

Theater: Hamiltons Miranda Is the New Biggie Smalls? No, He's the New Sondheim!

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HAMILTON *** 1/2 out of ****

RICHARD RODGERS THEATRE

Hamilton. You've heard of it, I think? Yep.

So I can skip the preliminaries, like the plot description or explaining what's exactly going on here and cut to the chase. [Here's [my review of the Off Broadway run](#) if you're one of the four people who hasn't heard about Hamilton already.]

Is every Broadway show going to include freestyling from now on? Of course not. And Lin-Manuel Miranda isn't the next Biggie Smalls. He's the next Sondheim (or to avoid such dizzying expectations, he has the talent to follow in Sondheim's footsteps). Hamilton isn't The Blueprint slapped onto Broadway. It's a full blown Broadway musical, with elements of Brit-pop and girl group sounds and good old-fashioned show tunes and yes of course rapping in various styles.

Listen closely and what you'll hear above all is a fresh new voice that is building on Sondheim's legacy: the whip-smart lyrics, the marvelous word play, the intelligence, the building of melodies that are catchy but never banal, the deployment of lines and hooks like depth charges that repeat again and again throughout a song and throughout the show until they have a remarkable power and emotional intensity. In short, Hamilton has a lot more in common with Sunday In The Park With George than It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back.

This isn't to downplay the central accomplishment of creating the first great musical that employs hip-hop. But he's not just doing a hip-hop show that's playing on the Great White Way. They did Tango Argentino on Broadway and people loved it, but it's not like every show now includes a tango salon. One-off shows in a particular style don't change Broadway. But a full-on Broadway musical that incorporates a style that's fresh to its audience (albeit one long-established) can change it. Miranda has grafted a strand of hip-hop onto Broadway's DNA and it's going to stick. The same happened with Hair and Grease and others embracing rock and roll. That genre of music and style of singing became part of Broadway's vocabulary, just as jazz and r&b and country and other genres have intertwined with old style belting over the years.

Some great Broadway talents simply can't sing in a rock and roll style. They'd be useless on a show like Newsies. Others can't do country or jazz or soul. Not everyone belongs on The Wiz revival. It has nothing to do with age or talent; some people just don't have the voice or affinity for certain genres. (You hear it time and again when opera stars make the awful mistake of tackling pop tunes.) And operetta is beyond many -- that's clearly why the delightful musical On The Twentieth Century hasn't been done in dog years. One needs a particular refined skill to assay it. And yes one needs a very refined skill set of swagger and excellent enunciation to tackle the complex lines and internal rhymes of Hamilton and hip-hop in general. Not every Broadway wanna-be has this in their quiver. But from now on, they're going to have to try.

We all know why some say hip-hop makes sense for this particular show. The Founding Fathers were bad mother f***ers! They laid it on the line! They were scrappy and bold and risking it all with their backs against the

wall and looked down upon as Johnny Come Latelys by their betters! In short, maybe it's sort of a fluke that the style works so well for an era once enshrined by the very old-school musical 1776.

Wrong. Hip hop works for this show because Miranda wrote it and he's good and because he used hip-hop as a vehicle for revealing character and pushing the story forward. Imagine a musical set in France, a show about the court of the Sun King where withering put-downs and dexterous word play were prized above all. Hip-hop? Freestyling? It would work like a charm. Imagine a show about scientists, maybe the Manhattan Project or a show about Isaac Newton or Galileo or maybe string theory. In science, scholars debate and claw at one another. Creating a vivid, convincing picture of your theory is important. And tearing down someone else's idea is just as important a skill as building up your own. A rap battle? Makes perfect sense. A show about newspaper reporters today or during the tabloid era of the 1970s or back in the Roaring 20s when (I hear) reporting was glamorous and fun and actually paid well? Yes, I can imagine hip-hop working well there too because who savors language and slang and cutting retorts more than reporters? A hip-hop Taming Of The Shrew? It's probably already being written. A hip-hop musical for the American Revolution is no more incongruous than rock n roll as a source for the music in Spring Awakening, a show based on a German play from 1891. So let's put to rest the idea that hip-hop will only work once in a blue moon or when whomever took an option on the movie Straight Outta Compton brings it to Broadway.

In the same way, the diverse casting of almost everyone but white guys to play these iconic roles works not because of any particular political context it creates. It works because color blind casting (or here, color-centric casting, casting with purpose and in celebration of color, not mindlessly pretending it doesn't exist) works for everything from Shakespeare to Arthur Miller because when the material is classic and the performers are good, new layers will always be revealed. Indeed, it only works when the performers are good because no show works unless the performers are good. And this cast is great.

NOTE: Here's casual video of Lin-Manuel Miranda and the delightful Jonathan Groff entertaining the hundreds waiting in hope of winning a \$10 front row seat to the show. Something like this happens every day outside the theater. Try as you might to hate a show with all this hype and with endless stories in media outlets that never talk about Broadway, but when you see something cool like this, darnit, you just can't.

