

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

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ALL ABOUT THE HAMILTONS

A new musical brings the Founding Fathers back to life—with a lot of hip-hop.

BY REBECCA MEAD

Lin-Manuel Miranda, the composer, lyricist, and star of “Hamilton,” says that Alexander Hamilton reminds him of Tupac Shakur.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ZACH GROSS

In April, 2009, Lin-Manuel Miranda, a writer, composer, and performer, received a call from the White House. The new President and the First Lady were planning to host an evening of live performances centered on “the American experience,” and Miranda was invited to participate. Miranda, who was twenty-nine, had spent the previous year starring in the Broadway musical “In the Heights,” of which he was the composer and lyricist. Set in Washington Heights, the show incorporated salsa and merengue with rap and hip-hop, blending them with more conventional Broadway tropes, to winning effect. “Heights” had won four Tony awards, including those for Best Musical and Best Original Score, and Miranda had accepted the latter with an effervescent rap that invoked “Sunday in the Park with George”: “Mr. Sondheim / Look, I made a hat! / Where there never was a hat! / It’s a Latin hat at that!” (He then pulled a Puerto Rican flag from the pocket of his tuxedo.) The White House likely expected Miranda to perform something invoking the Latin-American experience, and he was told that a number from “In the Heights” would be welcome.

Miranda had something different in mind. A few months earlier, he and his girlfriend, Vanessa Nadal, who has since become his wife, had been on vacation in Mexico, and while bobbing in the pool on an inflatable lounge he started to read a book that he had bought on impulse: Ron Chernow’s eight-hundred-page biography of Alexander Hamilton. Miranda was seized by the story of Hamilton’s early life. Born out of wedlock, raised in poverty in St. Croix, abandoned by his father, and orphaned by his mother as a child, Hamilton transplanted himself as an adolescent to a New York City filled with revolutionary fervor. An eloquent and prolific writer, he was the author of two-thirds of the Federalist Papers; after serving as George Washington’s aide during the Revolutionary War, he became America’s first Treasury Secretary. Later, Hamilton achieved the dubious distinction of being at the center of the nation’s first political sex scandal, after an extramarital affair became public. He never again held office, and before reaching the age of fifty he was dead, killed in a duel by Aaron Burr, the Vice-President, after a personal dispute escalated beyond remediation.



Miranda saw Hamilton's relentlessness, brilliance, linguistic dexterity, and self-destructive stubbornness through his own idiosyncratic lens. It was, he thought, a hip-hop story, an immigrant's story. Hamilton reminded him of his father, Luis A. Miranda, Jr., who, as an ambitious youth in provincial Puerto Rico, had graduated from college before turning eighteen, then moved to New York to pursue graduate studies at N.Y.U. Luis Miranda served as a special adviser on Hispanic affairs to Mayor Ed Koch; he then co-founded a political consulting company, the MirRam Group, advising Fernando Ferrer, among others. On summer breaks during high school, Lin-Manuel worked in his father's office; later, he wrote jingles for the political ads of several MirRam clients, including Eliot Spitzer, in his 2006 gubernatorial bid. Chernow's description of the contentious election season of 1800—the origin of modern political campaigning—resonated with Miranda's understanding of the inner workings of politics. And the kinds of debate that Hamilton and his peers had about the purpose of government still took place, on MSNBC and Fox.

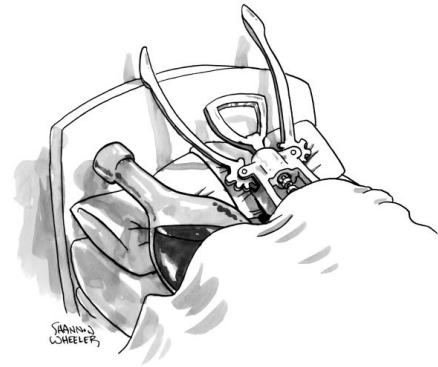
Hamilton also reminded Miranda of Tupac Shakur, the West Coast rapper who was shot to death in 1996. Shakur wrote intricate, socially nuanced lyrics: Miranda particularly admired "Brenda's Got a Baby," a verse narrative about a twelve-year-old girl who turns to prostitution after giving birth to her molester's child. Shakur was also extremely undiplomatic, publicly calling out rappers he hated. Miranda recognized a similar rhetorical talent in Hamilton, and a similar, fatal failure to know when enough was enough. There was extraordinary dramatic potential in Hamilton's story: the characteristics that allowed him to rise also insured his fall. When the organizers of the White House event called, Miranda proposed a rap about Hamilton, and they said yes.

That evening in May, Miranda and the other performers—among them Esperanza Spalding, the jazz bassist and vocalist, and James Earl Jones—were introduced to the President. Miranda asked him to sign a copy of "Dreams from My Father" that he'd bought at the airport. Onstage, Miranda announced that he was working on a concept album about Hamilton—"someone I think embodies hip-hop," he said, to general laughter. He did not mention that he had written only one song. After Miranda explained that Hamilton represented "the word's ability to make a difference," he launched into complex lyrics that condensed the first twenty years of Hamilton's life into four minutes. Slight of build, with dark cropped hair and thick stubble, Miranda paced the stage with coiled energy, rapping of "the ten-dollar Founding Father without a father / Got a lot farther by working a lot harder / By being a lot smarter / By being a self-starter." His performance ignited a rising murmur of delight among the audience, and the Obamas were rapt: Miranda later heard that the President's first reaction was to remark that Timothy Geithner had to see this.

