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Besmir Shishko

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Lin-Manuel Miranda: Hamilton, a New Era of Broadway Musicals

Besmir Shishko, PhD (C.)

Karl Franzens University, Graz, Austria

Email: besmirs@gmail.com

Abstract

Over the past two years, something odd has happened on Broadway, which can be accredited to one man, or rather two. A new musical known as *Hamilton*, based on the genius and life of Alexander Hamilton, is striving to become one of the most beloved, most viewed and widely appreciated Broadway shows of all time, and it is all the creation of Lin Manuel Miranda. This paper aims to address the issues of changing the conventional Broadway music by introducing hip-hop, which seemingly focuses on rapping about relevant issues over edgy beats. In line with relevant literature, the dissertation attempts to explore the role of the introduction of modern hip-hop music and diverse cast playing the protagonist parts of the Founding Fathers in achieving to convey the message of *Hamilton* while changing the face of orthodox Broadway plays. The paper departs from the question of whether these elements are successful in attracting diverse ethnicities and a younger audience, while simultaneously managing to gross higher ticket sales.

Keywords: *Broadway, hip-hop, Hamilton, audience members, diversity.*

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Hamilton connects American history, musical theatre and hip-hop to present an experience that is exciting and fresh for theatre goers. While playwrights and composers may have made progress bringing rock and pop into Broadway, none have dared ventured as deeply as Miranda into Hip-Hop, the genre of music that has a style and culture of its own. Indeed, Miranda himself has been quite experienced in this culture since his youth and in *Hamilton* he delivers a lifetime's worth of immersion and study. Cast albums as well as rap artists like Jay-Z inspired Miranda for they were able to convey a narrative with rhyme, albeit with different time. Young Lin-Manuel found that he had a talent for both as well, and in *Hamilton*, he has brought together music and history with a plot that stands more than 200 years outside of what is considered the typical culture of hip-hop. The genius of Miranda, who also stars as Founding Father Alexander Hamilton, is nowhere more evident than in the way he has translated this historical tale into 21st century musical exuberance – the kind of sound today's urban swashbucklers already have streaming into their ears.

By relating the hopes and setbacks, squabbles and seductions, triumphs and tragedies of these 18th century American rebels in a score that allows the past to speak in the musical language of the rebellious present – rap, he connect audiences to characters separated by more than 200 years (Zeitchik, 2015). Lin-Manuel Miranda, the Tony winning playwright of *Hamilton*, created this musical with the idea of having a diverse cast due to the fact the United States has more immigrants than any other country in the world, where roughly more than 40 million people living in the U.S. were born in another country, accounting for about one-fifth of the world's migrants in 2016. (Lopez & Bialik, 2017).

While *Hamilton* is based on the founding father Alexander Hamilton during Revolutionary America, Miranda thinks that the casting of Black, Hispanic, Asian American, etc. in roles that are historically white will not take away from what the show is about (Miranda & McCarter, 2016). He wanted to separate the

history from today and make the show current and relatable (Delman, 2015).

The genre “hip-hop musical” may appear to some as degradation to the high standards of Broadway productions yet one look at *Hamilton’s* lyrics may refute any such criticism. Within *Hamilton*, Miranda’s musical score excellently merges so many diverse musical elements from a masterful score and expert rapping style to lyrics that shake the foundations of the country. Although modern day rap and America’s near 250-year-old revolution may seem as far apart from one another on the surface as can be, Miranda states that rap would likely have been the language of the founding fathers for rap has always been a way for people to remove themselves from circumstances of oppression. To clarify, rap is often a means for rappers to distinguish themselves from their environment, expose their environment, and overcome their enemies; all things that the founding fathers would have needed to do in order to establish the country.

Miranda comments that in his show, Broadway audiences are given a chance to see Hip-Hop in a manner that’s consistent with the genre’s most important conventions. Indeed, the show’s cast album has achieved well on its own. Hip-Hop fans have high praise of *Hamilton* due to its complex and outstanding rhyming. Indeed, to see them perform, one cannot help but feel that they are holding a beat that is, in the words of former President Barack Obama, “Young, scrappy, and hungry” (CBSN, 2016). This fresh, feisty and eager attitude is described by the former President as a quintessentially American attitude which is what makes the art so timelessly moving. He states, “Rap is the language of revolution, hip hop is the back beat. In each brilliantly crafted song, we hear the debates that shaped our nation and the debates that are still shaping our nations” (CBSN, 2016). Perhaps this is the hidden sympathy that unites rapper’s rhetoric with the discourse of democracy; that both have accepted and owned the necessary ‘trial by fire’ from which all great things come about.

