

Theater: Does "Hamilton" Hit "The Heights?" Not Yet, But It's Close!

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HAMILTON *** out of ****
THE PUBLIC THEATER

Is [Lin-Manuel Miranda's](#) new musical Hamilton exciting? Yes. Does it allow us to banish the memory of Bring It On: The Musical as a misfire and make In The Heights the start of a lengthy career and not a one-hit wonder? Absolutely. Can it improve mightily before the inevitable Broadway transfer? Indeed, with some judicious recasting, rejiggering, reshaping by director Thomas Kail (in top form here) and if Miranda makes like Hamilton and keeps writing on and on till the break of dawn! (Actually, Miranda looked understandably exhausted the night I saw the show, so here's hoping he can collapse and catch his breath though I doubt the Tony calendar will allow that.)

But if they didn't change a word, I'd gladly see the show again right away just for the many talented performers and Miranda's groundbreaking score. (Last summer we had the Tupac Shakur musical Holler If Ya Hear Me, which seemed almost afraid to be hip hop. Hamilton dives right in and lets the audience catch up. Don't worry -- even your mother will follow the flow. It's not so different, really, from Henry Higgins talk-singing his way through My Fair Lady, not with Miranda and the rest enunciating their lines with casual, clear aplomb.)

You might call Hamilton brash and irreverent. The Founding Fathers in rap battles, dissing one another? Scandalous. Or at best clever-clever. But you'd be wrong. Hamilton is brash and very reverent, which is crucial to its success. It's not mocking those old white dudes in wigs, it's celebrating the battle of ideas and the actual battles they engaged in, the freedoms they fought for and the freedoms they would give themselves and others like them while wittingly or not creating a fluid political system that would slowly expand those freedoms to more and more members of society until people of color in this cast could play them onstage and it would feel natural and inevitable and right.

Ultimately, Miranda treats the Founding Fathers the way many of them could not or would not treat poor white men or women or slaves or Indians or people of color -- as people, living and breathing with hopes and dreams and fears and blood coursing through their veins, not the living legends that make so many Revolutionary dramas dead on arrival. Nothing here is ironic; nothing is in quotes, even when it's being cheeky. It's exciting and passionate and fully immersed in Revolutionary America and that is what allows it to crucially come alive, not the style of music in which it's performed. (The show is inspired by the Hamilton biography of Ron Chernow, with book, music and lyrics by Miranda.)

Good heavens, all that and I haven't even described the plot yet. But you know the plot, at least in its broadest terms. Alexander Hamilton is an orphan come to America seeking...attention perhaps. He's on fire with revolutionary ardor and befriends a group of men like Lafayette ([Daveed Diggs](#)) and Hercules Mulligan (Okieriete Onaodowan) and most of all -- or is that least of all -- Aaron Burr ([Leslie Odom, Jr.](#)) Hamilton can't stop arguing and talking and giving his opinion. Burr is cadgy and quiet, playing things close to the vest.

They travel on separate but roughly parallel tracks and Burr is frustrated as Hamilton rises and rises, first as a crucial aide to George Washington ([Christopher Jackson](#)) during the Revolution and then as an effective cabinet

member and deal maker. On and on Hamilton rises while Burr remains on the outside, always looking in. Ultimately, Burr sees his chance to become President and as a forerunner of so many politicians to come, cannily avoids taking a firm stance on issues, campaigns openly for the office (so tacky!) and uses whatever dirt he can to smear Hamilton. That leads to the fateful and fatal duel, with Hamilton the eternal martyr and Burr a byword for treachery.

Like the musical 1776, Hamilton finds high drama in battles over the banking system and other debates about the shape and size of the federal government. It's just this time they take place as rap battles. The heart of the show is not really Hamilton's private life (which is richly drawn) but the camaraderie between the men who overthrew the yoke of England and established a new nation. Swanning in and out with commentary for all-too-brief moments is [Brian D'Arcy James](#) as King George. His doleful look and confusion over the colonies is priceless counterpoint to the action.

Counterbalancing Hamilton's almost non-stop rise on the political stage (despite being a know-it-all who can pick a fight with friends, Hamilton knows how to deal and get things done) is a fraught private life. He is entranced by the wealthy Schuyler sisters. Angelica ([Renée Elise Goldsberry](#)) is his soul mate but she steps aside for her younger, often overshadowed sister Eliza ([Phillipa Soo](#)) who is immediately infatuated with this magnetic but penniless revolutionary. They marry but Hamilton is repeatedly drawn to the mind of Angelica and -- unfortunately -- the body of a random woman who pleads for his financial aid, offers her favors in return and then becomes a pawn in a blackmail scheme by the woman's husband.