Six years later, that song has become the first number of "Hamilton," which opens at the Public Theatre on February 17th, with Miranda in the title role. Rooted in hip-hop, but also encompassing R. & B., jazz, pop, Tin Pan Alley, and the choral strains of contemporary Broadway, the show is an achievement of historical and cultural reimagining. In Miranda's telling, the headlong rise of one self-made immigrant becomes the story of America. Hamilton announces himself in a signature refrain: "Hey, yo, I'm just like my country / I'm young, scrappy

and hungry / And I'm not throwing away my shot,” and these words could equally apply to his dramatizer. Miranda has used as his Twitter avatar Hamilton's portrait on the ten-dollar bill, slyly tweaked to incorporate Miranda's dark eyes, humorously set mouth, and goatee.

“Hamilton” is not a gimmicky transposition of early American history to a contemporary urban setting. Miranda's Founding Fathers wear velvet frock coats and knee britches, not hoodies and jeans. The set, by David Korins, is a wooden scaffold against exposed brick; the warm lighting suggests candlelight, and the stage is equipped with ropes and iron fixtures that evoke the shipbuilding—and nation-building—of eighteenth-century New York City.



Miranda presents an Alexander Hamilton of incandescent focus, abounding talent, and barely suppressed fury. Hamilton was known to pace and mutter to himself while composing his treatises, and onstage the rap soliloquy feels startlingly apt as his preferred mode of self-expression: “I imagine death so much it feels more like a memory / When is it gonna get me? / In my sleep? / Seven feet ahead of me? / If I see it coming do I run or do I let it be?” Miranda transposes Cabinet meetings into rap battles where participants face off while surrounded by whooping supporters. The debate over whether a national bank should be established to assume the states' debts—Hamilton's farsighted invention—becomes an animated exchange, in which he emerges victorious by disparaging Thomas Jefferson: “Always hesitant with the President / Reticent—there isn't a plan he doesn't jettison.”

It does not seem accidental that “Hamilton” was created during the tenure of the first African-American President. The musical presents the birth of the nation in an unfamiliar but necessary light: not solely as the work of elite white men but as the foundational story of all Americans. Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and George Washington are all played by African-Americans. Miranda also gives prominent roles to women, including Hamilton's wife, Eliza Schuyler (Phillipa Soo), and sister-in-law, Angelica Schuyler (Renée Elise Goldsberry). When they are joined by a third sister, their zigzagging harmonies sound rather like those of Destiny's Child. Miranda portrays the Founding Fathers not as exalted statesmen but as orphaned sons, reckless revolutionaries, and sometimes petty rivals, living at a moment of extreme volatility, opportunity, and risk. The achievements and the dangers of America's current moment—under the Presidency of a fatherless son of an immigrant, born in the country's island margins—are never far from view.

Oskar Eustis, who marks his ten-year anniversary as the artistic director of the Public with this production, says that “Hamilton” is the most exciting new work he has been involved with in years—perhaps since Tony Kushner’s “Angels in America,” which he commissioned, and directed in its première production, in 1992. He sees a connection between Miranda’s creation and the *Henriad*, Shakespeare’s early cycle of history plays: “What Lin is doing is taking the vernacular of the streets and elevating it to verse. That is what hip-hop is, and that is what iambic pentameter was. Lin is telling the story of the founding of his country in such a way as to make everyone present feel they have a stake in their country. In heightened verse form, Shakespeare told England’s national story to the audience at the Globe, and helped make England England—helped give it its self-consciousness. That is exactly what Lin is doing with ‘Hamilton.’ By telling the story of the founding of the country through the eyes of a bastard, immigrant orphan, told entirely by people of color, he is saying, ‘This is our country. We get to lay claim to it.’”

One bright day in October, Miranda and his closest collaborator, Thomas Kail, the director of both “In the Heights” and “Hamilton,” climbed into a town car outside the Public Theatre and headed for Hamilton Park, in Weehawken, New Jersey. In the years since Miranda first conceived of “Hamilton,” he has worked on several other projects: co-writing “Bring It On: The Musical,” an adaptation of the movie about cheerleading, which played on Broadway in 2012; appearing on “Modern Family” and “How I Met Your Mother”; performing with an improvisational hip-hop comedy group, Freestyle Love Supreme, which plays at Joe’s Pub and other venues, and whose début TV series aired last fall. All along, he was writing songs and mounting periodic readings of his work-in-progress. In 2012, he staged a concert production of songs from “Hamilton” at Lincoln Center’s American Songbook series; in the *Times*, Stephen Holden hailed it as “an obvious game changer.”

While Miranda was working on the musical, he read Hamilton’s voluminous correspondence and published works, and he visited sites in New York City that bear the traces of Revolutionary history, like Fraunces Tavern, on Pearl Street, where, after the defeat of the British, George Washington delivered a tearful farewell address to his officers. For a while, Miranda was granted a writing space at the Morris-Jumel Mansion, near West 162nd Street. Now a national historic landmark, it is the oldest surviving house in Manhattan. Washington used the mansion as his headquarters during the Battle of Harlem Heights, and it later became the home of Vice-President Burr. “I met with the head of the Museum of American Finance, and he showed me the plaque on the side of an office building that says, ‘This was Thomas Jefferson’s residence in New York,’” Miranda said. “I love that we are just a bunch of layers above where all this shit went down.” Ron Chernow, who met Miranda a few months before the White House performance, became a historical consultant for the show. “Lin never gratuitously invents anything,” Chernow says. “He tries first to stick to the facts, and if he has to deviate from the facts I have found that there is always a very good reason for him doing it. I said to him, ‘Do you want me to tell you when I see historical errors?’ And he said, ‘Absolutely. I want the historians to respect this.’”