The resonance between hip-hop rappers’ challenges and the ones faced by the founding fathers is apparent in the

thematic elements and lyrics that Miranda utilizes in *Hamilton*. For instance, in 'My Shot', one of the fieriest and lively of the play's songs, Hamilton raps for his life and his stake in it with a die-hard desperation that is instantly recognizable by hip-hop enthusiasts as something similar to Eminem and his song 'Lose Yourself'. Hamilton sings "I am not throwing away my shot. Hey yo, I'm just like my country, I'm young, scrappy and hungry, And I'm not throwing away my shot, We're gonna rise up (time to take a shot)" (Miranda, 2015). Compare this defiant challenge to Eminem's "You own it, you better never let it go, you only get one shot, do not miss you chance to blow, this opportunity comes once in a life time" (Eminem, 2018). What most profoundly ties together Hamilton however with a hardcore rapper like Eminem is that both of them come from such humbling backgrounds. In Eminem's case, the struggle was in not having a father, living with his mother in the trailer park and feeding his child. Hamilton's ranting of tears is no less daunting in the play's self-titled song '*Hamilton*' in which the protagonist is identified as the forgotten bastard son of a whore, left alone by a roommate and also stuck living in starvation. Surely, the pages of *Hamilton* look like something scribbled from the loose leaf diary of a deprived destitute from Harlem rather than the diary of the nation's 10-dollar forefather.

Nevertheless, for as miserable as his beginnings were, Hamilton's vision, literacy, and rap skills portrayed in *Hamilton* seemed destined to raise him from the lowest of the lows to the highest of the heights once they were put to use in the right environment, New York. The play's opening describes how "In New York you can be a new man, just you wait, Alexander Hamilton, We are waiting in the wings for you, You could never back down, You never learned to take your time" (Miranda, 2015). How similar is this love for New York to acclaimed hip-hop rapper Jay-Z's own 'Empire State of Mind' which describes how "In New York, Concrete Jungle where dreams are made of, There's nothin' you can't do, Now you're in New York, These streets will make you feel brand new, Big lights will inspire you, Let's hear it for New York, New York, New York" (Jay-Z, 2018). New York, New York is said to be the

city so great they named it twice. Residents come to the city not only for its greatness but for unlocking the greatness that lies within them and, in doing so, make a name for themselves. New York is the big apple because it is the place where one's desires can be fulfilled, that is if they are willing to take a bite of it as big as Americans Jay-Z and Hamilton have proven is possible. No wonder why *Hamilton* has consecutively sold out more than a year's worth of its New York Broadway shows and is a hit with the hundreds of inner city students who have received free private theatre performances from the cast.

Perhaps the only place more American than New York is Washington D.C., a place where *Hamilton* has also been performed for dozens of politicians. On Broadway, African-American and Latino actors dressed in the costumes of the Revolutionary War period are portraying the Founding Fathers – George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton – in Lin-Manuel Miranda's "*Hamilton*," a critically acclaimed hip-hop musical whose audience last month included President Obama (Aucoin, 2015). During *Hamilton*'s condensed White House performance, the former president emphasized that "We hope that the remarkable life of Alexander Hamilton will show our young people the possibilities within themselves and how much they can achieve in the span of a lifetime. We hope that they will walk away with an understanding with what our founders got started, that it was just a start, just a beginning..." (CBSN, 2016). The former president may be biased about *Hamilton* however. Miranda, who had composed just the first song of *Hamilton*, performed it successfully at the Obama administration's White House poetry jam, which according to Barack Obama helped to set wind in the screenwriter's sails. Following his amazing reception at the White House, Miranda went onto the writing of the rest of the play's songs.

