

Hamilton (2020)

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dir. Thomas Kail; prod., screenplay, music Lin-Manuel Miranda; photography Declan Quinn. digital, color, 160 mins. Walt Disney Pictures et al., distrib. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, Disney+.

Hamilton is a Hollywood film that was released straight to streaming in July 2020 in the midst of a global pandemic. The release alone was a moment of celebration for millions of Americans who had been isolated for months under quarantine. *Hamilton*'s story of a scrappy nation fighting unjust colonial power and emerging as a new country resonated with those who were stuck at home, sick, grieving the loss of loved ones, and generally feeling powerless as they were confined inside for months on end. The release of *Hamilton* on the eve of Independence Day, directly into homes across the country, promised a light at the end of the tunnel and became a national event.

Hamilton is the filmed version of one of the most popular and award-winning Broadway musicals in history, which tells the story of the American national founding by focusing on the rise and fall of Alexander Hamilton. The movie films the staged show by stitching together three live performances. It thus combines the emotional closeness of the movies with the electric energy of live performance, showcasing dynamic staging for revolutionary wartime and heated political battles alongside close-ups of actors that would otherwise be inaccessible to a theater audience. A roving camera adds to the movement of busy action scenes, while overclose shots of sweat, spit, and tears give audience members a connection to the characters that enhances the affective power of the Broadway show.

At one level, *Hamilton* offers the felt pleasures of the familiar national melodrama of the American Revolution, in which virtuous Americans, unjustly victimized by the British, eventually overwhelm the villainous forces of evil through their own courage, pluck, and wit to found a new nation (McConachie; Grimsted). In addition, *Hamilton* continues the tradition of »founding melodrama« by erasing from its story the indigenous dispossession that drove revolutionary power, while downplaying the enormous



role of enslavement in powering the nation's financial capacity to revolt. Yet, on another level, *Hamilton* offers a different founding melodrama by fronting its idiosyncratic version of Alexander Hamilton, a figure usually positioned either in the background of the drama or as a vaguely nefarious banker juxtaposed to Thomas Jefferson, the yeoman farmer. Americans have been captivated by a founding father fetish for the last few decades. As their own democratic self-image has lost critical force, many have turned to heroic stories of past greatness to ground their national identity (Schocket; Sehat; Anker 2014). While *Hamilton* certainly operates within this fetish, its reworking of the founder theme both breaks new ground for envisioning democracy and helps to contextualize the film's galvanizing force.

Hamilton's melodrama recasts who and what an American revolutionary can be. Alexander Hamilton was a penniless immigrant from the Caribbean—»a bastard, immigrant, son of a whore,« as the cast sings in the first act. Centering Hamilton's story thus creolizes the nation's founding from the start, rooting it in a hybrid and ever-shifting identity derived from multiple peoples and traditions throughout Atlantic regions. The character of Hamilton is played by the show's writer and director, Lin-Manuel Miranda, himself a Latinx son of immigrants from Puerto Rico. Indeed, all of the founding fathers and Americans are portrayed solely by people of color. Only King George and a handful of British loyalists are white. In this sense, *Hamilton* is less history retold through the eyes of an unsung hero than it is a future fabulation that reimagines what America could look like once it not only grapples with but celebrates its creolized, multiracial, multi-ethnic origins. *Hamilton* asks its audience to invest in a national vision where people of color are both central to the American story and equal participants in shaping the nation.

Hamilton's emotive appeal also comes in its *melos*, its use of hip-hop as an original African American music vernacular, bringing the Broadway musical genre into a more capacious present. The show untangles and elaborates sophisticated political arguments in the cadence of hip-hop, debating the role of state power, the struggles of federalism, and drawbacks of limited government with the often brash and irreverent braggadocio of the hip-hop form (Rose). In its music, as well as its casting and storyline, *Hamilton* offers a vision of politics that is not contained within the imaginary of colonial architecture and hallowed gestures of white aristocracy. It expands who gets to tell the story of America—and in what cadence. In this sense, the lines Hamilton wrote for Washington, which they here sing together, anticipating »the sweet enjoyment of partaking in the midst of my fellow-citizens, the benign influence of good laws under a free government,« are *Hamilton*'s own vision of democratic pleasures to come, not those already achieved in the miasma of a mythic past.

Thus, in contrast to the familiar founding melodrama, *Hamilton* offers a new version of black and brown revolution for racial equality where the forces of white supremacy, equated with colonialism here in the figure of King George, become the villainous foe of popular sovereignty. This is why it is important for the show that Thomas Jefferson, rather than the expected moral hero of most American founding stories, is instead pusillanimous, flighty, and less committed to the fight than the others. This portrayal highlights rather than elides Jefferson's own contradictions as a supposed proponent of freedom who enslaved hundreds of people, as someone who fathered children with an enslaved woman and enslaved his children, all while writing the Declaration of Independence. Many criticized the show for its historical inaccuracies, but the film is not

so much a historical reenactment as much as a contemporary reimagining of American national identity and political ideals.

Released not only during a pandemic but at the start of the largest protest movements in American history against endemic racism, *Hamilton* became the soundtrack for those working to change ongoing racism, xenophobia, and discrimination. At the time of its film release, many in the United States were in an uproar over the continued police killings of unarmed black men, and the protests organized by the slogan and politics of Black Lives Matter became the most multiracial and multi-coalitional political protests in American history (Chua; Anker 2022). *Hamilton* connected with this moment, as it offered a lyrical, aesthetic, and emotionally resonant story of immigrants and people of color revolting against injustice and reimagining a better world with all of the authority that Americans grant to their traditional founding heroes. The film's famous line »Look around, look around, how lucky we are to be alive right now!« petitions its audience to think of *their own* difficult moment as a lucky one, as they have the potential to change the dire circumstances in which they find themselves. Perhaps the best way to view the film, then, is as a work of imaginative and affective political theory rather than a revisionist history: one in which multiracial democracy is a lived possibility, where agonistic debate is played out to the bold rhymes of hip-hop, where the country is not run by vituperative, xenophobic, and racist leaders but by people who aim for freedom and equality even within their own ambivalences and complexities. It's this message that ultimately lets *Hamilton* bring its audience to tears.

References

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