It's this betrayal of Eliza that proves hugely damaging to Hamilton. One-upping Burr in the who-is-more-modern sweepstakes, Hamilton makes a full and public confession that humiliates his wife. That leads to his hot-headed son's death by dueling with a man that insulted Hamilton's name and that ultimately leads to Hamilton's duel with Burr.

If this seems like a lot of territory to cover, it is. Whereas the show moves along swiftly in the public realm, the private back and forth takes up too much of the show's time and slows it down. If Miranda is ready to shape and prune away to reveal the truly great show waiting to be born, this is where he'll start. For example, his son (Anthony Ramos, very good in dual roles) becomes angry when hearing about a man insulting his father. He heads out on the town, chats with some women, tracks the man down, confronts him at the theater, demands satisfaction or a duel, reveals what he's doing to his father, gets advice, heads out for the duel, is shot, is brought home and dies with both parents naturally distraught. Almost none of this is necessary and might easily be condensed to Hamilton discovering his son is going to duel, offering the advice to manfully aim his pistol in the air (which any gentleman will acknowledge and do the same) and then in the next moment be blindsided when his son is brought home at death's door. Not only would it be much quicker, it would have much more emotional impact.

Similarly, Hamilton's indiscretion with a random woman is played out at laborious and uninteresting length. Why not a quick glance and then cut to Hamilton being confronted by political opponents followed by his public confession. Do we need to see him being tempted? We know he's often away from his wife and truly only desires her sister. Audiences are familiar enough with politicians who expect it all to derive a lot from a sultry glance and don't need even that, truly. This area is ripe for trimming as well. Much of the show moves over a great deal of history with vivid speed, so perhaps they felt the need to linger over the private moments to give the story emotional heft. But it has it already and the anguish and drama that remains will have more weight, not less.

Less would certainly be more in terms of choreography. Andy Blankenbuehler's work is almost too modern in this context. Obviously, the musical style of the show is a constant modern gloss, commentary or call it what you will to the action of the 1700s. Paul Tazewell's costumes understand this: the era-authentic clothes have a dash of modernity here and there to define a character or attitude, aided by the hair and wig design of Charles

LaPointe which does the same. It's never for cheap contrast or laughs and rarely calls attention to itself. (In my one complaint, I'd say the corsets of the female chorus do just that and should be rethought; they're hardly racy but still seemed a little too eye-catching. They can't vote yet; at least don't ask them to dance around in what were undergarments!) But where the costumes save modern touches for subtle flavor, the choreography is endlessly calling attention to itself. Perhaps it's the smallish stage of the Public and a Broadway house will allow his work to realize itself more fully. But ladled on top of Miranda's hip hop score, it seems like gilding the lily.

The basic design of the show by David Korins works very well, using a turntable within a turntable to keep the cast and props and the show in constant Les Miz-like motion, all smoothly handled by Kail. However, the stage is overshadowed by a second level with a boardwalk along the sides and back of the stage. It's bulky and wooden and rather dimly lit, which certainly emphasizes the period nature of the story. But that second level is almost never used in an interesting fashion, excepting a few modest times that could be easily lost. Again and again, one felt that any chorus members or actors "upstairs" served no purpose other than a minor decorative one. A few brief moments work, such as wheeling out a staircase for various effects or lowering a galley so Hamilton could disembark in the New World (perhaps the best visual touch involving the upper half and it occurs very early on). Dramatically, visually, theatrically, that entire upper deck is dead space, filled rather desultorily. Again, a much bigger Broadway stage might allow it to be used better. But why bother? It's not necessary and removing it would allow the show to breathe more and perhaps permit a lighting palette by Howell Binkley that goes beyond gloomy and gloomier. The effective touches can be achieved easily without the constricting, dark, looming presence of that second tier.

Happily, Miranda and director Kail are blessed with an excellent cast assembled with Bethany Knox, drawing on old friends from In The Heights and exciting new talent. With two modest, non-fatal exceptions, they are excellent. Hamilton and his buddies are like the Four Musketeers taking on the world: credit the writing and the songs and the direction and everything that goes into it. But above all, credit the four actors who generate terrific sympathy. Other than Miranda, they all double up very effectively. Ramos is good as John Laurens and Hamilton's son (especially as a little kid). Onaodowan gets the pleasure of playing two very different men, Hercules followed by the dour and hunched over James Madison. But Diggs is the breakout here, first as the hilariously French Lafayette and then even more gleefully as Thomas Jefferson, Hamilton's notable foil. His talent is infectious.