Despite the fact that Miranda wrote the songs in the most unlikely of places, such as on the subway, the *Hamilton* record rose to Billboard 200's 12th position making it the most acclaimed musical recording in over 50 years (Gate, 2015). Additionally, *Hamilton* ranked third in rap charts, an

achievement echoed by the “Best Rap Album of 2015” accolade from Billboard. The awards came again as well in 2016 after the cast’s recording took the Award for Best Musical Theatre Cast from the Grammys. What all these achievements demonstrate is that, with a powerful message delivered through a soulful genre of music, it is possible for Broadway productions to earn the respect and admiration of a larger audience than any before.

Perhaps the success of the cast album is in that it encloses the story’s entirety with just a single recording. From beginning to end, the narrative for each historical character is clearly presented and reads as coherently as a history book. Indeed, much of the play’s historical basis is taken from one such printed book, Rob Chernow’s biography of Alexander Hamilton, a text which Miranda picked up by chance at the airport. Clearly, the power of the story impacts not only those who can travel to New York and purchase tickets, but anyone who listens to the album. Furthermore, the availability of the track is becoming quite widespread meaning that listeners, even not having seen the show, have access to the captivating portrayal of the Hamilton story.

Essentially, *Hamilton’s* wide ranging charm which stretches over several genres and generations, gives the show the ability to unite them all with one story and its soundtrack. In *Hamilton*, Miranda widens the spectrum of the modern-day musical by eliminating cliché and passé theatric maneuvers for the sake of a more gripping narrative told in the moving spirit of rap, a genre of music that has always had the intention of shaking things up. In so doing, *Hamilton* reaches a wider sphere of people who now are realizing there is something more current and amazing to see on or hear from Broadway. Essentially *Hamilton* proves that even a Broadway show can deliver a performance capable of moving people on the streets rather than just the upper ranks of society. Nevertheless, Lin-Manuel has further succeeded in overturning the upper-middle classes’ perceptions of the musical genre as well. The prejudice against rap—that it is a weak or shallow form of art—dissolves in the context of *Hamilton*. The show maintains the magic of Broadway while introducing the standard musical crowd to the

world of rap and hip-hop. By combining these two styles, Miranda opens the door to a variety of viewers quite unlike any performance before. Essentially, the show merges its diverse elements so perfectly that no matter which feature originally attracted the viewer—hip-hop, history, or musical theatre—he or she will be captivated for the entire show, even by parts that may not initially have seemed interesting.

A Historical Production

History is a common theme for Broadway shows to delve into. *Camelot* and *1776* are two such musical performances that successfully made their mark on Broadway, and in *Hamilton* the historical trend continues, albeit in radically new style of rap. Nonetheless, *Hamilton* references surpass the history of historic musicals to include lyrics like “sit down, John!” (Miranda, 2015) a line taken directly from *1776* to dismiss the insufferable John Adams. Miranda’s work gives audiences the chance to feel Alexander Hamilton and his colleagues more directly, thereby gaining an insight into the ideals and challenges each of them faced. Some of this sympathy is surely attributable to the dozens of pop-culture allusions interspersed throughout the play such as songs that reiterate themes and wordage from contemporary rappers, like Jay-Z for example, and odd references to other musical productions like *Beauty and the Beast* when the actors sing “Screw your courage to the sticking place” (MsMojo, 2017). These many modern references help to frame the past in a contemporary and interesting lens.

The complexity of the nation’s founders is not a topic brought up that frequently. To many, they are distant and mythological personas belonging to the distant past rather than contemporary present. Even so, in *Hamilton*, their performances help to overturn these biases as audiences see them for who they are truly, as human beings with human strengths and weaknesses. On NPR’s “All Songs Considered,” the contributor admitted that he was “ready to hate” *Hamilton* (Aku, 2015). The contributor believed the basis of *Hamilton*, which combined hip-hop with a history was too ridiculous to

be good. However, after watching the show, he was very moved by the performance, both as a show as well as an album of hip-hop on its own. Actually, the performance inspired him to delve deeper into Alexander Hamilton's life to confirm what he had learned on stage and see what more there was to know. This is the transformative power *Hamilton* delivers, that it will make researchers from even the skeptics.