Okay, so on with the show. Hamilton is an orphaned immigrant, penniless but intellectually vibrant and desperate to contribute, desperate to take part in the American Experiment. His first friend when arriving in New York is the cautious Aaron Burr. Their lives are intertwined as each succeeds and plays a major role in the Revolution, with Hamilton somehow always one step ahead of Burr and so on and then in comes Lafayette and Washington and Jefferson and King George gets huffy and you know the rest.

Hamilton is sprawling and messy and deliriously ambitious and flawed -- of course, it's flawed! You can't push boundaries without stumbling briefly here and there -- and very exciting. I saw it at the Public and held back on raving. Sometimes the bolder a film or TV show or novel, the more you want to catch your breath and hold off. A second viewing of a movie, waiting five or ten episodes into a season, living with an album for a while, all of that can make a huge difference. Sometimes, flaws become more pronounced and the shock of the new becomes less shocking. Other times, a second viewing of a movie or repeated spins of an album deepen your appreciation and bolster your confidence that this is indeed the shit. Hamilton is indeed the shit.

When I saw it at the Public, I knew it would be among my favorite shows of the year. But I felt it could be better in varied ways. If nothing else, the cramped space of the original venue was not ideal for the heavy wooden set design of David Korins. It felt a little dark and oppressive. In this transfer, almost everything on Broadway is better. Miranda -- who wrote the book, music, lyrics and stars as Alexander Hamilton -- refined and tightened every element of the show. (I would dearly love to see a breakdown of all the changes lyrically and musically and book-wise.) The performances are sharper and more powerful. The set can breathe. The audience is ecstatic, electric. The Producers and The Book Of Mormon were super-charged smash hits that broke through

to the popular culture that is now usually indifferent to musicals. *Rent* was an obvious precursor in the game-changing role of stamping rock and roll as music that belongs once and for all on Broadway. But I have to go back to *Angels In America* for a show that felt this charged and this important both culturally and politically and especially theatrically.

And what a cast! Anthony Rapp was in the audience the night I saw it. And just like *Rent*, I'm certain this show has launched the careers or boosted the fortunes of any number of performers on stage. Christopher Jackson as George Washington has gained in stature since the *Public*. Before, his Washington seemed to fade into the background. Now he looms like a fatherly presence, wise and a little intimidating.

In the dual roles of the brash Hercules Mulligan and the reserved James Madison, Okieriete Onaodowan remains a droll pleasure. Is it possible Leslie Odom Jr. is even better as the wily, put-upon Aaron Burr? His story feels more balanced and empathetic, more of a mirror to Hamilton instead of just a foil. Burr reflects the cynical modern politician and Hamilton the ideals of passion. Yet he's not just a bitter Salieri. If Burr hadn't fired that fateful, fatal shot, he'd be remembered more highly. And no one seeing his show-stopper "The Room Where It Happens" -- it stops a lot, this show -- will forget how Odom captured Burr's ambition and insight and frustration over being bested yet again.

Certainly Renée Elise Goldsberry couldn't have improved as Angelica Schuyler, the woman who sacrificed her attraction to Alexander Hamilton so her sister could be happy and her family's fortune secure. She is incandescent, both enchanting at good ole Broadway belting and sensational at rapping. Goldsberry has verve and punch and diction so crystal clear (thank you, classical training in the fundamentals!) that her flow puts most everyone else to shame. Of course, Daveed Diggs steals the show as both the outrageously fun Marquis de Lafayette in Act One and the aristocratic, combative Thomas Jefferson in Act Two. He's hilarious in the first act and then tops himself with the second-act opener "What'd I Miss." Miranda naturally is the heart and soul throughout, singing with the shy awkward voice of a teenager and gaining in confidence throughout without ever calling attention to the slowly evolving growth of our protagonist.

And I'd like to make a personal apology to Jonathan Groff for the modest doubt that was in my heart. Brian D'arcy James was so...so delicious as King George at the *Public* that I was crushed when he left for *Something Rotten* and bummed that friends wouldn't be able to see his indelible turn. How would they get someone with enough star power to put over such a fun, if secondary role? Well Groff has the star power and I've been a fan of his on every conceivable level since *Spring Awakening*. But still I thought, "Damn, I wish James were still in it. He was perfect."

Then out comes Groff and he's a sheer delight as well. He's younger but this works perfectly, emphasizing the spoiled child aspect of King George. Groff delivers completely in the part, which emphasizes what a gem Miranda created and how good Groff is when given material this sterling. Plus the Brit-pop nature of his tunes are a savvy respite from the delightfully dense, but sit-up-and-pay-attention rap lyrics that dominate the show. Along with Goldsberry's singing at key moments and some other islands of pure singing, Groff's scenes allow the audience to catch its breath. I guess someone else down the road will make the most of it too, but now I want everyone to catch Groff in this role. Who'd want to miss a sexy, slightly mad King George? Not me.