The Weehawken trip was to a site Miranda had not yet visited: the duelling ground where, in July, 1804, Burr shot Hamilton, who died of his wounds the next day. At the time, duelling was outlawed in New York but tolerated in New Jersey. “Hamilton” dramatizes three duels between

three pairs of combatants, and the second two prove fatal, including one in which Hamilton's son Philip participates. "A duel was like arbitration is now," Miranda said, with wonder. "It was, like, 'Oh, well, we are not going to settle this, we are going to have to go to a field in Jersey. Bring some arms and a doctor.'"

Although Miranda had spent years developing the script, he remained unsure how to portray the final moments of Hamilton's life. Among other difficulties, the historical record lacked clarity: Burr shot Hamilton on the first draw, claiming afterward that he had been convinced by his opponent's behavior—the way he examined his gun, the fact that he put on his glasses—that Hamilton also meant to shoot in earnest. Hamilton, however, left behind multiple letters that suggested he intended to aim away from Burr—to throw away his shot—and eyewitnesses later reported that he fired into the air.

At a workshop production in May, Miranda had delivered a final rap in which Hamilton gives an account of his preparations—"The sun is in my eyes and I'm almost giddy / As I watch it slowly rise over my New York City"—and weighs whether or not Burr has it in him to kill. Both musically and lyrically, the song hadn't conveyed the high stakes that Miranda sought to capture, in which Hamilton's fears about Burr's lack of integrity extended to broad trepidation about the uncertain direction of the country. Nor had the song fully delivered a sense of tragic inevitability, in which Hamilton's uncharacteristic reticence and Burr's uncharacteristic forwardness ruin the lives of both men. Miranda was still revising the song, and expected to be still worrying over the scene in rehearsals. He said, "There are things that don't exist, and that are not going to exist, until we have actors in the room, and I go, 'Oh!'" Kail, who sets deadlines for Miranda, and reacts to every draft of every song, explained, "Lin's response to pressure is to generate more material."

Daveed Diggs, Okieriete Onaodowan, Anthony Ramos, and Lin-Manuel Miranda, in a scene from "Hamilton."

COURTESY JOAN MARCUS



The fraught relationship between Burr and Hamilton is at the center of Miranda's show. In the opening number, Burr introduces Hamilton as a "bastard, orphan, son of a whore and a Scotsman": lyrics derived from a contemptuous description by John Adams. Burr was born to privilege—his father was the president of the college that became Princeton University, and Jonathan Edwards was his maternal grandfather—but, like Hamilton, he was orphaned at an early age, studied law, and turned to politics. In Miranda's telling, they are negative images of each other, Hamilton's heated recklessness contrasting with Burr's icy caution. "Hamilton is this orphan with nothing to lose, and Burr is this orphan with everything to lose," Miranda says.

Establishing Burr as a foil to Hamilton was suggested not just by the historical record but also by musical-theatre precedent. In "Jesus Christ Superstar," Judas narrates, and Miranda was attracted to the idea of showing Hamilton as he is observed by his nemesis. Stephen Sondheim, who enlisted Miranda to translate some of the lyrics in "West Side Story" into Spanish for the show's 2009 revival, appreciates Miranda's respect for the art form's history: "A lot of

contemporary songwriters for the theatre are not the least bit interested in what went before. But Lin knows where musical theatre comes from, and he cares about where it comes from.” Miranda brought the first few songs from “Hamilton” to Sondheim a few years ago. “I was knocked out—I thought it was wonderful,” Sondheim says. “They seemed so fresh and meticulous and theatrical.”

Miranda shares Sondheim’s attention to uniting rhyme scheme with musical phrasing. But while composing “Hamilton” he also took inspiration from other, highly commercial Broadway scores. “I really got my ‘Les Miz’ on in this score, like being really smart about where to reintroduce a theme,” he said. “In terms of how it accesses your tear ducts, nothing does it better than that show.” “Hamilton” also pays winking respect to other musical precursors. Aaron Burr advises Hamilton and other would-be revolutionaries to temper their outrage with a line lifted from “South Pacific”: “I’m with you but the situation is fraught / You’ve got to be carefully taught.” “That’s our little Rodgers-and-Hammerstein-racism quote,” Miranda said, as the town car drove through the Lincoln Tunnel toward New Jersey. George Washington, who is played by Christopher Jackson, one of the co-stars of “In the Heights,” refers to himself ironically as “The model of a modern major general / the venerated Virginian veteran whose men are all / Lining up, to put me on a pedestal.” It’s a reference to “The Pirates of Penzance” and, in Miranda’s opinion, an improvement on Gilbert and Sullivan: “I always felt like ‘mineral’ wasn’t the best possible rhyme.”

