

Opinion: ‘Hamilton: An American Musical’ has a dangerously loose grip on the truth

Lin-Manuel Miranda modestly puts himself centre-stage as the poster boy of the American dream; something nobody was asking for

By Charlie Cook

It is difficult to know what sort of trajectory Alexander Hamilton’s life was on in 1804 when Aaron Burr punctured his rib with a bullet. If their duel had not occurred, what would he have gone on to achieve? For a Founding Father who established America’s first National Bank (essentially inventing American capitalism) as well as having a hand in writing the Constitution, Hamilton has always been pretty obscure; his legacy quietly resigned to an anonymous mugshot splayed on the ten-dollar bill. Or at least, he was obscure, right up until 2008 when actor and playwright Lin-Manuel Miranda -- having read Ron Chernow’s biography of the long-dead polymath – was inspired to rectify this and write a musical homage to the man. A four-minute rap performed at a White House poetry event spiralled into a world-renowned Broadway hit, amassing millions of fans and millions of dollars in the process. Sounds pretty good, right? Hamilton re-enters the zeitgeist with a splash and Miranda gets to buy a sports car.

If you take the musical at face value, it appears to be a perfectly harmless affair. The essence of the narrative is the simple – yet classic – underdog arc supplemented with a strong theme of legacy which depicts Hamilton as a working-class hero who was cruelly forgotten by history. However, scratch beneath the surface of this dazzling, expertly choreographed production and there lurks an insidious truth, conveniently swept under the rug by Miranda. The musical goes beyond taking poetic license in telling this story. For reasons I will outline in this article, the glossing over of Hamilton’s views on government and slavery can only be the result of wilfully misinterpreting facts in order to craft a narrative. This musical is possibly the most ridiculously extravagant display of American exceptionalism that we have encountered this side of the millennium. Its perpetuation of the ‘American dream’, a false promise of happiness pursued, and liberty enjoyed, for the small price of crushing your body in a life of labour sends a dangerous message and makes a spectacle out of poverty.



(image courtesy of cinemablend.com)

Rising up from humble beginnings

It is well documented from interviews that Miranda’s urgency in telling this story stemmed from the parallels which he observed between the Founding Father and his own father, who also came to America as an immigrant and achieved great success. The whole musical hinges on this sentimental depiction of the ‘young, scrappy’ man who made it to the land of opportunity, determined not to waste his shot. Factually, Hamilton’s humble beginnings are accurately portrayed. The first song, aptly titled *Alexander Hamilton* is a punchy and engaging summary of an orphan born out of wedlock who was able to escape the Island of Nevis through sheer talent, gaining a scholarship to study at King’s College in New York.

Miranda paints the picture of a rough-around-the-edges intellectual who lands in America with a radical vision of independence from the British Monarchy. While it is true that Hamilton was, in many ways, instrumental in America winning the War of Independence through his work as an aide to George Washington, Miranda craftily diverts the audience’s attention from his views on revolution beyond this point. We are directed by the narrative to maintain a perception of that ‘diamond in the rough’ with a dream of the colonies rising to strength and glory.

Hamilton’s views on government are not fully explored by Miranda’s homage, because if they were, the whole narrative would implode. The ‘ten-dollar Founding Father’ effectively being the progenitor of American capitalism, referred to democracy as a ‘poison’ – a stance tied up in his belief that most people were essentially too stupid and fallible to decide their own fate. While it is true that he was at the forefront of the American Revolution, he seemingly dropped his desire for social change to be in the hands of the underclass as soon as he was rubbing shoulders with the elites, even going so far as to suggest Presidents should be in power until their death. It is understandable why Miranda chooses to gloss over this particular section of Hamilton’s story

Word count: 1,587

because it ruins his fabrication of the swashbuckling, brave charmer who is unapologetically radical (*did I mention Miranda cast himself in this role?*).

Poverty porn: who tells our story?

