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American History Gets the Rap Treatment in Hamilton Musical

David Sheward · Tuesday, March 17th, 2015

American history gets a vigorous shot in the arm with *Hamilton,* Lin-Manuel Miranda's bracing new musical about the most abrasive of our founding fathers, now playing at the Public Theater. You could argue, and Miranda does, that outside of George Washington, Alexander Hamilton was the key figure in the birth of our new nation. Scrappy, ambitious, and sometimes obnoxious, he didn't care whom he offended as he fought at Washington's side and instituted the national debt as a means of financing our government. After being disgraced by a sexual scandal, he famously dueled with the power-hungry Vice-President Aaron Burr and lost his life at 47.

Already a sell-out hit and announced for a Broadway transfer, *Hamiton,* which Miranda wrote, composed, and stars in, takes the bold step of telling its audacious hero's story with largely hip-hop and rap and recasting the historic roles with mostly African-American and Latino actors. By using the music of today's disenfranchised youth, Miranda reinforces the image of the young American rebels as dangerous outsiders. Hamilton, a bastard born in the Caribbean, is constantly derided as an "immigrant," drawing parallels to hot-button issues of the 21st century. In addition, the dueling machismo culture of Hamilton's era echoes the sometimes violent jousting amid contemporary rappers.

Carleigh Bettiol, Lin-Manuel Miranda, Leslie Odom, Jr., and Anthony Ramos in *Hamilton*
Credit: Joan Marcus

Miranda's score, brilliantly orchestrated by musical director Alex Lacamoire, incorporates a variety of styles to convey the diverse mixture of the new nation. Even the distant figure of King George III, played as a hilariously effete snob by Brian d'Arcy James, is given a signature leitmotif, a "Beatles" pop sound, for his ballad of lost love for his former colonies.

This is an invigorating history lesson, but it's not a perfect one. Clocking in at close to three hours, it could do with some cutting before it moves to Broadway and Miranda is bit too much in love with his subject at the cost of just about everyone else. His Hamilton is almost too smart for the room with all the other main figures—with exception of Washington—coming across as jerks or cads such as the preening, shallow Jefferson, the doddering Madison, and the incompetent, unseen John Adams.

Despite the show's flaws, Miranda's overall achievement is staggering. He tells a complicated story in a sung-through work with a host of distinct voices, juggling political intrigue, passionate

ideals, and interpersonal connections. Hamilton's complicated rivalry with Burr, his tragic family life, and his father-son relation with Washington are given full weight and depth. Director Thomas Kail and choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler, who served in those capacities on Miranda's *In the Heights*, stage the sweeping epic with invention and energy. Howell Binkley's versatile lighting sets the scenes from battlefield to executive mansion.

Miranda intensely conveys Hamilton's quicksilver intelligence as well as his quick temper. Leslie Odom, Jr. delivers a breakout performance as the nefarious Burr, equally convincing as a scheming politician and a loving father tenderly crooning to his baby daughter. Phillipa Soo, so moving in *Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812*, is just as heartbreaking here as Hamilton's put-upon wife Eliza while Renee Elise Goldsberry gives off sparks of wit and passion as her sister Angelica, also smitten with the title Treasury Secretary. Christopher Jackson is a stalwart Washington, Okieriete Onaodowan is formidable as a rough rebel, and Daveed Diggs is delightfully bubbly as a party-boy Lafayette and a popinjay Jefferson.

While this *Hamilton* is not quite as revolutionary as *Oklahoma!*, *Hair*, *Rent*, or even *1776*, it's an exciting sign that American musical theater is moving forward with the times even as it examines our past.

Feb. 17—May 3. Public Theatre, 425 Lafayette St., NYC. Tue.—Sun., 8 p.m.; Sat., Sun., 2 p.m. Running time: two hours and 45 mins. including intermission. $120. (212) 967-7555 or www.publictheater.org.

This review has been previously posted on ArtsinNY.com and Theaterlife.com.

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