Immigration Nation

One of the most significant contributions *Hamilton* makes to the audience, and indeed the people of the United States of America, is its emphasis on themes of immigration, diversity, and the achievement possible when the two cooperate together. Hamilton, who was born in the Caribbean island of Nevis, immigrated to the United States in his teens, is a powerful example of the ongoing support that immigrants have provided for the country, as without Hamilton's immigration, the world would not only have been deprived of an invaluable founding father but also of the award winning musical about his life.

Miranda is a fine candidate to articulate these themes for he himself is the son of immigrants. Though he was born in New York, his parents are from Mexico and Puerto Rico. President Obama, who evidently noticed this connection, stated of Alexander Hamilton that he was "a striving immigrant who escaped poverty, made his way to the new world, climbed to the top by sheer force of will and pluck and determination; in him Lin-Manuel saw something of his own family and every immigrant family" (CBSN, 2016). Miranda certainly broadcasted his support for immigration on Broadway through his line "Immigrants: We get the job done" in the song Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down) (Miranda, 2015). Lin-Manuel and his crew picked up and expanded upon this verse with "The Hamilton Mixtape: Immigrants (We Get the Job Done)," a full length song with a provocative video on YouTube describing the importance of immigrants to the American economy.

Regardless of whether or not one is in favor or against immigration, *Hamilton* shows how fundamental the practice has been to the founding of the country. In describing Hamilton, Burr says he was “Another immigrant comin’ up from the bottom” (Miranda, 2015). Throughout the play, the term ‘immigrant’ is used 9 times to describe Hamilton, a repetition that Miranda uses to emphasize the significant role the immigration plays into the identity of the forefather and all like him who have relocated to the U.S. in hope of a better life. Rather than allow his foreign birth and humble origins define him, Hamilton, in the words of his biographer Ron Chernow “had totally and irrevocably repudiated his past” (Chernov, 2005, p. 580). His triumph is shared with *Hamilton’s* increasingly diverse audiences. Demographic trends indicate that, as of 2015, 43.2 million U.S. residents had been born abroad which translates to roughly 13.4% of the U.S. population. Certainly, an aspect of Alexander Hamilton’s success is in that it not only promotes such a popular theme but also uses a cast made up of racially diverse actors.

Broadway is known for only casting white actors so exclusively it is called “The Great White Way.” Raised in central New York, Lin-Manuel saw that Broadway had hardly any openings for Latino actors and the channels which did open were obscure and infrequent. He says, “I don’t dance well enough to play Bernardo [in *West Side Story*] or Paul in *A Chorus Line* and that’s it. If you’re a Puerto Rican man, that’s what you got” (Deerwester, 2016, p. 1). Miranda sought to adjust the inequity in Broadway casting with *Hamilton’s* highly diverse cast. The accolades they have achieved since is a testament to both the capacity of Latino performers as well as the ability for talented actors to deliver outstanding performances regardless of any discrepancies between them and their characters’ race.

Hamilton, though about a group of all-white men, uses diverse actors to reach beyond itself. Excellent actors of color bring characters like Aaron Burr, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington to life. *Hamilton* denies stereotypes of casting stereotypes and in so doing, “transcends race” according to

Miranda (Vosick-Levinson, 2015). Instead of looking at George Washington's powdered wig, audiences have to pull from a deeper level to see the character for who he truly is. In so doing, they may get closer to not only the character but themselves as well.

Lin-Manuel attracts audiences to recognize these figures of history as real-life individuals rather than distant and glorified beings who are larger than life. His decision to cast non-white actors is a testament to this vision. He states "In *Hamilton*, we're telling the stories of old, dead white men but we're using actors of color, and that makes the story more immediate and more accessible to a contemporary audience" states Miranda (DiGiacomo, 2015). Hence, the hip-hop elements ingrained in Alexander Hamilton's story with elements relatable to today's culture and the diverse cast makes these long-dead white characters relatable to contemporary, and diverse audiences. "We have the opportunity to reclaim a history that some of us don't necessarily think is our own," said Renee Elise Goldsberry, the actress playing Alexander Hamilton's sister-in-law Angelica Schuyler, (Perez & Ashley & Salima, 2016). Her feelings extend beyond her cast mates and into the audience as well.