Miranda’s score makes targeted use of musical genres, too. King George serenades his departing colony with a number titled “You’ll Be Back,” which echoes British pop—the Beatles, but on the harpsichord—with witty, melodious menace. (“When push / Comes to shove / I will send a fully armed battalion / To remind you of my love,” Brian d’Arcy James, as the haughty monarch, sings.) Miranda underscores the generational difference between Hamilton and Jefferson, who was a dozen years older, by giving Jefferson—just returned from Paris—a jazz-inflected number entitled “What’d I Miss?” Jefferson is played by the rapper Daveed Diggs, who has put his international touring schedule on hold for “Hamilton.” He says, “Lin exists at the intersection of a bunch of worlds that don’t often intersect. He happens to be a devoted fan of rap music, he happens to be a really talented rapper and freestyler, and he also grew up engaged in musical theatre. Everything that comes out seems so authentic.”

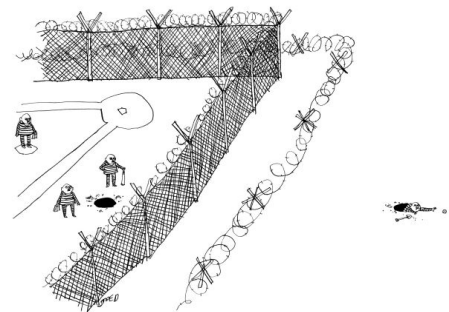
The pop music of the early nineties—the soundtrack of Miranda’s youth—is woven into the score. Listeners may pick up allusions to the Fugees, Mobb Deep, Brand Nubian. The show makes multiple references to the Notorious B.I.G., the New York rapper Christopher Wallace, who was shot to death in 1997, at the age of twenty-four. When Hamilton introduces himself, he spells out his name in the celebrated cadence that Wallace used in his song “Going Back to Cali.” Miranda takes particular pleasure in a song called “Duel Commandments,” a riff on “The Ten Crack Commandments,” Wallace’s primer on how to deal drugs. The song appears during the show’s first duel, in which Hamilton and Burr serve as the seconds for the combatants; in the May workshop, Miranda reprised the counting structure in the fatal duel between Hamilton and Burr. Kail, the director, explained, “We needed to set up the duel between Hamilton and Burr—because you know Hamilton is going to die—so the groundwork of that, structurally, made a lot of sense to us. But having it be something so loved by hip-hop fans was also a way of

saying that these folks from long ago were doing the same things that Biggie was talking about fifteen years ago.” Miranda nodded. “It’s a song about illegal activity, and how it works,” he said. “And we’re both stealing the structure from Moses.”

After arriving at Weehawken’s stretch of the Palisades, Miranda and Kail hunted in vain for some indication of where Hamilton fell. A marble obelisk commemorating Hamilton had been placed at the duel site as early as 1806, but it was destroyed within a few years; later, train tracks were laid along the foot of the cliff, eradicating the duelling ground. Eventually, Miranda and Kail spotted a pillar that had been topped, in the nineteen-nineties, by a small bust of Hamilton. The memorial, opposite the axis of Forty-second Street, was surprisingly diminutive: Jefferson or Washington would surely have merited a full statue.

The memorial was behind a locked gate, and Miranda climbed on a low wall to look down the cliff’s edge, past scrub and trees, to apartment complexes below. “I didn’t expect it to be this manicured,” he said. “I thought there would be some woods for us to walk around in. When I picture it in my mind’s eye, I picture the wood across from where I grew up, just kind of grimy and hidden. I don’t think this is going to replace that in my head.” Miranda took a picture on his phone of the view of Manhattan across the Hudson. “Made the pilgrimage,” he later tweeted.

The composer of “In the Heights” grew up not in Washington Heights but thirty blocks farther uptown, across from Inwood Hill Park, the site of the last natural forest in Manhattan. Miranda was the second of two children: his older sister, Luz Miranda-Crespo, trained as an engineer, and is now the C.F.O. of the MirRam Group. (Lin-Manuel’s unusual name was inspired by a poem about the Vietnam War, “Nana Roja Para Mi Hijo Lin Manuel,” by the Puerto Rican writer José Manuel Torres Santiago, which Luis Miranda read as a teenager and filed away for future use.) His mother, who was born in Puerto Rico but immigrated to New York as an infant, is a clinical psychologist. Edmunda Claudio, a live-in nanny, joined the family from Puerto Rico, and Miranda calls her *abuela*—grandmother. “My parents worked so much that I really remember them only on weekends,” he says. “My dad and I would go and see an action movie, and then we would go and play Ping-Pong or pool. They were like weekend visits, even though we all lived in the same house.”



In the summers, he and his sister would go to Puerto Rico to stay with their grandparents and improve their language skills. (Miranda's Spanish is good, but not equal to that of a native speaker.) High achievement was expected from both children, academically and culturally. Luis taught them to dance salsa. "For me, that was very, very important—that they learned how to dance," he says. The family was of a mixed economic background: one of Miranda's great-uncles, on his father's side, was the founder of the Independence Party in Puerto Rico, but other relatives were solidly working class. At five, Miranda tested into Hunter College Elementary School—the only child he knew from his neighborhood to do so. "I can't imagine what that was like for my Puerto Rican father," he says. "All my friends were Jewish, because that is who goes to Hunter. I was Lin at school, and Lin-Manuel at home. I was a totally different person at home than I was at school. All my friends lived on the Upper West Side or the Upper East Side, and I'd speak to their nannies in Spanish."

