

Abstract

The Broadway production “Hamilton: An American Musical” first reached audiences in 2015. The production used well-crafted sets, clever lyrics, and appealing melodies to tell the story of Alexander Hamilton’s life. Despite a few important limitations, I argue that Hamilton is beneficial to society because it disseminates historical knowledge through its story, portrays a well-balanced use of under-represented genres of music, and recognizes and praises immigrants for their achievements throughout the musical. I also consider alternative arguments highlighting the limitations of the musical, such as the fact that Hamilton may distort society’s understanding of history, and that the musical lacks narratives of people of color during the Revolutionary era. This paper is important because it recognizes the accomplishments of the popular musical while addressing its shortcomings. Critics and fans of the production are encouraged to enjoy the soundtrack and the musical.

Keywords: Broadway, musical, American Revolution, Hamilton, founding fathers, rap, hip-hop, show tunes, racial empowerment

Hamilton: An American Musical

In this paper, I argue that “Hamilton: An American Musical” has had a positive social impact. This musical, more commonly simply known as Hamilton, follows the life and story of the founding father, Alexander Hamilton, and the American Revolution as written by Lin-Manuel Miranda.

The musical, released in 2015, reached a socially and politically divided community. A rise in current struggles led to a need for hope and a strong national identity. According to Stearns (1998), this hope can be found in historical stories, allowing people to develop their national beliefs and support for their nation and its values. Therefore, it is sensible for the American population to passionately relate to the characters’ struggles and the message of the musical. In this paper, I will address the achievements of Hamilton by providing evidence of the positive impact it has had, and continues to have, on society as a whole.

I support my position on the musical’s positive impact with the following three arguments. First, I argue that Hamilton has a positive impact on society because it creatively engages its audiences, causing an increase in interest in American history. As Tonti (2022) explains it, many history teachers have noted that their students have been motivated and educated by the politics in the musical. Second, I argue that the production has had a positive impact because it portrays hip-hop and rap positively on Broadway and thus destigmatizes these genres (Craft, 2018). Finally, I argue that Hamilton has had a positive impact because it empowers immigrants throughout the musical. The production was written to present Alexander Hamilton as an “immigrant hero,” allowing the musical to praise immigrants and their achievements (Salo, 2018).

I also consider alternative positions against Hamilton. First, critics rightfully argue that supporters of Hamilton have deterred the representation of people of color on U.S currency. Garcia (2016) reports that the Treasury Department has decided to keep Alexander

Hamilton on the ten-dollar bill after facing criticism from fans of the musical. Second, some critics claim that Hamilton has had a harmful impact because it distorts the public's historical knowledge. That is, critics argue that while Hamilton follows the general history of the American Revolution, it leaves the details unclear to allow for creative flexibility (Schocket, 2017). Lastly, some people argue that Hamilton has had a harmful social impact because it does not include the many narratives and struggles of actual people of color during the American Revolution. The criticism extends to express that all characters in the musical are inherently white. Umehira (2016) also notes this shortcoming and voices that there are nearly no narratives that include people of color in the musical. While these positions have merit, I demonstrate that Hamilton's playwright effectively thwarts these concerns. For instance, to argue against the lack of multiracial narratives from the Revolutionary Era, I consider the multiracial cast of Hamilton. According to Miranda, the casting decisions made for Hamilton convey a message of inclusivity in the subtext of the show. Miranda explains his decision by saying that "our story should look the way our country looks" and "it's a very powerful statement without having to be a statement" (Craft, 2018, p. 3).

This paper is important because it recognizes Hamilton's social achievements and shortcomings beyond simply being a musical. The production has a message for thespians and social activists, but it also has a flavor of well-reenacted history for historians. Furthermore, the musical itself can entertain its audience, but it also seeks to inspire and motivate. This paper aims to present to audiences the benefits of Hamilton beyond its creative brilliance and hopes to convince future audiences to enjoy the musical.

Achievements of Hamilton

Hamilton has been a phenomenon since it reached the eyes, ears, and hearts of Broadway audiences and Spotify users in 2015. The musical's use of fascinating sets and creative lyricism paired with catchy tunes captivates the attention of its audiences. According

to Harbert (2018), Hamilton has achieved the highest number of ticket sales on Broadway and has captured the interest and appreciation of Barack and Michelle Obama for its brilliance. I discuss Hamilton's musical, theatrical, and social accomplishments.

