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Dani E. Kupersmith
Gettysburg College

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A “Hip-Hop” Broadway Masterpiece or a Misrepresentation of Hip Hop Culture

Abstract

In February of 2015, a music sensation hit the streets of New York City and started a revolution across the country. The renowned Lin Manuel Miranda; composer, musician and actor, debuted his six-year creation - an integration of hip hop music into the world of Broadway through the sensational story of Alexander Hamilton. Based off of Ron Chernow’s 2004 biography of Alexander Hamilton, this entirely musical production details the story of the poor immigrant who came to America with big ideas and wrote his way to being a predominate figure in American history (Miranda, 2016). Impressive choreography is combined with powerful lyrics to narrate Alexander Hamilton’s journey through war, politics, his family and the birth of our nation. Concerned with protecting his legacy and having his voice heard, Hamilton constantly put himself in compromising positions for the greater good of our country. The show’s unconventional structure and use of race bending casting has caused a true Broadway revolution across the country.

Keywords

Hamilton, Hip-hop, Music

Disciplines

African American Studies | Music Performance | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies

Comments

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A “Hip-Hop” Broadway Masterpiece or a Misrepresentation of Hip Hop Culture

Dani Kupersmith
AFS 318 Final Paper
Prof. Paul Austerlitz
MLA Format

In February of 2015, a music sensation hit the streets of New York City and started a revolution across the country. The renowned Lin Manuel Miranda; composer, musician and actor, debuted his six-year creation - an integration of hip hop music into the world of Broadway through the sensational story of Alexander Hamilton. Based off of Ron Chernow's 2004 biography of Alexander Hamilton, this entirely musical production details the story of the poor immigrant who came to America with big ideas and wrote his way to being a predominate figure in American history (Miranda, 2016). Impressive choreography is combined with powerful lyrics to narrate Alexander Hamilton's journey through war, politics, his family and the birth of our nation. Concerned with protecting his legacy and having his voice heard, Hamilton constantly put himself in compromising positions for the greater good of our country. The show's unconventional structure and use of race bending casting has caused a true Broadway revolution across the country.

The show began to spark interest as conversations across the nation began to grow about the hit musical's color conscious casting and use of African American music. Despite the wild popularity of the show, historians and critics have attacked Hamilton for its lack of historical authenticity and cultural depth. Many have claimed that Hamilton is the first Broadway show to truly incorporate African American music, while others believe it is overrated and an insult to the culture (McAllister, 2017). Lin Manuel Miranda has claimed that he is the first composer to bring hip hop music onto the Broadway stage (Miranda, 2016). Yet critics have attacked Miranda for his misuse of a color conscious cast, inaccurate

historical records and unauthentic hip hop music. However, whether Hamilton is truly an authentic representation of the African American hip hop culture is still undetermined.

Color Conscious Casting

Miranda speaks of his “representational mission” to change the way we think about color casting on Broadway by creating a show that defies the boundaries of classic all-black or all-white racial portrayals (McAllister, 2017). In an interview, Miranda discusses how using actors of color to play old white men makes the story more immediately accessible to understand. This controversial topic has resulted in many critiques of the show for its inaccurate depiction of history and ignorant display of actors of color playing rich slaveholders (McWhortor, 2016). African American Actor Renee Elise plays Angelica Schuyler, a slaveholding American socialite. Renee is seen in various parts of the show singing about how lucky she is to be alive during that time period. In reality, a woman of color would have been enslaved and treated very poorly during the 1700s (Hiatt, 2015). Many found this representation of the character offensive and disrespectful to African American people.

Cultural critic Aja Romano defends Hamilton with the concept of race bending; the act of changing a character’s race or ethnicity to make the character part of an underrepresented cultural community. Essentially, this creates a role for an actor from that community (McAllister, 2017). Romano argues that Hamilton does not just celebrate the founding fathers, but the show proposes an opportunity for American History to reclaim itself for those who were dismissed or devalued. Hamilton is the first Broadway show to

incorporate the concept of race bending in an appropriate manner. Although there are those who do not appreciate this form of stage performance, various critics have praised Lin-Manuel Miranda for his seamless work to make historical figures come to life in the 21st century.

The use of race bending in this production can be looked at in a positive or negative light. While there are viewers who do not appreciate Hamilton's use of color conscious casting, Miranda's representation of hip-hop culture is strengthened by the African American actors. The show exhibits a new level of depth by having actors of color play white historical figures (Maultsby, 2017). This is because it feels like the actors are fighting for what their enslaved people would have been fighting for in the 18th century, but did not have the position or opportunity to take on this task. In addition, Hamilton says throughout the show that he feels trapped in his own mind, but in reality it is almost as if the actors are the real ones who are trapped, so they bring their own personality and background to create new and complex characters. However, Miranda makes his "representational mission" clear by proclaiming that our nation's history does not change even when the faces appear to change (McWhortor, 2016). Many have acknowledged that the show makes you feel for those struggling through the revolution, but it also gives you a sense of connection to American history because you are able to process it in a modernized way. By integrating parts of our contemporary world, like hip-hop music, Miranda is able to appeal to a diverse

audience of various ages. This one of a kind historical production goes well beyond what anyone could have expected from a narration of Alexander Hamilton's life.