Miranda's desire to promote Hamilton to being some kind of hero to the working-class is misguided at best and insidious at worst. Considered by Hamiltonian scholars such as Joanne Freeman to be the most elitist of the Founding Fathers, he was a staunchly private man who would have detested a celebration of the humble beginnings he was so ashamed of. When you consider this, Miranda's insistence on deifying Hamilton seems a bit odd. Taking an anti-democracy social climber who abandoned the façade of 'I think the underclasses deserve agency' as soon as he rose to power and presenting him as a likeable protagonist is a deceitful move on Miranda's part and essentially re-writes history. This becomes significant when you consider how obscure the man was before Miranda cast his gaze upon him – because while nobody should take a story of white colonial men who are portrayed by a cast of people of colour as a puritanical biography, the immense popularity of the musical has made this story part of the public lexicon. Through Chinese whispers, fact has fused with fiction.

At its best, working-class representation in media can be an act of public service; seeing our stories portrayed on stage and screen can be a source of inspiration and solace. Russell T Davies' Rose Tyler in *Doctor Who* was a stroke of genius: a working-class girl living on a beaten-up south London council estate gets to travel the stars and save the universe – populist TV gold. But *Hamilton* is on a different playing field. Because you have to ask yourself: who is this musical *for*? With average ticket prices being up to nearly \$400, this is certainly not a grass-roots production made for working-class people to watch and relate to. No, this is a production that makes a spectacle out of us. Large swathes of people with hundreds of dollars to burn on a ticket stub get to gather in a theatre and marvel at the underclass. Now obviously since the musical's availability on streaming platform *Disney+* in July 2020, it is certainly more accessible, but it had to be funnelled through the rich people first; we had to wait our turn.

A slave to success

'You have to know what you're writing about' says Miranda in an interview on ITV chat show *Good Morning Britain*. This self-assured statement shows that he feels confident in the research he carried out to write the musical. However, maybe he should have kept this brag to himself because it leaves him open to a whirlwind of criticism when you spend more than thirty seconds looking into the facts. Take, for instance, how Miranda represents

slavery in *Hamilton*. An anti-slavery stance is taken by the musical (good start), something most clearly stated during the cabinet debate sequence wherein Thomas Jefferson is reproached for his hypocrisy in writing the Declaration of Independence (which promotes equality) while also being a prolific owner of enslaved people. And who, you might wonder, performs this rebuttal? Hamilton himself! You could be forgiven then for think that Hamilton must surely have been an abolitionist, seeing as it is blatantly implied.

This is possibly where Miranda's cognitive dissonance is at its most alarming. Because while nobody is arguing that artistic renditions of historical figures' lives must be totally puritanical, if you intend to write a tale of a principled abolitionist, you might want to check that he actually was one first. Hamilton, as it seems was *not*. While some historians argue that he was privately opposed to slavery, the actions carried out by the man would firmly point to the contrary. How Hamilton meekly nodded along to the 3/5ths clause (a piece of legislation which deemed enslaved people only three-fifths human) to stay on the social elite's good side, the way in which he bought and sold slaves for his in-laws, the new evidence which suggests he owned some himself; all factors which stack up against him in a pretty damning way. Miranda's conscious (for it could only have been conscious, given how much research he purports to have carried out) ignorance of these facts so that he could craft a narrative simply cannot go unnoticed. Disingenuously portraying him as a man of the people is insulting, but wilfully side-lining his tenuous links to slavery is unforgivable.

In a society that seeks to progress past bootlicking the champions of yesteryear due to their fundamental misalignment with our contemporary values, one which heaves bronze statues from concrete foundations, Alexander Hamilton has no place in our cultural consciousness as a hero; for he is a villain in every sense of the word. Miranda's misguided love-letter to capitalism is equally as dangerous as it is deceptive. This Broadway homage has taken a man who was buried in obscurity and amplified him to folk-hero status. I struggle to see the heroism in climbing to success and then burning the very ladder that got you there with an intentionally inaccessible financial system. And what is there to be celebrated in a man with the intellect and influence to enforce social change, but who stood on the side-lines as human beings were traded as property? Thanks to Miranda's cognitive dissonance and egotism, the elitist Alexander Hamilton now looks down on us from his summit of success; now reaching a new and ridiculous peak.

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