Increasing Interest in American History

Hamilton is reigniting an interest in the history of the United States of America and its Founding Fathers. The musical is increasing interest by using music and lyrics to relay the story of the founding of the United States of America, achieving the praise of historians. For example, Lurie (2022) suggests that Hamilton is remarkable for its unique ability to make history relevant and interesting to modern audiences. Using Lurie's logic, Hamilton is managing to drive people toward studying American history by capturing the interest of audiences. Dubowska (2017) also praises this achievement by highlighting that Hamilton's creators have set forth a rush of education with their musical. Accordingly, Hamilton has had a positive impact on people by increasing their educational and historical interest in the Founding Fathers and the Revolutionary War.

Hamilton's positive impact on historical interest can also be seen in the rising number of visits to historic sites. According to Skala (2018), historic sites associated with the musical, such as the Schuyler Mansion, the Schuyler-Hamilton House, Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, and the Hamilton Grange, have seen an increase in visits. The staff at many of these sites realized that the visitors were arriving with a greater amount of background knowledge as a result of watching the musical. Mayo (2016) reports that staff at some of these sites started indulging the visitors' interests by further explaining the site's historical value.

In addition to simply educating audiences about American history, Hamilton engages the audiences in current political and historic issues. One such issue was the decision to remove Alexander Hamilton from the ten-dollar bill. According to Murphy (2016), the

Treasury Department had made plans to replace the image of Alexander Hamilton on the ten-dollar bill. However, once the musical had premiered, audiences' support for Hamilton caused the Treasury Department to postpone its decision. Manuel (2015) directs the audience's attention to the ten-dollar bill through the lyric "the ten-dollar founding father without a father." By introducing this information in the opening song, the musical manages to inspire its audience to support Hamilton's position on the ten-dollar bill. This support is backed by the sentiment that Alexander Hamilton essentially initiated the American banking system and deserves to remain on the currency. The impact of the musical on people's engagement with the Founding Fathers can surely be seen through the decision to postpone the removal of Alexander Hamilton's image from the 10 dollar note. If the musical had not introduced mass audiences to the character of Alexander Hamilton, then the image of Hamilton would likely have been replaced. The musical works to engage and educate people, which is always a positive and beneficial result for modern society.

Hip-hop and Rap on Broadway

Hamilton masters the art of storytelling through the use of creative lyricism and memorable music. The popular production is entirely sung-through, with distinct styles of music being employed to better present the personality of a character, or the urgency of the plot. The use of music and song in Hamilton is two-pronged. That is, they are not only designed to sharpen the message of the musical but also to bring diverse genres of music to Broadway. According to Oskar, "Miranda takes the language of the people and makes it verse... He tells the foundational myths of his country. By doing that, he makes the country the possession of everybody" (as cited in Miranda & McCarter, 2016, p. 103). This statement points out that by using rap and hip-hop, Miranda allows communities of color to feel as though they also belong in the country they reside in.

Hamilton's use of faster-paced music and beats helps make Broadway more interesting to newer audiences. More specifically, the use of hip-hop and rap makes Broadway more contemporary and enjoyable for mass audiences. According to Shishko (2019), Hamilton's music attracts many audiences to the musical, and by extension, to Broadway.

In addition to making the musical more engaging, Shishko points out that by introducing a sung-through musical using rap and hip-hop on Broadway, Hamilton has managed to ease prejudices against those genres. McAllister (2017) shares this sentiment and explains that Hamilton's creative teams hope to revolutionize the way Broadway sounds. This revolution can accurately be described as bringing diversity to Broadway music and allowing diverse audiences to feel accepted. Therefore, Hamilton has a positive impact because it is popularizing and partially destigmatizing hip-hop and rap, and is carving the path for Broadway to be more inclusive.

Praising Immigrants in the Musical

An important argument to consider is how Hamilton praises immigrants and their hard work throughout the musical. The writers of the musical sing about immigrants like Alexander Hamilton and the Marquess de Lafayette and how they have achieved greatness through their hard work. Miranda (2015) tributes the diligence of immigrants in lyrics such as "Immigrants, we get the work done" from the song Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down), which spreads a message that immigrants are reliable and hardworking. The constant praise places immigrants and immigration in a positive light. Salo (2018) similarly claims that Hamilton manages to highlight immigrants and their achievements by presenting Alexander Hamilton as an "immigrant hero." This argument explains that the musical begins to break down prejudices against immigrants by presenting a Founding Father as an immigrant.