Miranda started taking piano lessons at six. "The teacher did a recital, and each of the kids played a couple of songs," Luis Miranda recalls. "After Lin-Manuel played his first song and people applauded, he played his second one; then he was, like, 'I know another one, I know another one,' and we had to pull him off, because he loved the applause." His showmanship sometimes extended to his homework assignments: in place of a third-grade report on Jean Merrill's "The Pushcart War," he submitted a short video in which he enlisted family members to reenact the book's events while he delivered a precocious narration in a newscaster's suit and tie. "The currency that matters among smart kids is funny, and if you can be funny you are going to be fine, so I got really funny," he says. (Miranda still calls upon friends and family to fulfill his creative needs. When he and Nadal, who is a corporate lawyer, got married, in 2010, he recruited a corps of wedding guests to surprise her with a choreographed rendition of "To Life," from "Fiddler on the Roof." Nearly four million people have watched a video of it on YouTube.)

His parents were aficionados of musicals. "They threw a lot of parties, and the music they played was all Latin music: salsa, El Gran Combo," he says. "But the clean-up music was always the cast album." There was not a lot of money for Broadway outings, but Miranda was taken to see "the Holy Trinity: 'Les Miz,' 'Phantom,' 'Cats.'" He says, "I remember seeing 'Les Miz' when I was seven. I cried when Fantine died, fell asleep for a while, woke back up in time for Javert's suicide—that is actually a great way to experience that show. When I saw 'Cats,' I remember being touched by the cats when they ran down the aisle. And then I saw 'Phantom,' and I was, like, 'Oh, shit!' Because it's about an ugly songwriter who wants to impose his will on the world. I related to that."

Miranda didn't study music formally; his piano lessons petered out before he finished elementary school, though he continued to play for pleasure, on a keyboard in his bedroom. But in high school he started performing in musical theatre. As a ninth grader, he was cast as the Pirate King in a production of "The Pirates of Penzance," beating out a senior who was expected to get the role. "I still remember the applause from that show as my favorite applause I ever got in my life," he says. As a senior, he directed "West Side Story." "I had no Latino men in the Sharks—they were various shades of brown, and Asian," he recalls. "So my dad came in and did accent work with the Sharks. It was us teaching these kids how to be Latino. I had never brought any of that to school, and 'West Side Story' was my way to do it." Miranda first crossed paths with Sondheim, who wrote the lyrics to that musical, at Hunter; Sondheim was a friend

of another student's father, who arranged for him to talk to the student cast. "He told the most amazing stories of how the show was created," Miranda says. "He told us how he had written an opening number and dialogue—he started singing us these lyrics—but Jerome Robbins said, 'No, I am going to dance all of that.' It made an enormous impression. It was the first time I had seen how a musical gets created for real."

In 1997, on his seventeenth birthday, Miranda saw "Rent" on Broadway. He says, "I thought, Oh, I can do that. You are allowed to write musicals about now." He started writing twenty-minute pieces for the school's annual theatre festival. Chris Hayes, the MSNBC broadcaster, was also a Hunter student at the time, and he directed an early work by Miranda called "Nightmare in D Major." Hayes recalls, "The protagonist's name was Dylan, and there was a long extended nightmare—some love from his past that was snatched from him, and an evil pig showed up halfway through. There's a sad ballad, about the forgotten crush, which I can still hum." Miranda was well aware of his gifts, according to Hayes: "That is part of his power—it gives him a confidence and self-assurance that is part of his charisma. He is not falsely humble. From a distance, I can imagine thinking, Who does that guy think he is? And the answer is, a once-in-a-generational musical talent."

After graduating from Hunter, Miranda went to Wesleyan, where he reprised one of his high-school productions, a musical called "Seven Minutes in Heaven," about a seventh grader's first kiss. "Wesleyan was very similar to Hunter, in that you can find resources for whatever cockamamie idea comes into your head," he says. In his sophomore year, Miranda moved into La Casa, a Latino cultural center and residence, living there with eight other first-generation students. "This was for real my first time making friends with Latino kids," he recalls. "It was the first time I could make a joke about Marc Anthony at the same time that I could make a joke about 'The ThunderCats,' or some other American bullshit we grew up with. Just like 'Rent' gave me permission to write musicals, this gave me permission to write about home."

In his sophomore year, he wrote a musical set in Washington Heights, conjuring the sound of the neighborhood by drawing on Latin music and hip-hop, neither of which he had ever attempted to compose before. The story line, which featured a tortured love triangle, was shopworn, but when the show was staged, in the spring of 2000, Miranda noticed that every time hip-hop was used to communicate the audience sat up in their seats. "This mix of Latin music and hip-hop was potent—there was something in that groove," he says.

"You can tell us the sound of one hand clapping here, or you can tell us downtown."

APRIL 27, 2009



For the remaining two years of college, Miranda left the musical's manuscript—an early iteration of “In the Heights”—in a drawer. But word of it got out among students interested in theatre. In 2002, Miranda's senior project, a show called “On Borrowed Time,” was presented at Wesleyan's Center for the Arts. Thomas Kail, who had graduated from Wesleyan two years earlier and had recently helped launch a theatre company, came to see the show, having admired the script of “In the Heights.” He found “On Borrowed Time” far less interesting, and afterward Kail shook Miranda's hand and said, patronizingly, “Enjoy this.” (The two still use the phrase on each other several times a week.) A month later, Miranda and Kail met in New York, in the basement of the Drama Book Shop, on West Fortieth Street, and talked for five hours. “I had been thinking about ‘In the Heights’ for two years, and we started a conversation that never stopped,” Kail says.

