

Hamilton: A Revolution On and Off the Stage

Before 2015, the demographic that would commonly frequent Broadway's 41 iconic theaters was the upper- middle white class. Like clockwork, every September saw a flock of them, commonly hailing from the Metropolitan New York City area, exuding the essence of elegance and poise.

Throughout the fall, these auditorium's red cushions would be engulfed by a sea of homogeneity, with comparable faces eager to watch their seeming reflections for a couple of hours. For decades, this had been the status quo; it boldly announced that theater was an exclusive commodity reserved only for those who resembled those on stage.

“Working-class people and culture are an endangered group in our theatres, invisible in our auditoria and rarely seen on our stages. Where they do appear it’s often in a rather anthropological way with a subtext that says ‘thank God we don’t live next to those people,’” said Karena Johnson to The Guardian in 2014.

Yet, a revolution that had been silently brewing since 2009 took the world by storm. When "Hamilton" debuted at the Public Theater on Aug. 6, 2015, it challenged this unspoken notion and delivered a message to all those holding on to the restrictiveness of the past that there is room for everyone in the arts.

Through its use of an ensemble made up almost entirely of people of color, "Hamilton" narrates the story of Alexander Hamilton, the famous founding father whose influence led to the ratification of the Constitution and the creation of the strong federal government that is still used today.

Its inception stemmed from the creative mind of Lin-Manuel Miranda, who, after reading Ron Chernow's biography on this key American figure, was inspired by Hamilton's utilization of language to communicate his progressive ideas, a powerful theme he had witnessed throughout the hip-hop movement of the 1990s.

This past-present parallelism inspired him to produce a rap mixtape that would later become the acclaimed musical.

"That was what grabbed me about it," Miranda explained to NPR, "was this was a guy who used words to get everywhere and do what my favorite hip-hop artists do — if not write about their struggles, their lives, then transcend their circumstances by sheer virtuosity."

In May 2009, Miranda was invited to the White House for An Evening of Poetry, Music And The Spoken Word. The administration expected him to perform a track from "In the Heights," a musical he had originated his sophomore year of college depicting his experience growing up in a Hispanic neighborhood in New York City.

Before *Hamilton*, *"In the Heights"* was Miranda's firstborn and his confirmation that pushing for innovation and diversity was worth it. After it debuted on Broadway in 2007, it earned 13 Tony nominations, winning four and a Grammy award for Best Musical Show Album.

Yet, instead of playing it safe, he opted for something novel, choosing the songs he had been working on that year. Alongside a couple of members who would later join the Broadway cast, Miranda presented *"The Hamilton Mixtape,"* a collection of used and deleted tracks he utilized as an outline when creating the show.

During his foreword, he humorously pointed out the absurdity of writing a hip-hop album about a founding father as Barack and Michelle Obama laughed in the background. However, as his presentation progressed, their expression changed from curiosity to admiration, and they even snapped along to the tune.

Following this successful White House showing, he was motivated to make *"Hamilton"* a full-scale musical and began touring U.S. colleges, performing to students to experiment with his potential sound.

After six years full of trial and error, *"Hamilton"* finally debuted in 2015, marking the beginning of a revolution on and off the stage. Admirably, it received 16 Tony award nominations, winning 11, a Pulitzer in Drama and a Grammy Award.

Miranda's inventive tune spoke to Broadway's forgotten demographics and received praise originating from every corner of society, from the usual professional theater critics to even curious historians who had taken a liking to the show.

"I kid you not, I had two historians hand me two different books on the way to the studio today. 'Thank you very much,'" he recounted to NPR "Because it's coming from a place of enthusiasm, it's coming from a place of, 'Look what you did.' So, I can't help but be touched by it."

The musical's initial reception shook the foundation of the theater – an art form that had been kept pristine and unaltered for centuries was finally transforming into something that reflected the changing times.

"Miranda is putting immigrants and the descendants of slaves, black people, Latinos and Asians, low-income kids with little hope for the future, in the room where it happens," discussed Sarah Churchwell for *The Guardian*. "The ambitious individual left out of the 'smoke-filled room' becomes the emblem of entire groups excluded from power."

So, thanks to *Hamilton's* distinctive spotlight shining on underrepresented groups, it powered a sudden surge in BIPOC theater attendance that is expected to continue amplifying in the upcoming years. According to statistics presented by The Broadway League, the 2022-2023 season saw the highest percentage of these audience members counting with a 29 percent.

Yet, besides this off-stage expansion, Miranda's efforts to create such a diverse and inviting show also extended to those bringing these iconic characters to life. A study from the Actors' Equity Association found that since 2017, contracts for BIPOC actors increased from 15.3 to 23.3 percent, a change they directly linked to the pioneering pathways broadened by this creative genius.

"[Hamilton] doesn't present actors of color just to put them on a stage," stated Don Michael Mendoza for D.C. theater arts. "It places them in a meaningful story about the founding of our country that is also a comment on the diversity of what America is comprised of, which is many cultures as one."