Brandi Catanese explains why and how multicultural casting can be successful or harmful in her book *The Problem of the Color Blind*. Using her work to understand Hamilton, it is clear of why the production fell so short of perfection. By featuring a race bending cast, opportunity for artistic expression can either transcend or transgress in the minds of the audience (Catanese, 2012). Non-traditional casting has the ability to ignore racial systems of belonging and portray an actor in a different light.

Many argue that the positive representation of colored characters transformed viewers' perspectives to believe in a more optimistic future for the founding families of our nation. However, in reality, every character in Hamilton's story endured the struggles and deaths that came from the Revolutionary war. Even if the future of American people looked positive, the characters in Hamilton all had to go through a great deal of pain before anything looked remotely optimistic. Although Miranda initiated a transcendent performance by casting himself as an immigrant founding father, his misuse of color casting and African American historical override made the overall performance unauthentic.

Historical Records

Miranda writes "American history can be told and retold, claimed and reclaimed, even by people who don't look like George Washington and Betsy Ross." (Nathans, 2017). Despite the truth to this statement, scholars have attacked the production for

attempting to subvert the audience's expectations of how they should image the racial and ethnic backgrounds of America's founding fathers. Miranda intertwines pointed comments about America's slave past throughout his retelling of the story, which silently provokes a more positive image about the involvement of the found fathers in slave trade. However, Miranda is not the first to try to bring the issue of race and national identity to the theater stage. We can see from Jon Nichols 1802's satire, *The Essex Funtto*, that taking a stand for slavery was often a dangerous approach for theater audiences. Nichols satire depicts Hamilton as a radical immigrant and betrayer of the Revolution. He portrays Hamilton as an endorser of the slave community, but ignores the conflict-ridden issue of slavery that endangered and divided the nation. His racially ignorant performance and use of offensive blackface surfaced conversations about the accurate racial representation of history and whether or not the topic was a matter for theatrical performances. Nancy Isenberg has observed that "history is created by the archive" and how those materials are interpreted by the current generation of scholars (Nathans, 2017). However, if the archive is not complete enough to give us a whole understanding of the past, is it acceptable for an artist to interpret what may have happened in a modernized fashion?

This question is what has sparked debates about the historical accuracy of Hamilton. Miranda's musical creates an enhanced, mores positive, image of the complex racial identities stemming from the post-revolutionary periods. This has created friction between how the current generation and traditional representations of the white founding fathers are depicted. However, theater historian Patricia Herrera believes that Hamilton has made the

Afro-diasporic significance in American history visible and appreciated (Maltstby, 2017). She discusses how the face of larger society rarely recognizes this significance and applauds Miranda for his work. Herrera reminds of the critical challenge in re-presenting the history of race in America and how Hamilton has used particular musical casting choices to incite an understanding of history that has not yet been told. As Herrera observes “This racially-conscious cast tells a story *bound* by race”, though she adds that the violent history of slavery conveniently remains silent during the performance. Through interviews we can see that Miranda understands the “brutal practices of slave trade” that Alexander Hamilton took part in, but the obstacle, for any artist, is how to translate that into theatrical form. For over a century we have seen playwrights of color try to stage Americas historical racial oppression, but the one issue that has not been fully accomplished is to stage the violent history of slavery and put those stories in the mouths of non-white performers (Nathans, 2017).

The dispute continues about the authenticity of the history as Hamilton has been claimed to be nothing more than an entertaining performance by many scholars (Isenberg, 2017). Nancy Isenberg has derailed Hamilton for his historically inaccurate timeline and depiction of characters. She discusses how the use of media has elevated the show’s status and has lead audience to have a preconceived idea of the show before even seeing it. Her article titled, "Make 'Em Laugh; Why History Cannot Be Reduced to Song and Dance”, discusses the implications of adopting Hamilton as an accurate piece of historical evidence.