After Miranda graduated from Wesleyan, his father urged him to go to law school; Luis Miranda pointed to the example of Rubén Blades as a musical talent who had taken the precaution of getting a law degree before pursuing stardom. Instead, Miranda went back to Hunter, as a substitute seventh-grade English teacher. “They did grammar, which we didn't do when I was a student, so I was kind of learning grammar one lesson ahead of my kids,” he says. At the same time, he was working on “In the Heights”: every few months, he and Kail got together with actors to try out new material, with Miranda taking the role of Usnavi, a bodega owner who serves as a narrator. “We couldn't find someone to learn all those raps, under an Equity contract, so I kind of fell in the snowball,” he says.

The show eventually drew the attention of several Broadway producers, including Kevin McCollum, who had recently nurtured another new work, called “Avenue Q.” “He was, like, ‘Come back to me when you know what the story is,’ ” Miranda says. (McCollum became one of the Broadway producers of “Heights.”) In 2004, Miranda and Kail recruited Quiara Alegría Hudes, a young playwright, to rewrite the book. Hudes made radical changes, including eliminating one corner of the love triangle and placing the focus on Usnavi, the humble yet charismatic anchor of the block. The romance that had driven the narrative became secondary to Miranda's loving depiction of a neighborhood.

In 2007, after several more workshop productions, the show opened Off Broadway. It moved to Broadway the next year, where it was praised by reviewers for its inventive infectiousness, even if it was also charged with a degree of sentimentality and dramatic incoherence. In the *Times*, Charles Isherwood wrote, “In many ways ‘In the Heights’ suggests an uptown ‘Rent,’ plus some salsa fresca and without the sex, drugs and disease.”

Miranda writes many of his lyrics while in motion: walking around Fort Tryon Park, which is near his apartment, or riding the subway downtown from 181st Street. His iTunes folder is full of musical fragments—“Battle Loop,” “Burr-Hamilton Loop”—that he composed on Logic Pro. “I will write eight or sixteen bars of music I think is exciting, or interesting, or sounds like the pulse of the character I want to be speaking, and then I will go and put on my headphones and walk my dog and talk to myself,” he says. Sometimes when he is working on a riff he sings into the voice-memo function on one device while listening to the loop on another. The refrain of Aaron Burr's signature song, “Wait for It,” came to him fully

formed one evening on the subway. “I was going to a friend’s birthday party in Dumbo,” he says. “I sang the melody into the iPhone, then I went to the guy’s party for fifteen minutes, and wrote the rest of the song on the train back home.”

For a long time, Miranda couldn’t decide whether he wanted to play Hamilton or Burr, who has often been portrayed as one of the villains of early American history. After Hamilton’s death, Burr was accused of conspiring to form an independent nation in the Southwest. (He was eventually acquitted.) Miranda has more sympathy for Burr than many historians do. “I feel an equal affinity with Burr,” he says. “Burr is every bit as smart as Hamilton, and every bit as gifted, and he comes from the same amount of loss as Hamilton. But because of the way they are wired Burr hangs back where Hamilton charges forward. I feel like I have been Burr in my life as many times as I have been Hamilton. I think we’ve all had moments where we’ve seen friends and colleagues zoom past us, either to success, or to marriage, or to homeownership, while we lingered where we were—broke, single, jobless. And you tell yourself, ‘Wait for it.’” Miranda recently turned thirty-five. “I feel very Burr-like when I think what Hamilton accomplished by that age. Or Paul McCartney. Or Sondheim. Or Gershwin. Or OutKast. My jaw drops in awe of that kind of work ethic.”

In the end, a professional calculus prevailed. “When I get called in for stuff for Hollywood, I get to be the best friend of the Caucasian lead,” he says. “If I want to play the main guy, I have found, I have to write it. John Leguizamo would tell you the same thing.” (At the Public, Burr is played by Leslie Odom, Jr., who recently starred in the NBC series “Smash.”) Playing Hamilton, Miranda says, “I get to be cockier than I really am; I get to be smarter than I really am; I get to be more impulsive than I really am—it’s taking the reins off your id for two and a half hours.”

Thomas Kail was not surprised that Miranda ultimately chose to portray Hamilton. He says, “This idea of Hamilton being so conscious of a ticking clock is very much a match for Lin’s biochemistry.” During rehearsals for the Broadway run of “Heights,” Miranda developed the superstition that he would die before opening night. “It was like a running joke: ‘Unknown Composer Falls Down Manhole,’ ‘Unknown Composer Hit by Bus,’” Miranda says. “When I wrote Hamilton’s lyric ‘I imagine death so much it feels more like a memory,’ I was, like, ‘O.K., I know this guy.’”

Quiara Hudes, who remains a close friend, compares “Heights” to an autobiographical first novel: “‘This is who I am, this is where I come from’—he got that off his chest with an explosive energy.” “Hamilton,” she suggests, is the first piece Miranda has written entirely as an adult, in which he can powerfully incorporate his multiple identities. “He is Puerto Rico, he is New York, he is hip-hop, he is Broadway—he is all these different worlds,” she says. “He has discovered that when you bring all of your spaces into one room it excites people, because that’s what this country is.”