Since Hamilton's groundbreaking advancements toward a more inclusive theater world, many other musicals followed suit in replicating the diversity of this cast. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, shows such as the fully-African American ensemble of "A Strange Loop" were increasingly recognized by the Tony Awards and audiences alike.

However, while it's clear that Miranda is responsible for hashing the fire, it's impossible to ignore the fuel added by journalists and media members – crucial in sparking this revolution. Starting on July 3 of 2020, Disney+ added the popular musical, attracting 2.7 million households and further inflating its appeal for fans all over the world.

Twitter members live reacted to their first viewage on the platform by creating hashtags such as #Hamilmfilm and sharing humorous memes about the revival of their obsession with Hamilton. By this point, the show had been on Broadway for five years, yet its social media presence seemed perpetual.

Still, journalists themselves also played a hand in upholding its popularity. By creating review pieces addressing negative claims of "Hamilton" being overrated, they encouraged readers to abstain from blindly believing the online herd and motivated them to judge the condition of the show themselves.

"*Hamilton* is the kind of show that everyone talks about, so much so it catches the attention of people who'd otherwise have no interest in a musical, or even the theater in general," said James Hunt for Screen Rant ".The quality leads to a sense of hype which leads to those sold-out crowds, which then only feeds the hype machine further still."

Usually Broadway shows are reviewed by local gazettes and they count with around a dozen of reviews. Exemplifying this normalcy, Hell's Kitchen, Alicia Keys' 2023 long-awaited musical, was commonly reviewed by thirteen tabloids, eight of these emerging from the city.

However, Hamilton peculiarly received twenty-four, with reviewers flying in from esteemed cities such as Boston and Chicago to answer one of the biggest inquiries of 2015: *Could the show truly live up to its hype?*

In the early stages of the musical, journalists served as the eyes and ears for the intrigued public, which was excitingly made up of people of all ages who had previously never shown an interest in musical theater.

"I am loath to tell people to mortgage their houses and lease their children to acquire tickets to a hit Broadway show. But *Hamilton*, directed by Thomas Kail and starring Mr. Miranda, might just about be worth it," said Sarah Krulwich for *The New York Times*, furtherly encouraging this publicity.

Apart from mobilizing audiences to the Public theater, journalists also had the vital task of covering the musical's impact on modern American political and social advocacy. In 2020, they covered the profound effect of using *Hamilton* lyrics amidst the Black Lives Matter protests. Many posters in manifestations around the country read, "History has its eyes on you" and "This is not a moment; it's a movement."

With many reporters additionally refuting the negative backlash received by the show for its color-conscious casting and placing it into a clearer perspective.

"The casting choice doesn't change the past." stated Dakota Buhler for *Study Breaks*, "Altering history is not the intent or the result, but the unexpected cast does take viewers and listeners out of preconceived history ruts and force them to look at historical figures as real people, who have dreams, ambitions and flaws just like everyone else."

Yet, although *Hamilton* is often positively spoken about for opening doors for talent and audiences, not everyone saw its effects as constructive despite journalists and the media's best efforts.

Toni Morrison, the acclaimed author best known for *The Bluest Eye*, reportedly financed a play titled "*The Haunting of Lin-Manuel Miranda*," directed by Ishmael Reed.

The script took after "*A Christmas Carol*," but rather than being haunted by ghosts of his personal past, in this version, the white founding fathers terrorize Miranda until he recognizes his theatrical mistakes.

Reed's goal for the show was to emphasize *Hamilton*'s glorification of racist historical characters and its counterproductive effect in advocating for underrepresented communities, a point of view Morrison similarly shared.

"As Morrison saw things, the play either glossed over or utterly whitewashed some of the more unsavory aspects of the characters' lives," described Aaron Homer for *Grunge*.

Other critiques, meanwhile, focused on the lack of diversity amongst its public, a worrying theme for a musical dedicated to championing increased representation on and off the stage.

"It was hard not to notice that while *Hamilton* has been hailed for deliberately casting actors of color as some of America's most venerated Dead White Men ... the actors onstage seemed

to make up the majority of brown people in the house the night I went," recounted Gene Demby for NPR.

Nonetheless, even though the criticism of Hamilton seems to be coming from a valid place, just like any revolution, perfection or flawlessness was never its main objective. Instead, Miranda's clever origination managed to shake the floor of an institution that seemed unshakable and bring such a magnificent wave of change that will now be remembered for generations.

This musical uniquely reignited a passion for the arts for those who felt alienated and forgotten for decades, creating bonds among demographics of all ages who now can't help but sing along or hum to Hamilton's familiar tunes—a uniting universal language in the form of modern hip-hop.

Amidst its polemics and historical inaccuracies, Hamilton also reminds us of the beauty of the past, the wonders of the American dream and the employment of creativity in making an ardent difference.

In Miranda's inspiring words during "The World Was Wide Enough," "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*."

Hamilton has re-invented what it means to produce and watch musical theater, setting precedents for diversity and inclusion that are now not only encouraged in the industry, but required. Miranda has done the unthinkable, making space "in the room where it happens" for black and brown people, empowering them in all areas of their lives—and this memorable essence seems to be the takeaway that truly matters in the end.