If King George and his signature tune "You'll Be Back" and the monarch's other reprises were merely the comic pleasures they are, that would be enough. But typically for this show, they're so much more. Along with tunefulness and full-on comic relief, like everything else in this rock solid creation, George's tunes advance the plot, provide context and underline the high-wire nature of what the rebellious colonists are attempting.

Think about what they accomplish. The King's petulance and expectation of unquestioning allegiance makes clear why they would rebel. His unnerving threats to crush them militarily make clear how fraught with danger the situation would prove. George's malicious glee over the utter mess that faces them after "winning" -- having

to create a new nation and government from scratch, deal with foreign powers, appease the various factions that only found common ground when they had the common enemy of England and so on -- illuminate how the easy part was winning freedom and it could all so easily fall apart, especially with England ready to undermine it at every turn. And his utter bemusement over Washington voluntarily stepping down from the reins of power (King George had no idea such a thing was even possible!) nudges us to remember how unusual self-rule, elected leaders and a peaceful exchange of power was for both the US and the world. All of this is conveyed subtly and with élan in tunes that you would kill for and lyrics that are sparkling. They combine in the hands of an artist like Groff to create musical theater heaven.

Most every complaint or concern I had melts away in the flush of excitement in seeing the show a second time. I appreciated anew how a lesser talent might have used hip-hop so each Founding Father could boast endlessly about himself. In fact, most of the time, everyone is rapping about someone else. Burr is the narrator so he's usually commenting on Hamilton. And Hamilton raps about Burr and Jefferson, Jefferson raps about Hamilton, the Schuyler sisters rap about the men in their life and so on.

And what a smart show. Like Sondheim, Miranda revels in arcana that might seem an unlikely source for musicalizing (a song about the federal banking system?) and yet he consistently brings it to life with the same passion and attention to detail that Hamilton and the rest savored at the time. Miranda and director Thomas Kail have done an excellent job of modulating the flow of the story. Whereas the first time I saw the show, the finale felt dragged out and simply wrong, this time it moved much more quickly and felt earned. (Maybe it was just a second viewing when I knew what to expect, but I imagine a change in pacing and trims here and there are also responsible.) Ditto the death of Hamilton's son in a duel that cruelly echoes his own fate. The first time, I found it drawn out. This time, thanks to improved work by actor Andrew Chappelle and perhaps some tightening and trimming of his big scene(s), it works better.

Mind you, I remain utterly indifferent to the choreography of Andy Blankenbuehler. It leaves me just as cold on Broadway as it did at the Public. It doesn't hurt the show, simply because it feels like mere background, something one can ignore. I can't think of a single scene where the endless popping and modern moves of the chorus added emotionally to the events taking place (though director Kail uses them well for crowd scenes and transitions).

Ditto the set, which is far less oppressive in the big space of the Richard Rodgers. Less oppressive but not less interesting. It's a wooden walkway that encircles the back and sides of the stage and is mostly underutilized. People are often positioned up there to stand and observe the proceedings below but essentially they just fade into the background. Similarly, rolling wooden platforms very rarely come into play and the one visual flourish that made good use of them has been cut. I'd sooner see it all removed and no audience would be the wiser. The costumes of Paul Tazewell are excellent throughout, with the notable exception of the female dancers in the chorus. I still don't understand the artistic choice that has some of them wearing pants and vest akin to the men while others are unnecessarily garbed in what are essentially undergarments.

Certainly the musical direction and orchestrations of Alex Lacamoire work in ways large and small to get across the gorgeous score while supporting the actors and allowing the lyrics (surely among the wordiest in Broadway history) to breathe. Not to mention embodying a range of styles with nimble conviction! It's extraordinary work I am ill equipped to parse but appreciate nonetheless as boundary pushing in its own right.

Less positively, Phillipa Soo as Eliza Schuyler and the future Mrs. Hamilton remains a weak link both dramatically and voice-wise. It's clear why her big number "Burn" is one of the few in the show to receive tepid applause. To be fair, it is in part a combination of playing the less interesting role of dutiful wife and playing it opposite Goldsberry who becomes an undeniable star in front of our eyes. And only more careful listening will prove this, but I think the melodic lines of Eliza may also be the only awkward and weak ones in the otherwise excellent score. On the bright side, Soo holds the spotlight at the finale much more convincingly now, thanks to

the improvements made by Miranda and Kail.

And you know what? All those cavils are exciting! The choreography and the set and even one of the leads aren't ideal? And the show is still terrific? As I said before, it's a treat to see Miranda in this role and his innate likability shouldn't be underestimated in putting the show forward. But I still think the prickly role he has created will draw even better performances from other actors down the road; he is great casting and I wouldn't miss him in it for the world. But unlike say John Cameron Mitchell and Hedwig where it was hard to imagine others tackling that part (an idea that now seems silly, but still), it's not only not silly to imagine other actors playing Hamilton, it's fun. He's created a great role in a great show and people will be playing that part for all its worth for many, many years to come. And that's only counting the actors who will appear in this production.

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