The musical's representation and acknowledgment of immigrants in society also allow many immigrants to feel recognized and appreciated. The idea of the musical began with Miranda, an immigrant, relating to Alexander Hamilton's "rise to the top." Miranda (2015) composed the lyric, "See if you can spot him / Another immigrant comin' up from the bottom" in the first song of the musical. This lyric directs the attention of the audience towards the fact that a Founding Father was an immigrant. According to Shishko (2019), Miranda repeatedly refers to Alexander Hamilton as an immigrant in order to highlight that immigrants are a core part of America. Therefore, the musical is an ode to the importance of immigrants and provides a "hero" for immigrants in America to associate with.

Weaknesses of Hamilton

As a musical set in a historical period, Hamilton is considered to be a work of art and a work of history simultaneously. However, the production's dual status means that it may be considered remarkable by a thespian while being criticized for its historical and racial content. Some may criticize the show by highlighting the flaws of the Founding Fathers, while others may comment on the lack of diverse narratives. In the following paragraphs, I discuss the musical's perceived shortcomings, and how they have been dealt with.

The Ten- and Twenty-Dollar Bills

Unfortunately, the impact of the musical has not been entirely positive. Hamilton increased audiences' engagement with modern-day political plans, such as the removal of Alexander Hamilton's image from the ten-dollar bill. However, this form of engagement has not been entirely positive as it thwarted plans to replace Alexander Hamilton's image with a woman representing a progressive America. Garcia (2016) notes that Treasury Secretary Jack Lew initially wished to place the image of Susan B. Anthony on the ten-dollar bill; however, fans of the musical swayed his decision, leading to him keeping Alexander Hamilton on the

bill instead. Regrettably, while the musical is achieving great historical engagement, it is also preventing modern-day Americans from appreciating Anthony's remarkable work.

It is understandable that fans and supporters want to keep Alexander Hamilton on a dollar note. This Founding Father inherently curated the American banking system and undoubtedly deserves praise. Thankfully, while Hamilton remains on the ten-dollar bill, other women of color and American activists are being considered for alternate notes. According to Bittan (2021), people in America, such as Congressional Representative John Katko, recognize the importance of having people of color on U.S currency. Swanson and Ohlheiser (2016) inform us that the Treasury Department is planning on replacing Andrew Jackson with Harriet Tubman on the twenty-dollar bill. This plan is truly wonderful as it replaces a slaveholding president with an abolitionist leader. While the supporters of the musical have delayed any changes to Alexander Hamilton's place on the ten-dollar bill, an acceptable alternative plan has been announced.

Distortion of Historical Knowledge

Hamilton is critiqued for its distortion of American history. While some people criticize the musical for altering characters and events to make the musical more presentable, others posit that the musical's writers entirely rewrote the life of Hamilton to better suit the message of the production. Finally, some critics claim that the musical simply glorifies the lives of the Founding Fathers in an attempt to achieve a "Founders' Chic" status. These reasons are discussed in the following paragraphs. For these reasons, Scherr (2021) urges historians to work to educate people and break down the glorified legacy of Alexander Hamilton. Critics and historians, alike, claim that these features of the musical contribute to its distortion of history, causing it to be harmful to society.

Even though Hamilton pleasingly tells the story of the forgotten Founding Father, critics argue that the musical fails to do so adequately. Critics contend that the musical cannot

successfully educate audiences about historical events because the writers have altered many of these events to better suit a lyrical flow of storytelling. Opponents of the musical proclaim that Miranda and other Hamilton writers have changed scenes to prevent audience confusion and an overload of information. This sentiment is articulated by Coleman (2019) who criticizes Hamilton for oversimplifying all historical context to an extent that it lacks any educational value. Other critics argue that Hamilton is only loosely a work of history, and instead, is a diss-track set in the eighteenth century. Critics assert that this oversimplification and alteration of history in such a popular piece of media can hurt society's knowledge of events.

Critics also claim that Hamilton is guilty of following the excitement of a phenomenon known as "Founders Chic." According to Weiher (2021), Founders Chic is a genre in which artists glorify the time of America's founding, where America's history is based on the success of the white, male Founding Fathers. Since Hamilton works to present the Founding Fathers in a positive light, critics such as Kustritz (2019) argue that Hamilton reads like a work of fanfiction. Opponents of the musical support the above claim by reasoning that Miranda has altered the historical events of Hamilton's life to fit his vision of the immigrant Founding Father. Miranda worked to praise Hamilton in the musical and prepared scenes to show Hamilton in the best light as a hard worker and as an activist who fights for what is right. However, Scherr (2021) corrects this vision of Alexander Hamilton by arguing that the real Hamilton attempted to free slaves until his attempts were dismissed and disapproved. After the dismissal, he generally "gave up" on antislavery activism because he believed that it was only secondary to improving America. While the musical boasts Alexander Hamilton's successes, critics remind the audience that the character existed as a person first and that we do not have complete knowledge of his life. Therefore, critics allege

that Hamilton has a harmful impact because it glorifies the actions and events of an era that does not deserve praise from modern-day audiences.