Miranda’s team at the Public prefers that the show not be described as a hip-hop musical—a reasonable objection, given the score’s musical variety, but also a strategic one. Such a categorization might limit audience interest, especially on Broadway, where it is hoped that the

show will eventually transfer. (“Hamilton” was officially sold out at the Public well before the end of 2014, and its run has already been extended twice.)

APRIL 20, 2009



Although hip-hop has been a dominant musical genre for more than a generation, it has had little impact on Broadway: other than “In the Heights,” which ran for three years, the only significant effort was “Holler if Ya Hear Me,” from last year, based on the lyrics of Tupac Shakur, which closed after six weeks. Jeffrey Seller, who was a producer of “Heights,” and has contributed a million dollars to the production costs of “Hamilton,” says, “No one wants to listen to hip-hop all night, and we are not going to give it to them all night. I did ‘Heights,’ which ran for three years, and if it didn’t have that label of hip-hop painted on it all the time it would still be running, because it was a beautiful, emotionally satisfying show.”

Perceptions about the music aren’t the only challenge in promoting “Hamilton.” Seller can imagine theatregoers saying, “Who wants to go and see a show about America’s first bureaucrat?” Similar problems plagued the 2010 Broadway production of “Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson,” an emo-rock musical about the seventh President; though it received strong reviews, it closed at a loss, after four months.

Despite Seller’s caution, Miranda’s ability to make rap and hip-hop seem entirely appropriate to the Revolutionary period has won over viewers who may never have heard of OutKast. John Guare, the playwright, was taken by a friend to the workshop last spring. “I haven’t felt this alive in a show since I don’t know when,” Guare says. “You had that incredible feeling of when a door opens up and a brand-new wind blows through. He had captured the spirit of Hamilton, and the spirit of Ron Chernow’s book, and the spirit of the time. It was such an odd thing, but it was done with such elegance and care and control and madness.” Miranda’s bona fides as a hip-hop freestyler, meanwhile, may attract new audiences. Lemon Andersen, a performance artist based in Brooklyn, says of “Hamilton,” “There is going to be a community that never goes to theatre showing up to see this. I keep telling everyone from our culture, ‘You have no idea how lyrically amazing this show is from a rap perspective.’” The rapper Common, who appeared with Miranda in the Disney movie “The Odd Life of Timothy Green,” says, “I will always remember us freestyling during lunchtime on the set and thinking, ‘Wow, this guy is talented.’”

Miranda’s show is sung-through, as in most operas, so there is never a sense of a character shifting register into rap. Daveed Diggs, “Hamilton”’s Jefferson, says that, in the America depicted onstage, “this is the only way that people know how to talk to each other.” He adds, “It feels important, because it allows us to see ourselves as part of history that we always thought

we were excluded from.” He adds, “Rap is the voice of the people of our generation, and of people of color, and just the fact that it exists in this piece, and is not commented upon, gives us a sense of ownership.” Christopher Jackson, whose dignified George Washington raps commandingly over a grimy, bass-heavy hip-hop beat and ascends to soaring R. & B. ballads, says that the show offers an implicit commentary on the institution of slavery and its repercussions. “The Broadway audience doesn’t like to be preached to,” he says. “By having a multicultural cast, it gives us, as actors of color, the chance to provide an additional context just by our presence onstage, filling these characters up.”

Rehearsals for “Hamilton” took place in a rented studio space just off Times Square. One afternoon in early December, the cast worked on “My Shot,” the propulsive number set on the eve of the Revolution. Almost the entire company was performing, learning the strenuous hip-hop-inflected dances of the show’s choreographer, Andy Blankenbuehler. Miranda’s music, now fully orchestrated, by Alex Lacamoire—like Blankenbuehler, a veteran of “In the Heights”—built to a delirious crescendo. A young actor, Anthony Ramos, charged with exultant fury across the stage, playing John Laurens, a slave owner’s son who was a close friend of Hamilton’s. During the Revolution, Laurens proposed to recruit slaves as soldiers, promising them freedom upon victory, and sought to form a black regiment; he was killed in action during one of the war’s final battles, in 1782. “Don’t this shit make my people wanna rise up!” Ramos chanted, leading an escalating chorus of revolt.

Miranda, who had grown his hair to his shoulders for the role, had a haunted air, his eyes ringed with fatigue—in early November, he and Nadal had their first child, Sebastian. Nevertheless, Miranda shifted energetically between roles: one moment he was swaggering downstage with the ensemble, insolently extending his fingers and thumb above his head, as if he were shooting a gun; the next he was tapping on his computer or his phone. “I have a lot of apps open in my brain right now,” he said. “The script, learning choreography, and Twitter. And the news.”

That afternoon, in New York, a grand jury announced that it would not indict the police officer Daniel Pantaleo in the death of Eric Garner, the Staten Island man who was choked to death last summer, after being apprehended for selling loose cigarettes. A week earlier, there had been riots in Ferguson, Missouri, after a grand jury there also failed to indict a white policeman, Darren Wilson, in the shooting death of an African-American man, Michael Brown. “We’re screaming ‘Rise up,’ and a lot of people are feeling that way,” Miranda said.

