

# *Hamilton: A Retrospective & Review*

*Originally published for The DisInsider on July 3, 2020*



*Hamilton* released on Disney+ on Friday, and is proving early to be a smash hit for the streaming service. Written by Lin-Manuel Miranda (who stars as the titular Founding Father) and directed by Thomas Kail, the film is a 2016 recording of the original Broadway cast in what has now become a cultural sensation. The show holds a special place in the hearts of thousands of theatre and history geeks alike. I'm one of those geeks.

Back in 2009, Lin-Manuel Miranda first [performed the song "Alexander Hamilton"](#) (then called The Hamilton Mixtape) at the White House for President Barack Obama. His performance was met with laughs and applause. No one had any clue what would become of it.

At the time, I was still a child. I was very into sports, and very **not** into musical theatre. But like so many would soon be, I was intrigued by the idea of someone rapping the story of Alexander Hamilton. What a ludicrous idea! Even then, as a sports kid, the performance stuck with me. It was unlike anything I'd ever seen. It was odd, but captivating. It was enough to grab my attention.

Fast forward to 2016. I'm still a child, but no longer a sports kid. I'd pulled the ultimate 180° and become a theatre kid. I credit Lin-Manuel Miranda's White House performance as one of the seeds planted in my mind that would soon lead me to find a passion in performing. Still, I didn't know near as many musicals as my peers, but then something happened. *Hamilton* happened.

In 2016, *Hamilton* exploded onto the scene. It was a phenomenon, and for me, a perfect storm: my loves for live theatre, history, rap music and politics all converged into one masterfully crafted piece of art. Although I hadn't seen the show, the story told by the music was spectacular. It was a story of ambition, betrayal, war, and most of all: **legacy**. It was unlike anything anyone had ever seen before.

One year later in 2017, I was able to see this transcendent work of art at the Richard Rodgers Theatre in New York City. Although I wasn't able to see much of the original cast, the story was the same and the message just as moving. I remember crying six times in the first act. It was everything I'd hoped it would be and more. After a year of growing more and more in love with the show, I'd finally seen it in person. But that isn't the end of this story.

On Friday, *Hamilton* was released to the masses. The original Broadway cast recording that I'd been waiting for since Lin-Manuel Miranda announced it in 2016... was finally available for everyone to experience. **And what an experience it is.**



Where to begin? I'll start with the basics: *Hamilton* is still unlike anything I've ever seen. As a society, we are truly lucky that something like this even exists at all.

Let's be honest. It's such a ridiculous idea, it's almost downright laughable: a Broadway musical of rap music centered around the story of American Founding Father Alexander Hamilton. What were your thoughts when you first heard that? I'm sure they weren't overwhelmingly positive. And why should they be? **On paper, *Hamilton* should not work.** At least, not to the extent that it does. But it does.

The genius of it all starts with a story. Alexander Hamilton had quite the dramatic life: an immigrant who literally wrote his way to higher education, wooed his way to marrying one of the wealthiest women in New York, fought his way to victory in the American Revolution and worked his way to one of the highest offices in George Washington's cabinet, all while amassing enemies at every turn. Whew. That was a doozie.

Yet Lin-Manuel Miranda plays the titular character with such a presence, when you're watching the show, you don't see Lin-Manuel on stage. You see Alexander Hamilton. The then-36-year-old Miranda goes from playing a 19-year-old Hamilton in the first number to a 47-year-old Hamilton in the last, and you feel his arc every step of the way. As the show progresses, you feel his weariness. You feel his pain, his suffering. You feel his unfaltering ambition, but also his growing desperation. Miranda's performance is relentless, with nary a moment off-stage. He gives everything he has for 200 minutes, never letting up or falling behind his other cast members, all of whom shine in their own ways.

One scene-stealer in particular is Leslie Odom, Jr., who plays Hamilton's counterpart and frenemy: Aaron Burr. Whether it's show-stopping numbers like "Wait For It" and "Room Where It Happens," or solemn ballads like "Dear Theodosia" and "The World Was Wide Enough," Odom's performance is perhaps the most breathtaking in the show. The audience watches his Burr transform from indecisive and reserved to confident and infuriated. Thanks to Thomas Kail's brilliant direction and camera work, we're able to see that transformation up-close and personal in ways that a traditional theatre experience couldn't afford.

Other highlights from the cast include Christopher Jackson's beautiful riffs in "One Last Time," Daveed Diggs' extraordinary rhythm and lively humor as Marquis de Lafayette/Thomas Jefferson, Philippa Soo's passionate performance as Eliza Schuyler in the second act, Renée Elise Goldsberry's

commanding stage presence in the Act One showstopper "Satisfied," and Jonathan Groff's hilarious solos as King George III. Anthony Ramos, Jasmine Cephas Jones and Okieriete Onaodowan's performances are all wonderful as well.

I'd be remiss not to mention one other jaw-dropping performance: **the ensemble**. The way *Hamilton's* ensemble moves around the central narrative without distracting from it is a beautiful thing to see. Thanks to stellar choreography from Andy Blankenbuehler, the ensemble is given every opportunity to show off their spectacular talents all while adding to the show in pivotal moments throughout.

Aside from the performances, the story itself is so masterfully written by Lin-Manuel Miranda, that there's truly not much to say that can give it justice. Like I said, it's a piece of art unlike anything else. The music is enthralling, in large part thanks to music director Alex Lacamoire. The variety of songs creates a pace that makes a 200-minute musical feel like 30. For example, *Hamilton* will jump from booming ensemble numbers like "My Shot" to intimate songs like "The Story of Tonight" without missing a beat. Soon after, it'll pick right back up with another bombastic showstopper like "Right Hand Man." The songs are each carefully written and placed in such positions that only benefit the story, never slowing it down or speeding it up too much. *Hamilton's* audience is never lost, bored or overwhelmed, only captivated by the art they're witnessing.



Aside from the technical aspects of the show, there's another thing about the show that is specifically moving. As Lin-Manuel Miranda likes to say, *Hamilton* is the story of America then, told by America now. Every main player on stage, and most of the ensemble, is a person of color. Miranda said "people of color are the future of this country," and he's right. *Hamilton* exemplifies that sentiment.

In the wake of the deaths of George Floyd and countless other people of color, America is in a state of revolution today, and *Hamilton* couldn't have been released at a better time. It's a sobering reminder that some of the issues that plagued America in its conception are still plaguing it today, 250 years later. While that reminder is indeed sobering, *Hamilton* also serves as an empowering glimpse at what the future of America could be: a future of diversity, camaraderie and opportunity. *Hamilton* leaves the viewer not only patriotically impassioned, but refreshingly hopeful for that future every American should want to see: a future the Founding Fathers strived toward, but fell short of creating in its entirety. Nevertheless, *Hamilton* inspires us to take it upon ourselves to create that future. It inspires us to be the change and build an America where all people truly are equal. **It's our time now, and we must not throw away our shot.**