Explaining Historic Discrepancies

Despite critiques of Hamilton's rewriting of history, the musical exists primarily as a form of entertainment. To further explain, the musical is a work of art first, a work of inspiration second, and a work of history last. While much of the writing follows the general historic timeline, Hamilton should not be judged so harshly for its historical inaccuracies when it's primary aim is to entertain and not educate. This argument is better articulated by Isenberg (2017) who emphasizes that Hamilton is a form of entertainment. Isenberg suggests that the audience should simply enjoy the music and the inspirational message rather than devalue the musical as a form of historic retelling. The musical is simply that: a musical. Therefore, Hamilton should not be equated to a history book, nor should it be critiqued like one.

To further argue for Hamilton's stance as a work of art, Miranda wrote the musical as an ode to himself and his journey of hard work. Mead (2015) relays that upon reading Chernow's biography about Hamilton, Miranda related to Hamilton's work ethic, resilience, and aptitude, and saw himself in the Founding Father. Using this feeling of familiarity, Miranda developed the musical. In doing so, Miranda erased many plotlines to shape the musical as he wished. Romano (2016) counters critics by arguing that if Hamilton is written like a work of fanfiction, then it can be expected that Miranda has transformed and rewritten the story to appeal to his audiences and himself. Following Romano's stance, I argue that Miranda does not fail to accurately portray historic facts since historic retelling was never his aim. While the musical does manage to educate many audiences by following historic texts, the musical never promises historical accuracy. As a work of art, and now as a perceived work of fanfiction, Hamilton does not owe its audiences any more historic accuracy than a

sci-fi television show about Arthurian legends and the round table. This logic, once again, undermines the arguments of critics who shame Hamilton for its lack of accuracy, thereby suggesting that Hamilton is successful where it stands as a musical.

We should also consider the annotations written by Miranda in the book *Hamilton: The Revolution* to counter the claims of critics. In the book, Miranda and co-author McCarter give written explanations for scenes that they may have altered. One such scene was in Act I during the song “Aaron Burr, Sir.” At the borders of the page, readers can view details such as, “this is, of course, a fictional first meeting between Hamilton and Burr” (Miranda & McCarter, 2016, p. 23). These annotations allow fans of the musical to understand that Miranda has taken creative liberties while writing the musical. That is, the content in Hamilton may not be entirely historically correct. Miranda has provided another example while explaining a rhyme sung by Hamilton’s son in the musical, “There is no history book in which you’ll read about Phillip doing a recital for Alexander. This came out of me, and looking at it, I see myself, in every character onstage” (Miranda & McCarter, 2016, p. 169). This quote allows the reader to better understand events in the musical, but it also reaffirms the idea that Hamilton is a work of fiction tailored by Miranda. The musical has been altered and tailored to suit the joy and experiences of audiences, but it is also primarily tailored to suit the character of Miranda. While Hamilton is a message for modern-day America, it is also a gift to Miranda himself. Miranda’s connection can be seen in how he immerses himself in understanding and building every character onstage. It is fruitless to criticize a work of art as a work of history, and it is fruitless to criticize Hamilton for failing at something it never promised.

Overlooking the Narratives and Struggles of People of Color

Critics claim that Hamilton overlooks the lives of people of color during the Revolutionary Era. The musical follows the life and story of Alexander Hamilton from his

arrival in America to the moment of his death. The musical, narrated by Aaron Burr, also involves other popular Founding Fathers, such as George Washington, James Madison, and Thomas Jefferson. Other notable characters in the musical are the Schuyler Sisters and Hamilton's friends from the first act. These characters, while played by people of color in the production, are all originally white people in history. Many critics reason that the musical has had a negative impact because it does not include any narratives about people of color. Mena (2020) argues that the lack of narrative on slavery and other people of color highlights a "white-centric view" of American history, and once again dismisses the lives and narratives of people of color. Critics can effectively use this argument to claim that Hamilton fails to be revolutionary or inspiring. Critics can further claim that the musical has a harmful societal impact because it fails to address the lives and stories of people of color during the Revolutionary Era and the founding of America.

The musical is similarly criticized for barely addressing the issue of slavery and the struggles of people of color during the American Revolution. Isenberg (2017) agrees with many critics that Miranda dismissed the struggles of slaves in the musical. Isenberg continues to argue that Miranda erased all struggles and dynamics in this musical because it does not portray any struggle of race or class. This argument explains why some critics claim that Hamilton has had a harmful impact because it entirely overlooks the struggles of people of color during that era.

