: A character needs to want something pretty badly to sing about it for two and a half hours. (p. 21)

After witnessing the obstacles of Hamilton's childhood (father abandons family, mother dies next to him, cousin commits suicide, hurricane devastates his Caribbean island), we see that this self-made man wants to earn honor and glory—and is ready to fight for it. So we understand why he's willing to take a shot whenever the opportunity arises.

The book also provides hundreds of annotated notes to the lyrics, which Miranda thought important enough to explain. He describes how a song like "My Shot" took him years to write on account of his show-me-don't-tell-me approach to characterization: "We have to systematically prove that Hamilton is the most fearsome intellect in the room, not just by saying so, but by demonstrating it" (p. 27, n. 10). Hamilton's leadership skills, facility with language, confidence in his mind, can-do spirit, and brisk call to principled action immediately earn from his new friends their endorsement to "get this guy in front of a crowd."

Additional elements of the musical's structure are identified. For instance, if Act One had ended with the victory at Yorktown, the audience would have a predictable and understandable feel-good sense during intermission. Miranda risks pushing the upward arc even higher and manages to finish with a different kind of flourish:

In 'Non-Stop,' Lin very explicitly asks what makes a genius relentless, what turns a gifted individual into a monster of creativity. The Act One finale covers six furiously productive years in Hamilton's life, from his return to war-ravaged New York City in 1783 to his ascension to Washington's cabinet in 1789. It rips through 12 scenes in six minutes, and staging it demands the same kind of ingenuity that it describes. (p. 133)

Also explained is a change made between the show's off- and on-Broadway productions. Having seen and loved the musical twice off-Broadway, the opening night on Broadway disappointed me only in that Act Two's "One Last Ride" (where George Washington and Hamilton ride to squash the Whiskey Rebellion) was changed to "One Last Time" (where Washington asks Hamilton to draft his Presidential Farewell Address). Miranda uses sound reason in making the change:

The rewrite to 'One Last Ride' illustrated what all those creative impulses, all those pragmatic experiments, were trying to achieve: to ensure that every single element in the show, at every moment, was serving The Story. The Story was not a list of events on a historical timeline, in Tommy [Kail]'s view, it was the emotional journey that Hamilton and the other key characters needed to make . . . It needed to reveal how Hamilton was affected when his friend, mentor, and father figure retired from public life. (pp. 206-7)

Aside from needing to reduce the length of the musical, the number condenses many aspects of Washington's and Hamilton's lives more dramatically—and always leaves me in tears.

My decades spent in ballet class have taught me to observe keenly how effectively dance or purposeful movements are presented onstage. Do they enhance or contradict the story? Choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler gives behind-the-scenes insight about how he chose to choreograph the movements of opponents Hamilton and Burr: “Burr moves in straight lines because he sees no options, and Hamilton moves in arcs, because he sees all the possibilities” (p. 134). He continues, “Dance is just meant to be a framing device that matches emotionally what I want the audience to feel.” We certainly do feel it, even when we might not have been consciously aware of the significance of those movements.

Miranda clarifies some of his artistic-license choices. For example, we are introduced in Act One to several friends of the hero, though when and how he came to know each of them did not occur as staged. Some of them are not well known, like John Laurens, and others have interesting nomenclature. Miranda states that “[Hercules] Mulligan didn't grow up to be a statesman like Lafayette or Hamilton. But his name is just the best rapper moniker I ever heard in my life” (p. 25, n. 9).⁶ Miranda then amusingly has the same actors who play Hamilton's friends (Marquis de Lafayette and Mulligan) in Act One, play his opponents (Thomas Jefferson and James Madison) in Act Two. It's a testament to the great talent of actors Daveed Diggs (Lafayette/Jefferson) and Okieriete Onaodowan (Mulligan/Madison) that they are equally convincing in both sets of roles, enabling Miranda to pull off this clever casting choice.

3. The Enlightenment with a Modern Twist

More than anything else, what drives *Hamilton: An American Musical* are the lyrics. Without the profound and clever word schemes,⁷ all else would have much less of an impact. In order to have a theatrical masterpiece, though, all other aspects of its production must strive to equal the lyrics. The book shows us how this succeeds.

The book's full title, in keeping with eighteenth-century titling practices, is, *Hamilton: The Revolution—Being the Complete Libretto of the Broadway Musical with a True Account of Its Creation, and Concise Remarks on Hip-Hop, The Power of Stories, and The New America*. The chapter titles and graphics style also emulate that of the Enlightenment era, so they put the reader in the mood for that period. In keeping with that timeline, photos show

⁶ Miranda is reminded of rapper monikers by Hercules Mulligan's name, but what comes to my mind is how his name sounds like he could be a hero in an Ayn Rand novel. Indeed, a brilliant banker in Rand's 1957 epic, *Atlas Shrugged*, is named Midas Mulligan.

⁷ Which I discuss elsewhere; see my “Hamilton: An Act of Justice—in Two Acts,” *Reason Papers* 37, no. 2 (Fall 2015), pp. 163-77.

the costumes and staging with ropes, bricks, and wooden props everywhere. There is an earned pride which comes from a job well done, such as attention to details. One of the many examples of this is: “The candles onstage are real wax, because nothing else looks like wax. The seals on the letters by Washington and Hamilton are real wax as well. Each man gets *his own personalized seal*” (p. 133).

