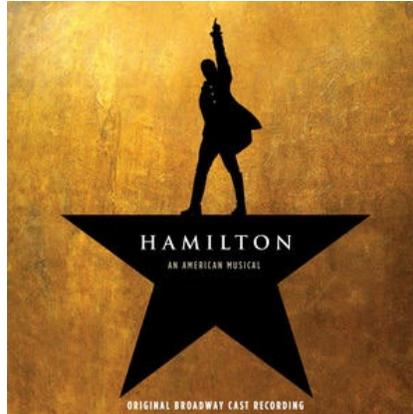


“Hamilton”--Original Broadway Cast (2015)

Added to the National Registry: 2025

Essay by Cary Ginell (guest post)*



In Broadway history, a handful of musicals have stood out as being not only admired for their excellence in combining story, song, and dance, but which also representative of turning points in the evolution of the genre due to their unique production values, superb book and score, and influence upon succeeding works. Major shows of this nature include “Show Boat” (1927), “Oklahoma!” (1943), “West Side Story” (1957), “Gypsy” (1959), “Hair” (1968), “A Chorus Line” (1975), “Sweeney Todd” (1979), “Les Misèrables” (1987), and “The Lion King” (1997). Add to this list “Hamilton” (2015), an extraordinary and highly innovative work that revolutionized musical theater through its story that centered on the United States’ first Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton (1755 or 1757-1804).

“Hamilton” was the work of Lin-Manuel Miranda (born 1980), a son of immigrants whose heritage combines Mexican, English, and African American ancestry. As a small boy growing up in New York, Miranda began writing musicals in high school and in 1999, while attending Wesleyan University, began work on what would become his first Broadway musical, “In the Heights.” The show utilized freestyle rap and salsa, two musical genres that were hugely popular in Manhattan neighborhoods but had yet to be adapted for use in a major Broadway production. Leonard Bernstein had come the closest, when he incorporated mambo rhythms (a cousin of salsa) into his production of “West Side Story” (1957). After its premiere off-Broadway in 2007, “In the Heights” became a major Broadway hit the following year, garnering 13 Tony nominations, winning four, including Best Musical and Best Original Score.

While on vacation in 2008, Miranda read Ron Chernow’s 2004 biography of Alexander Hamilton and was struck by how Hamilton’s rise from humble beginnings as a Caribbean immigrant arriving in America reflected his own family’s experience. Hamilton’s rags-to-riches rise to prominence shaped the American Revolution, and he eventually became one of the new nation’s Founding Fathers, only to be shot and killed in a duel with rival Aaron Burr in 1804.

Feeling that incorporating hip-hop music into the score would give it relevance as well as vitality to attract contemporary audiences, Miranda proceeded to find out everything that he could about Hamilton’s life, reading his letters, visiting places relevant to the American Revolution, and even

writing in Aaron Burr's bedroom, located in Washington Heights, the barrio used as the setting for "In the Heights."

After performing the song "Alexander Hamilton" in 2009 at the White House Poetry Jam, with President Obama in attendance, Miranda was encouraged by the enthusiastic response and expanded the song into a concept album called "The Hamilton Mixtape," consisting of additional songs describing highlights from Hamilton's life, à la "Jesus Christ Superstar." This soon morphed into a full-fledged musical, which premiered off-Broadway in February 2015, moving to Broadway that August, where it became a national phenomenon, triggering an assault on box offices that had not been experienced since "Phantom of the Opera" in 1986. At the 70th Tony Awards, the show received 16 nominations, winning 11, including Best Musical. "Hamilton" was eventually awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and has since been used in history classes to teach the story of the American Revolution.

"Hamilton" has been described by Miranda as being "about America then, as told by America now." The ingenious as well as courageous decision to cast the show using chiefly non-white actors was meant to reflect America's heterogeneous diversity, with Miranda focusing on actors who could rap and rappers who could not only sing and act but whose backgrounds reflected parallels to the Founding Fathers. Miranda himself played the title role, with Christopher Jackson as George Washington, Daveed Diggs as both the Marquis de Lafayette and Thomas Jefferson, Leslie Odom Jr. as Aaron Burr, and Phillipa Soo as Eliza Schuyler Hamilton. Of the major characters, only Brian d'Arcy James (replaced by Jonathan Groff), who played King George III, was white.

The score's most popular and prominent songs included the insistent and declarative "My Shot," the Beatlesque singalong "You'll Be Back" (musically implying a British invasion), the profound and haunting "Wait For It," and the razzmatazz showstopper "The Room Where It Happens," which utilized the unexpected use of a banjo, in a score that featured hip-hop, R&B, gospel, and soul as well as traditional style showtunes. Miranda's use of hip-hop and rap, however, went beyond just using them musically. Because of the nature of these styles, Miranda was able to incorporate them as recitative, as is used in opera, replacing dialog, but retaining the rhyming and rhythm inherent in the genre to keep the momentum moving forward.

The language craftily mixed 18th and 21st century tropes, combining historical vocabulary with contemporary slang, euphemisms, and street talk, making the show accessible to a wide variety of audiences. Miranda's brilliant use of clever wordplay, onomatopoeic phrases, puns, and terms with double meanings made many audiences return for a second or even third visit to catch every note of the word-rich libretto.

"Hamilton" was not just one of the most successful musicals of all time, it was a worldwide phenomenon, not just because of the demand for seats by theatergoers, but because of its representation of what made the American experience unique: reflecting the ambition, drive, and ingenuity of the Founding Fathers, who didn't just possess a collective can-do attitude, but a must-do attitude.

The value of immigrants to America's story, emphasized through the multi-cultural casting, coincided with the rise of Donald Trump, whose *raison d'être* revolved around his virulent opposition to what he viewed as a foreign incursion into the country. "Hamilton's" continued success as one of the most sensationally received shows in Broadway history is testimony to its stressing of history, societal inclusiveness, and noble sacrifice for the greater good, which collectively demonstrates the best of what America came to define.

Cary Ginell is an author and music historian and author of "Carefully Taught: American History Through Broadway Musicals" and "Watch Your Frazology! A Lexicon of Meredith Willson's 'The Music Man'." A Grammy nominee, he is also a recipient of the ASCAP Deems Taylor Award, the Will Rogers Medallion Award, and eight-time winner of the ARSC Award for Excellence in Historical Recorded Sound Research.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.