Hamilton's diverse actors serves to both humanize the characters that they portray as well as help viewers to see their story as potently and relevantly as though it happened at present. Such casting is admitted to the timeless message of Martin Luther King Jr., that one day a man "will be judged by the content of his character rather than the color of his skin". In *Hamilton*, the actors are exclusively judged by this standard alone. Contributing to this insightful perspective is the background of the former president Barack Obama, who emerged as an African-American in a historically all-white occupation. Indeed, without Barack Obama's White House Poetry Jam, it's unlikely that *Hamilton* would be in production now. Similarly shattering stereotypes is Christ Jackson, the African-American in *Hamilton* playing George Washington, a man who was white as the powdered wig he wore.

By breaking down the stereotypes of musical theatre and history, Lin-Manuel Miranda has opened up new avenues of theatre goer demographics on Broadway. Presently, the common age of the Broadway audience member is white and around 50 years old with nearly a quarter million dollar annual income. As one writer notes, "80 percent of Broadway ticket-buyers are white, according to the Broadway League, but the percentages of Black, Hispanic and Asian theatergoers have all risen significantly over the last decade" (Paulson, 2015, p. 1). Obama also remarked that tickets to a Broadway show were pricey but that, thanks to the generosity of *Hamilton's* cast, thousands of high school students are now getting a 'shot' to see the live play in action.

Like adult audiences, the increase in the number of students shows that they appreciate the cast's diversity, which one student described as reflecting "real life," and that "it's nice to see not just one race represented onstage" (D'Orio, 2017, p. 1). Fundamentally, the play wins over audiences white and colored, young and old, rich and low-income because of its ability to eliminate the social distance between them through the shared story of their country's founding. Like the many branches of a tree recognizing the shared heritage of its roots, the people of America find meaning and a common identity in *Hamilton's* performance. The ethnic cast also helps to recreate the moment of America's founding in real time since immigrants like Hamilton founded the nation.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the tactics and message of *Hamilton* are proving as revolutionary for Broadway shows as the protagonist was for the country's founding. By including modern genres of music like hip-hop and rap, an ethnically diverse cast, and reaching out to school, *Hamilton* consistently endeavors to build a bridge between the founding father's past and the future the belongs to the youth and all the ideals and art forms that are unequivocally theirs. Perhaps one of the greatest questions that *Hamilton* has raised following their performance is what is next

for Broadway? If *Hamilton* can succeed in winning the hearts of countless audience members and students with diversity, rap, and outreach education, what directions might present and future Broadway productions be able to go? Might dubstep ballet be coming to a theatre soon? Or perhaps a wicked inspired anti-bullying campaign for schools? The possibilities *Hamilton* has inspired are as endless and they are still unknown. In many ways *Hamilton's* inspiration value is directly related to America's own contribution to the free world. This is a country where there is no law telling who can be what and many laws that entitle people to the inalienable rights of liberty. *Hamilton* is a profound example of citizens expressing their inalienable right to express themselves innovatively in theatre and, in so doing, win over hundreds of thousands, earn a name for themselves, and decent salary to be sure; all things that are part and parcel to the wildest dream belonging to most any American, past or present.

Shows like *Hamilton* appeal to people of all different ages, races, and backgrounds. It seems as though Lin-Manuel Miranda's production is in full motion to influence musical theatre not just for a season, but quite a while as Broadway comes to grips with the infusion of its least ever used musical genre, hip-hop. Though tickets may be 'pricey', anyone can get a front row ticket to the show with the cast's recording which, though without the theatrics of the stage, is acclaimed in its own right nonetheless. In Miranda's words, "art changes people's minds, because it allows us to empathize with people we never empathize with" (Vozick-Levinson, 2015, p. 1). Within *Hamilton*, Lin-Manuel succeeds in uniting many diverse crowds of theatre goers not only with music and theatre but each other as well. His style is forging a common ground for those of all background to find their voice in Broadway and more by transcending stylistic conventions. Lin-Manuel Miranda, by creating an art form for all, has made history forever. What's even more astounding however is what avenues for the future the play has opened up with is creative contributions and innovative casting. Truly, the full contribution that *Hamilton* makes for the world remains to be seen, just like America itself.

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