After Miranda’s White House performance, in 2009, the party had moved to a reception area in the lobby, where Miranda had discovered a d.j. playing hip-hop. He had felt astonished: America finally had a President who didn’t feel like a throwback, who lived in the same world that he did. If the events of the previous weeks had offered painful evidence that this promise of inclusion remained unfulfilled, Miranda still had the power of words to offer. While marchers started assembling on the streets of Manhattan for evening demonstrations, Miranda tweeted Hamilton’s lines from “My Shot”: “If we win our independence / Is that a guarantee of freedom for our descendants? / Or will the blood we shed begin an endless / Cycle of vengeance and death with no defendants?”

In a quieter rehearsal room that afternoon, Miranda and Jackson worked with Kail on another scene: an early encounter between Washington and Hamilton after the devastating Battle of Brooklyn, in August, 1776. In the song “Right Hand Man,” Washington summons Hamilton and informs him that he needs his services more as a secretary than as a soldier: “Head full of fantasies of dying like a martyr? / Dying is easy, young man. Living is harder.” Hamilton protests—he wants to be given the command of a battalion.

“Was I supposed to answer? I thought it was a rhetorical text.”

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Kail asked Miranda what he thought was in Hamilton’s mind. “I think he’s in defensive mode, until he sees Washington open up,” Miranda replied. “I am thinking of Al Pacino, in ‘The Godfather,’ when he hears the train approaching—it’s, like, he’s going all in, or he’s not. Is he going to pop the police chief and Sollozzo, or is he, like, going to have dinner?” Hamilton, Miranda said, had been determined to get the “martyr win,” and was always the last to leave the battlefield. Now Hamilton was rapidly calculating the greater impact he might have by being at Washington’s side—a calculation that needed to be conveyed within a single bar of music. “Even here, he is saying, ‘I’m going to use this to rise,’” Miranda said. “‘I thought I was going to rise on the battlefield. But I am going to have to do it this way.’”

Running through the song a few times, Miranda played with the delivery of Hamilton’s response to Washington’s proposal: “I am not throwing away my shot.” A few songs earlier, that refrain had implied Hamilton’s willingness to lose his life in battle; now it signified his recognition of an opportunity to establish a legacy that would outlast him. In the script, Washington interrupts Hamilton with a single word—“son”—capturing his paternal feeling for his young lieutenant. (Chernow writes that Hamilton was falsely rumored to be Washington’s illegitimate child.) But in Jackson’s delivery “son” also had a hip-hop resonance, implying brotherhood and parity.

Miranda, Jackson, and Kail turned the lines over, looking for the best way to convey Washington’s comprehension of Hamilton’s new intention—allowing the audience to register Hamilton’s sense of himself evolving from soldier to future statesman. Miranda studied the script that he’d written. “I wonder if it’s as simple as Washington not saying ‘son’ but saying ‘good,’” he said. “And that ‘good’ means ‘You’re hired.’ And then Hamilton is unleashed in this new capacity.”

Miranda's script was still in draft form. On the page where Hamilton's death in the duel was to be depicted, there was a placeholder sentence: "New Song Under Construction Here." A few weeks later, Miranda was still struggling with the passage. "What was going on in Hamilton's head in those final moments?" he said. "I am going to be making that guess until Tommy forces me to put my pen down." He went on, "There is this man, Burr, he has known since being a teen-ager, and his thoughts on that. There is his wife, who he knows he is leaving behind with many children, and in debt, and the guilt over that. But he was a Christian, and so there is also a son that he is going to get to see again; John Laurens he is going to get to see again; George Washington he is going to get to see again. There are plenty of people he loves pulling him to the other side. And so I'm exploring how much of that we have time for, in the time that it takes the bullet to leave the gun."

The solution came to Miranda at almost the last moment, early in the morning on New Year's Day. He was lying in bed, with his infant son sleeping on his chest, and Nadal sleeping next to him. It was the quietest Miranda could remember his life being for a long time. Quiet, he thought. That was the one card he hadn't yet played in "Hamilton." What if he didn't write any music at all? He took his dog out for a walk, leaving his headphones at home this time, occasionally stopping to scribble in a notebook. He stayed up working until five the next morning, hearing Hamilton's final moments at last.

Previews began three weeks later at the Public Theatre. In the lobby stood a pair of bronze statues borrowed from the New-York Historical Society, showing Burr and Hamilton facing off, pistols drawn. Onstage, Miranda's cast was getting comfortable wearing unfamiliar costumes, and enjoying the receptivity of an audience. There was laughter at the prideful reprimands of a bejewelled King George, and delighted recognition of the Biggie homage in "Duel Commandments." Cheers followed the interwoven musical themes that end the first act, in the shamelessly rousing manner of "One Day More," from "Les Misérables." The harrowing death of Philip, Hamilton's cherished son, elicited tears.

After two and a half hours of surging music, it was time for the Burr-Hamilton duel. When Burr fired his fatal shot, and Hamilton recognized that his long-anticipated death had arrived, the music dropped away. Miranda, dressed in black mourning clothes, delivered not a rap but what sounded like a poem; Hamilton's last flickers of thought and emotion were no longer tethered to a beat or a melody. "I wrote some notes for the beginning of a song someone will sing for me / America you great unfinished symphony / You sent for me," he said, quietly. Hamilton remembered his wife and friends, snatching at lyrical scraps from earlier songs as his coherence dissipated, the words forming a fractured, evanescent reprise, until he faltered and fell into silence. ♦



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