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## Hamilton: Musical Theater, Public History's New Frontier?

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# Hamilton: Musical Theater, Public History's New Frontier?

## **Abstract**

*Hamilton* is one of Broadway's newest musicals and it's the hottest thing to hit the stage in a long time. The show, a rap-opera, follows the life of Alexander Hamilton, the nation's 'forgotten Founding Father.' The show has had immense success since it opened in August 2015, with thousands of followers on the show's Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube pages. It has exploded from the stage into a cultural phenomenon, but what makes the story of this Founding Father so compelling for audiences? Previous productions of historical musicals and plays have failed on the stage, while *Hamilton* thrives. What is its secret? [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

The Gettysburg Compiler, Theater, Hamilton, Broadway, Alexander Hamilton

## **Disciplines**

History | Public History | Theatre and Performance Studies | United States History

## **Comments**

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## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

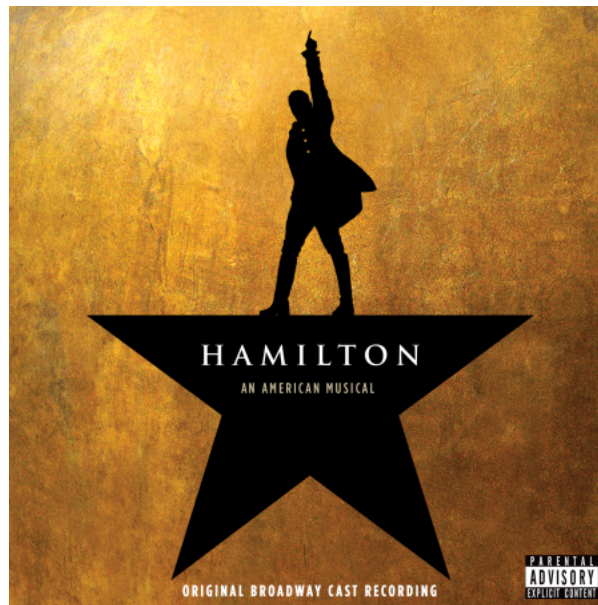
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### Hamilton: Musical Theater, Public History's New Frontier?

January 29, 2016

By Megan McNish '16

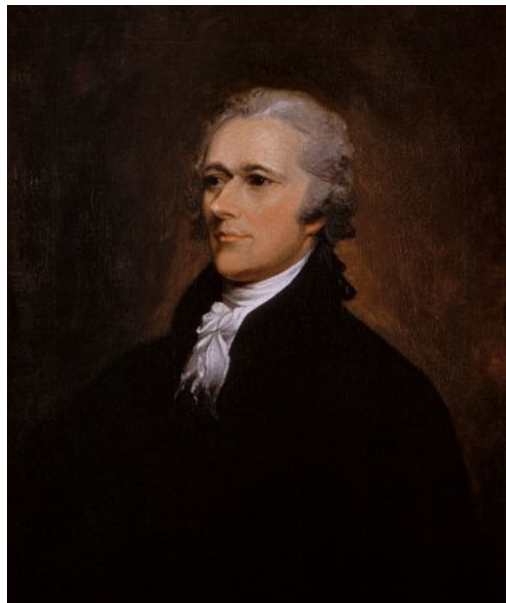
*Hamilton* is one of Broadway's newest musicals and it's the hottest thing to hit the stage in a long time. The show, a rap-opera, follows the life of Alexander Hamilton, the nation's 'forgotten Founding Father.' The show has had immense success since it opened in August 2015, with thousands of followers on the show's Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube pages. It has exploded from the stage into a cultural phenomenon, but what makes the story of this Founding Father so compelling for audiences? Previous productions of historical musicals and plays have failed on the stage, while *Hamilton* thrives. What is its secret?



*The album cover for the original Broadway cast recording of the new musical Hamilton. Image Courtesy of Atlantic Records.*

One of the great successes of the musical is that it blends music and history in a way that is memorable. The writer, Lin-Manuel Miranda, also has accomplished something else with his production. He has made the issues of the late 18th and early 19th century come alive and relatable to audiences today. "We want to eliminate any distance between a contemporary audience and [Hamilton's] story," Miranda has said. While removing all distance between the

audience and the history can be dangerous ground, Miranda is on to something. He has helped his viewers and listeners connect their struggles with the struggles experienced by historical figures. While these problems are often not identical, they help create connections between audience members' personal experiences and the experiences of the historical figures they listen to and watch. For example, the death of Hamilton's son Phillip is depicted in the second act of the show. While many parents who lose children often do not experience the loss as the result of a duel, many can empathize with the sudden loss of a child. The pain and suffering that the Hamiltons endured as a result of this loss makes them human, rather than simply the two-dimensional figures to whom we are accustomed. Through these new relationships, people are developing a better sense and appreciation for the past. Miranda's ability to make historical figures come alive has made the history all the more compelling for a general audience. By giving Alexander Hamilton a voice, he is no longer just "the ten dollar Founding Father," he is a man with emotions and real life problems. Miranda's work should be given credit as a legitimate piece of scholarship, even if it is not entirely accurate. For me, *Hamilton* is also something from which I draw inspiration. As a public historian, I strive to make history come alive for others and help them discover a love of history they never knew they had. I admire the way that Miranda has successfully accomplished this on a massive scale.



*The man himself: Alexander Hamilton. Image via Wikimedia Commons.*

However, Lin-Manuel Miranda has a secret weapon in his back pocket which many public historians do not, and that is song. While there have been other musicals about history, including one on the Civil War that made it to Broadway, Miranda's radically different style has made his work stand out. Ron Chernow, author of the book on which the musical is based, suggested that the blend between 18th century speech and 21st century slang is the secret to the musical's success. Other musicals, like the one on the Civil War, embraced slower styles of music and lacked the upbeat, powerful tunes that *Hamilton* provides. In essence, Miranda has taken music that appeals to popular audiences, not just Broadway goers, and added history. My only lingering question is why can't there be more? This musical, in my opinion, is an incredible teaching tool.

When we learn the alphabet we are taught to sing it. When we learn state capitals, it's set to song. Music makes learning memorable and helps what could be boring lessons come alive. Young students often complain that history is boring because it is taught as only facts and dates, but adding song could change the game and make history more exciting. If *Hamilton* has taught us anything, aside from a little bit about our nation's history, it is that public history, and history at large, has a whole new frontier of teaching techniques to explore for the next generation.

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Sources:

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