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A frantic, funky Founding Fathers' tale



New York Times

Lin-Manuel Miranda, center, and the cast of “Hamilton,” now six months into its history-making run at the Richard Rodgers Theater in New York. The show about the Founding Fathers is making its own resonant history by changing the language of musicals.

Why do we love Hamilton so much?

It's hard to find a Broadway musical that bears much resemblance to America. The Great White Way, aptly named and outrageously priced, is not especially well known for reflecting the remarkable diversity of the country in ways that transcend tokenism. That is, until now. That is, until “Hamilton.”

The unlikely show by Lin-Manuel Miranda, now six months into an extraordinary Broadway run likely to extend well into the next decade, takes a refreshingly radical approach to storytelling both in its polyglot presentation and its politically sly casting. Radical for Broadway, at least.

Via the urgent language of hip-hop, “Hamilton” reconnects the wayward American dream to its immigrant roots. It doesn't shy away from what the actor Stephen McKinley Henderson calls the



Colin Dabkowski

COMMENTARY

country's “birth defect” of racism. To that end, it features people of color in the roles of the country's Founding Fathers, a direct assertion that the story of America as we know it belongs as much to the descendants of Thomas Jefferson as those of the slaves who toiled under him at Monticello.

And the fact that it has registered with audiences across the country more than any musical since “Rent,” an equally energetic if inferior theatrical product that debuted to worldwide acclaim in 1996, is evidence that theatergoers have long been hungering for its message.

That hunger was reflected in the young and diverse crowd that lined up outside the Richard Rodgers Theatre before Wednesday's matinee performance in

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Phillipa Soo, Renee Elise Goldsberry and Jasmine Cephas Jones in “Hamilton,” a fast-paced musical from beginning to end.

The astonishing ‘Hamilton’ tracks the defiant ambition of the mad-genius statesman

BY COLIN DABKOWSKI
 NEWS ARTS CRITIC

NEW YORK – When you feel like death is just around the corner, nothing can stop you from getting what you want.

That cursed feeling spurred Alexander Hamilton, the forgotten Founding Father whose relentless pursuit of success against impossible odds left a searing legacy on his adopted country, to greatness. And 200 years later, the same urgent drumbeat that echoed in Hamilton's ears spurred Lin-Manuel Miranda, the mad-genius polymath of Latin extraction and universal vision, to write one of the great musicals of the century so far.

“Hamilton,” now six months into its history-making run in the Richard Rodgers Theatre, pulsates with the panic of American ambition from the staccato gunfire of its opening drumbeats to the haunting harmonies of its final phrase.

It is perforated with a sense of purpose and defiance pulled straight from the streets of black America, painted with shades of Sondheim and Shakespeare and Reggaeton and the Beatles, and slapped onto a Broadway stage. Even in its

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Hamilton, Jefferson clash in rap wars

“HAMILTON” • from D1

quieter moments, it never lets up and it never lets go, grabbing its largely white audience by their J. Crew collars and reminding them what their country really stands for.

And after its run ends sometime in 3026, Broadway is never going to be the same.

Even before the cast of “Hamilton,” led by Miranda in the title role, caused jaws to drop across the country during Monday night’s Grammy Awards, its place in musical history had been all but assured. Its well-documented journey to Broadway dominance began, auspiciously enough, with a command performance at the White House in 2012, from whence the endless and ongoing deluge of “Hamilton” hype emerged.

Based on Miranda’s previous Broadway venture, the cute if thinly plotted “In the Heights” of 2008, I went into the show with a somewhat skeptical attitude and a sneaking suspicion that the show’s killer opening might be promising something it couldn’t deliver. This concern was thoroughly obliterated by the first few measures of the third song, “My Shot,” which sets up the show’s most potent and affecting motif.

That motif, repeated in strategic spots throughout the evening against backdrops of R&B or reggae, is pure, unalloyed urgency motivated by nothing less than the constant specter of death: “I am not throwin’ away my shot!” Miranda exclaims with a glowering intensity bordering on menace. “Yo, I’m just like my country, I’m young, scrappy and hungry and I’m not throwin’ away my shot!”

Not even remotely.

In Miranda’s rendering, based on Ron Chernow’s doorstep of a biography “Alexander Hamilton,” the plucky treasury secretary from St. Croix doesn’t throw away any shots until the final scene, which depicts the event for which

Hamilton and his political rival Aaron Burr are lamentably best remembered: A juvenile duel in an anonymous New Jersey field where Hamilton fell to Burr’s bullet at the age of 49.

The show gets right down to business. It quickly charts Hamilton’s tortured youth in St. Croix, where he was orphaned at a young age before being sent off to America by his fellow islanders, who recognized in him an innate talent for the written word. “I wrote my way out,” he says in the show’s final number, echoing the show’s persistent theme of the elusive hip-hop dream.

It goes on to follow the absurdly ambitious Hamilton as he falls in with George Washington during the Revolutionary War, schemes to push his financial plan through Congress as treasury secretary, and frequently butts heads with fellow Founding Fathers Thomas Jefferson and James Madison over various affairs of state.