She claims that our media-saturated world is going to skew the minds of students from correct history to a reconstructed past of what we wish could have happened. Various historical discrepancies are noticed throughout the play as well, like Hamilton's deciding vote on the election. The main premise of the musical is that Hamilton determines the outcome of the election of 1800 by voting for Jefferson. In reality, Hamilton had nothing to do with the election and tried to sway the one person who could, James Bayard of Delaware, but his efforts were untimely and dismissed. Isenberg discusses other misconstructions of the show, specifically, the omitted slavery aspect. Several scholars interested in the show's racial optics have argued that Miranda's version of events erases the history of slavery (Isenberg, 2017). Hamilton allows its audience to overcome the disillusionment about our Founding fathers' involvement in slavery. This diminishes the significance of African American people and poses the idea that we should just forget that this time period happened. The lack of historical and African significant evidence threatens Hamilton's authenticity even further.

Hip-Hop Music

Introducing hip-hop into the world of theater has created a whole new complexity to the style (Nathans, 2017). The vast variety of hip-hop is what makes it so hard to distinctly categorize the sound, so it all falls under one genre. In fact, the style of music has so much variation that it can be broken into 31 subcategories, none of which have to do with musical theater. Nonetheless, Hamilton is advertised and praised for being the first Broadway show

to incorporate hip hop music into the production. The questions arises of whether or not the music in Hamilton can truly be considered hip-hop. Musical producers and overseers of the production, Questlove and Black Thought of the roots, two strong hip-hop and R&B artists, have claimed that as a team they created a “a groundbreaking fusion of hip-hop, R&B, pop-music and Broadway tunes” (McAllister, 2017). However, musical analyst, Alexis Petridis, claims that in no way is the Hamilton cast album is a hip-hop album (Petridis, 2017). She describes how the rapping done by the characters in the musical is unlike traditional rap and does not match the style that is consistent throughout the subcategories. She claims that this is due to the theatrical aspect, the kind of rap performed and a lack of black vernacular. Yet, the Mixtape, which features predominate hip-hop figures like, Queen Latifah, Wiz Kahlifa, Chance the Rapper and more signing similar versions of songs from the soundtrack, is widely considered true hip hop music and skips the debate. This may be because the style of music on the Mixtape is more mainstream and considered music that you would “hear on the radio”. The discrepancy between the two soundtracks sources back to the stage and how the music is interpreted by its listeners. Without the theatrical aspects to the music and on stage narrative, the music follows the sound style consistent across hip-hop, but adding narrative based raps takes away from the authenticity of true hip hop music (Petridis, 2017). Miranda would explain that the use of hip hop in the play was utilized as form , not content and thus it was irrelevant whether it adheres to strict standards of the critics.

Having experienced Hamilton first hand I feel as though I have a unique perspective on the performance. When I heard that there was soon to be a Broadway show about the historical figure, Alexander Hamilton, I had no interest in seeing the production. It was not until I had discovered that the show featured a rap based narrative and incorporated hip-hop music that I was intrigued. After listening to the album the first time, I was completely amazed. Having loved Broadway shows and music growing and being a hip hop dancer, I was complexly engulfed by the music and memorized the entire soundtrack. After over a year of asking to get tickets to see it live, I finally was lucky enough to be given the opportunity to go to the show. I had gone in with the impression that there would be dialogue between the characters to explain the scenes more in depth, but to my own surprise, the two-and-a-half-hour performance was entirely musical. Miranda not only incorporated hip hop music, but modern styles of hip hop dance brought the production to life. The performance blew me away and I was left speechless. Although Hamilton may not accurately represent authentic hip hop music, Miranda delivered a transcendent performance that brought a range of emotions to the audience, me included. I was overwhelmed by the compelling story, multilayered songs and dance. It was not until I began researching that I had questioned the authenticity of any aspects of the show. Despite portraying slaveholding figures in a more optimistic light, I believe that the use of a color conscious cast allowed the audience to process American history in a way that has never presented before. Incorporating hip hop music gave the show a depth and complexity that was able to appeal

to a wide variety of ages. The somewhat inaccurate historical record did not detract from the plot and the presentation greatly enriched the show. Overall, it is clear that the techniques Miranda used was essential to improve the production, not the authenticity.

Despite having widely mixed reviews and critics, Hamilton is now on its third year of production and continues to thrive on Broadway. Miranda strived to represent American history while incorporating hip hop culture, but fell short of perfection. His misuse of historical events, hip-hop claims and ignorant disregard of slavery's impact on Alexander Hamilton's journey, all deterred from the truly authentic aspects of the show. However, experiencing the show on Broadway is truly a once in a lifetime experience, in terms of theatrical performances. The production is so astonishing to the audience that these aspects of question were not even considered when viewing the actual performance. Miranda reminds us that the American Revolution was a writer's revolution and helped the founders create the nation one paragraph at a time, but it is evident now that re-written history does not align with what we previously believed. (Nathans, 2017) Hamilton's popularity continues to grow with the traveling show around the world, but the authenticity of facts and presentation of hip hop culture is one aspect that clearly deterred from the overall performance.

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