Jackson is the modest exception. He has the physical stature for George Washington and handles the dithering nicely enough. But he lacks the gravitas, the natural charisma and leadership that Washington must exude or at least strive for. Whatever might make Washington an interesting compelling character, Jackson does not bring it. He may be on stage for significant periods but you're never drawn to him. Perhaps in part it's due to not having a defining song that I noticed. But I think Jackson is simply not right for the role.

Jasmine Cephas Jones is amusing in the minor role of Peggy Schuyler and less effective in the far less interesting part of the woman Hamilton dallies with. I'm not sure Peggy is even necessary here, other than because she was present in history. And if they drastically trim down the role of seductress/fallen woman Maria Reynolds, both could be handled by a chorus member. I suppose others might have as much fun with the delicious cameos of King George but no one will do it better than D'Arcy James.

As the opposing sisters, Soo has the unfortunate task of playing the less interesting sister and playing it opposite Goldsberry. Like Diggs, Goldsberry is on fire here, immediately drawing you to her every time she's anywhere near the stage. Her fiery R&B rap where she details why she has sacrificed her heart for the needs of her family is terrifically done. Indeed, everyone handles the dense and demanding score with skill. Miranda has given many characters defining styles that delineate them without standing out as dramatically different. It's not as if one character sings salsa and another gets gangsta rap. The score feels of a piece but a character like Angelica is her own specific woman and Goldsberry brings her to life brilliantly. Soo is good in the dramatic

scenes that come late in the show for Eliza but her singing is not compelling; unfortunately, she has some big numbers like "Burn" which don't land with the passion another better singer might bring to it. For now, the show feels out of balance with these two sisters, at least on the musical end. And this is after all a musical.

That leaves Hamilton and Burr. Miranda is excellent as Hamilton but is it scandalous to suggest he may not even be the ideal one? Hamilton should constantly irk and annoy you even if you admit he's right. Miranda has an essentially likable and winning nature. That allows him to pull off this prickly and ambitious man but I can imagine the role he has created brought to even greater heights. He is by no means a drawback. Miranda did indeed have rings under his eyes and look wrung out on the press night I attended. But it didn't show in his committed and fully realized performance. He's the central figure and holds the stage with ease.

Matching him every step of the way is Odom, another terrific find for me in this excellent cast. He's sexy and smart throughout, never allowing Burr to become the stock villain a lesser actor (and lesser writer of the book) might have made of him. Their back and forth works beautifully, never overplaying the rivalry as Burr burns with thwarted ambition but still essentially respects Hamilton every step of the way, from the opposite directions they take in the Revolution to the ten steps they take in opposite directions during the final duel. I felt the scene where they both became fathers was unnecessary; these men already seemed bonded by their struggles in the Revolution and there was no need to show them linked in private matters so bluntly. Indeed, one wished Burr -- ever the outsider -- became even more the narrator with the modest moments of his private life excised completely (even Odom can't make these minor, unnecessary numbers interesting).

It ends very well with Burr but sadly the show continues a bit longer. Suddenly, Eliza, who has come forward more and more as she and Hamilton finally bond in grief, takes center stage for the closing song. In a very extended coda, we hear about all the work she did to preserve Hamilton's legacy and the other good deeds she did (like opening a private orphanage). It's all noble and frankly quite interesting; suddenly Eliza becomes more intriguing than we'd ever imagined. But the show is ending (or at least trying to) and learning about what she did in the decades after Hamilton's death is simply unnecessary. She sings about telling his story, as if everyone has been obsessed with this idea (that idea is echoed in the show's poster). Yet at first blush, I felt no such urgency in the rest of the show over "who lives, who dies, who tells your story." What Eliza accomplished was fascinating and I guess Miranda wanted to give this woman her due. But it doesn't serve the story, however compelling her actions may be. The show begins with Burr and it should end with Burr.

A great musical is right in front of us on the stage of the Public. They simply need to clear away the extraneous material, clear away the gloomy wooden structure entombing the stage, clear away some of the truly fascinating but not truly pertinent details of their private lives (don't worry, no one is going to confuse this with 1776), clear away the modern dance flourishes and reveal the show waiting to be shaped into something that is truly -- as Hamilton never said -- dope.

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