In anyone else’s hands, this ancient American history could be snore-inducing. But Miranda, with the help of a remarkably talented cast made up largely of minority performers – itself a sly and subversive statement – makes history crackle to life. He accomplishes this most memorably in a series of rap battles with Jefferson, played with hilarious swagger by Daveed Diggs. (His act-two opener “What’d I Miss?,” about Jefferson’s return from France after the war, is a highlight.)

It would be a vast oversimplification to call “Hamilton” a “hip-hop musical.” It is rather an unlikely Broadway embodiment of the hip-hop impulse, which also happens to be the immigrant impulse, which as it turns out is the central if ever more distant American impulse: To innovate yourself out of your circumstances with the material at hand, to pull yourself ever-upward through the sheer force of will into a place that is better than where you came from.

Not that “Hamilton” is some paean to the myth of American individualism

or a package for bootstrapping rhetoric. Far from it. In fact, in song after song, Miranda lays the blame for America’s treatment of blacks and other minorities squarely on the shoulders of his fellow Founding Fathers.

An excerpt, delivered by Hamilton to Jefferson in one of those great rap battles: “A civics lesson from a slaver,” he says incredulously, “Hey neighbor, your debts are paid cause you don’t pay for labor.”

But it’s also a mistake to think of “Hamilton” musically as an exclusively hip-hop affair, given that its score pulls as much from Biggie and Tupac as from R&B, reggae, rock and musical theater influences. It also evinces an irresistible Caribbean flavor, often punctuated with an addictive New Orleans backbeat. The quiet and haunting song “The Room Where it Happens,” delivered by the electric Leslie Odom Jr., is a great example of Miranda’s range and also of Alex Lacamoire’s smart and sophisticated orchestrations.

Under Thomas Kail’s diligent direction, those songs blend seamlessly with Andy Blankenbuehler’s street-inspired but unostentatious choreography, Paul Tazewell’s surprisingly versatile period costumes and David Korins’ spare set, designed to look like the hold of a ship in constant motion to somewhere new.

And that, after all, is the point of the show: To drive into uncharted territory, furiously making up the future as you go.

“I imagine death so much it feels more like a memory,” Hamilton says in “My Shot.” “When’s it gonna get me? In my sleep? Seven feet ahead of me? If I see it comin’, do I run or do I let it be?”

Until the very end, Hamilton didn’t throw away his shot. And, to the delight of an entire new generation of musical theater fans who’ll be clamoring to get into this show for years to come, neither did Miranda.

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Hummable tunes, political purpose

DABKOWSKI • from D1

hopes of scoring last-minute cancellation tickets. They’d flown in from Seattle, driven from Maine or taken the 2 train from the Bronx, lured by the promise of a show that speaks to them in a language they can understand.

The remarkable cross-cultural appeal was evident in that crowd, which ranged from nontraditional theatergoers to Broadway addicts thirsting for the latest, greatest thing. A pair of college students from Maine made a pilgrimage to the theater in hopes of scoring a lottery ticket. They didn’t win but were in high spirits as they waited for the phantom prospect of cancellation tickets to materialize.

“My boyfriend hates musicals and he listens to ‘Hamilton’ with me. It’s that kind of crossover,” said Cassidy Giggey, who drove to New York with her friend and fellow University of Maine Farmington student Christina Hallowell after months of listening obsessively to the immensely popular “Hamilton” cast

album. “It makes history really interesting. It’s just this different take on telling a story about history and I think it’s appealing to everyone.”

As boilerplate as that praise may sound, it’s actually central to the show’s success: Its relative radicalism works on its fans surreptitiously, without their knowledge, providing not just hummable tunes but a sense of political purpose.

For the Lackawanna-born playwright, actor and director Ruben Santiago-Hudson, who is directing an acclaimed off-Broadway production of Dominique Morriseau’s “Skeleton Crew,” the success of the show represents a long-overdue mainstream embrace of work by black and Latino voices. Asked if there were new glimmers of hope for a truly cross-cultural commercial theater after “Hamilton,” he responded optimistically.

“There’s always glimmers of hope when you have Lin-Manuel Miranda, when you have George C. Wolfe, hopefully when you have Ruben Santiago-Hudson. There’s always hope, and it’s not just glimmers. Because we refuse to stand pat and deal with the status quo. We

are always pushing the envelope,” he said. “It brings me a tremendous sense of pride because I’ve seen the growth of Lin-Manuel, and I also see how he gives back,” Santiago-Hudson said. “He creates opportunities through his opportunity. The thing we must do as people of color is create opportunities through our opportunity. But that doesn’t just stop with us.”

The cultural gatekeepers, Santiago-Hudson said, are finally coming around.

“Those that are in power, when they’re concerned, and open up that door, and give access to a multifaceted society, then we do well,” he said. “That’s what it comes down to: We’re all the same. We’re all parents, we’re all sons and fathers of sons and mothers and nurturers. And once we all come to that, animosity just disappears, anger just disappears, racism just disappears, ignorance disappears.”

And thanks to “Hamilton,” a cultural phenomenon that extends far beyond the traditional borders of Broadway, perhaps much faster now.

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