Sentiment Behind the Casting Decisions

The television industry is working to increase diversity in its productions. Television diversity and racial acceptance are important to appeal to modern audiences of diverse people. The same can be said for places of work, education, and recreation. While American history has not been kind to people of color, Hamilton aims to return power to its modern audiences. According to Kajikawa (2018), the musical's employment of multiracial actors

allows Hamilton to be “a story about America then, told by America now” (para. 1). Despite criticisms of the musical, Hamilton worked to convey a message about racial empowerment through its subtext. This move allows the musical more time to relay the story of Hamilton’s life. While few other efforts were made to show racial empowerment directly, this casting decision and its message of inclusivity reached a widespread audience. The casting strengthens the impact of Hamilton by allowing its audiences to relate to the message of empowerment, and to strive toward the inclusivity they have seen.

The true impact of having an entirely diverse cast can be noted clearly through the remarks of the cast members themselves. For example, Miranda and McCarter (2016) expressed the sentiments of Daveed Diggs, who played the characters of the Marquess de Lafayette and Thomas Jefferson. Diggs believes he would have had an empowered state of mind had he grown up seeing a man of color, specifically a black man, playing any one of the Founding Fathers. This belief is similar to many audiences experiencing a person of color playing a character in a positive light. According to Coleman (2019), the visual representation of people of color as the main cast drives a message and theme of racial empowerment. Therefore, I argue that while Hamilton lacks stories about actual people of color in the plot of the musical, its casting portrayed a far more important message of inclusivity, thereby providing a far more strengthening effect.

A concept to consider regarding the casting decisions of the musical is the political situation when the musical was released in 2015. Galella (2018) reports that many Americans voiced their support for “building a wall along the Mexican border, banning Muslim immigrants, and rejecting Syrian refugees” (p. 11). As can be understood, immigration and race issues were climbing high. Similarly, when Hamilton was released on Disney+ and made available to the general public in 2020, the Black Lives Matter Movement was gaining recognition worldwide. At times like these, Hamilton succeeded with its diverse cast and

inspiring message. The musical worked to persuade people toward a pro-immigrant standpoint. According to Harbert (2018), the musical signifies the importance of race and diversity, and it tries to inspire equality and justice. Hamilton succeeds because it reaches the hearts of its audiences. I highlight that Hamilton has a positive social impact because it does more than just entertain its audiences, it inspires them.

Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that “Hamilton: An American Musical” has had a positive social impact. To recognize the positive impacts of Hamilton, I explained that the musical manages to inertly educate its audience on American history. I further supported my argument by describing how the musical’s use of hip-hop and rap to narrate the life of a Founding Father allows it to break down biases against the two genres and make Broadway more contemporary and relatable. Lastly, I argued that Hamilton has had a positive impact because it recognizes the achievements of immigrants by praising Hamilton and Lafayette for their hard work and success throughout the musical.

Despite the musical’s achievements, critics claim that Hamilton contains various flaws. First, critics rightfully argue that supporters of the musical have delayed the representation of remarkable women of color on American currency. Second, skeptics have opposed the production for its supposed multitude of historical inaccuracies. While Hamilton’s writers have altered certain events and characters, I have contended that the musical exists as a work of art rather than education. Furthermore, Hamilton’s writers have provided annotations for the artistic-license decisions made to present a more pleasant musical. The Founding Fathers’ stories have been told many times, and if Miranda aimed to educate, he could have read a history book to the audience. Rather, the musical is designed as a performance for its audience, which is why it is not required to be entirely historically accurate. Critics have also claimed that Hamilton ignores the lives and struggles of people of

color. While this argument is understandable, the casts of Hamilton are chosen to convey a message of inclusivity. That is, the multiracial cast was chosen to inspire racial empowerment and equality. I have argued that the musical succeeds at portraying this message.

Realizing the benefits and shortcomings of any work of media is crucial to being a socially responsible consumer of the arts. While Hamilton is a musical, it also serves to appeal to its audiences by providing a message of hope and inspiration. Such a message is important to the masses in times of social and political conflict, such as the state of America in the latter half of Obama's term as president. Therefore, it would be beneficial to appreciate the musical's achievements beyond its artistic brilliance. While every piece of media has its shortcomings, it is apparent that Hamilton has been far more beneficial than harmful. I encourage my readers to enjoy the musical and its message, as well as to remember that "history has its eyes on you" (Miranda, 2015).

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