I’ll have more to say about race below, but for now I’ll say that if one is stuck on the perceptual level (where skin color is the primary concern, instead of the ideas and convictions of the characters), then many might not enjoy the show. Fortunately, this is not the case. One reason pertains to the design rule that was deliberately adopted: “Period from the neck down, modern from the neck up” (p. 113). This was to demonstrate that an actor of any race can perform these great roles, as long as the actor understands the essence of the character. If the audience is initially jarred by the visual effects of these casting choices, they get over it very quickly.

The purpose of art is to refuel the spirit. This is often done by the portrayal of heroes, who overcome all kinds of obstacles, many of which the audience can relate to. However, too much of today’s art and theater demonstrate the opposite, such as showing how the villain can “get away” with the perfect crime or how life is just some farce that warrants only cynical laughter. David Brooks pinpoints succinctly the massive appeal of *Hamilton: An American Musical*: “Every single person walks out of the theater thinking about Hamilton and saying, ‘I want to have *that* kind of ambition.’ . . . That’s why the show is universal. Because everyone wonders, *Are my dreams big enough? Am I really making the most out of my life?*” (p. 257).

What makes “*that* kind of ambition” possible? Thinkers who take decisive action. The Enlightenment respect for reason forges a nation that longed to be based solely on merit instead of class, race, gender, or political pull. Hamilton’s words from *The Federalist No. 36* exemplify this: “There are strong minds in every walk of life that will rise superior to the disadvantages of situation and will command the tribute due to their merit” (p. 174). Given the historical context in which he penned those words, they were truly revolutionary. Just as important is how much they resonate today.

4. The Book’s Flaws: “I wrote my way out. Wrote everything down far as I can see.”

While this book is splendid, it does have some flaws, none more glaring than its obsession with race. Whether it is Nuyorican, Latin, Black, Irish, Cuban, Chinese, Jewish, or West Indian, it feels like you can’t go more than a few pages without being told about someone’s race. This is dismaying, since the content of one’s character is much more important than the color of one’s skin. Hamilton himself was concerned with merit, not race. This constant identification of one’s race denies the freely chosen actions that an

individual takes which others of that same race might or might not have taken. “The smallest minority on earth is the individual.”⁸

Another flaw is Miranda’s blanket claim that “we continue to forget that immigrants are the backbone of the country” (p. 47). This is inaccurate. Although tens of millions of immigrants flocked to America, and many of them have certainly helped to make America the greatest country in world history, they are far too generally addressed in the musical and book. Hamilton’s success did not come from being an immigrant, but from being an individualist. Hamilton knew that he would perish under the oppressive conditions in the Caribbean, where his ideas would not have been implemented. It was only pro-reason, pro-individualism America that allowed orphan immigrants like him to “rise up” and “make a difference.” He was likely the most consistent defender of individual rights in his era. His individualism led him to the belief, for example, that because blacks had free will and could be effective soldiers, they should attain their freedom if they helped America win the war. Hamilton’s individualism is the only cure for racism. He rejected the collectivist, tribalist, and determinist view of human nature.

I also disagree with the book’s criticism of Hamilton over the war bonds issue (see p. 153, n. 6, and p. 199, n. 3). Many Revolutionary War soldiers chose to sell their war bonds to speculators. The speculators faced great risk (as is often the case) in having those bonds pay off, since the odds of America winning the war were miniscule. If we lost the war, I don’t think too many people would have shed tears for the money the speculators would have lost. However, Hamilton upheld the sanctity of contract and made sure that the speculators were paid. That turned out to be a core principle of his brilliant financial system, which was based on the protection of individual rights and “took America from bankruptcy to prosperity.”

5. Conclusion

McCarter quotes Henry Cabot Lodge: “The dominant purpose of Hamilton’s life was the creation of a national sentiment, and thereby the making of a great and powerful nation from the discordant elements furnished by thirteen jarring States” (p. 11). McCarter then remarks how Hamilton continues to unify us beyond his lifetime: *Hamilton: An American Musical* “draws from the breadth of America’s culture and shows its audience [that] what we share doesn’t just dramatize Hamilton’s revolution: It continues it” (p. 11).

I’m personally happy for this revolution. For eighteen months I lived in the Hamilton Heights section of Manhattan and regularly stood in awe of his statue uptown, as people strolled by, oblivious to who he was. The Grange,

⁸ Ayn Rand, “America’s Persecuted Minority: Big Business,” in Ayn Rand, *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* (New York: New American Library, 1962), p. 61.

where Hamilton lived at the end of his life and which now stands as a museum, was empty whenever I'd go in it. Not anymore.⁹

I am elated with this book and highly recommend it. Not only will it enhance my experience the next time I see the musical, it gives me hope for the future. I am eager to see the Hamilton revolution continue in American culture. How can the success of this revolution be measured? There would be no better way than to have our intellectuals and leaders grant full respect for the document which Hamilton so tirelessly fought to defend: The U.S. Constitution.

⁹ See Wendy Lu, "Off the Stage, 'Hamilton' a Hit," *amNewYork* (June 10, 2016), p. A34.

