

HAMILTON

Just in case someone has been in Siberia without any human contact for six years, I will start by saying HAMILTON is a wildly popular Broadway show about the historical figure, Alexander Hamilton. It was created, music and libretto, as well as first produced by, a Mr. Lin-Manuel Miranda. Most of the music is a sort of hip-hop. And Mr. Miranda went whole-hog with innovations by casting many of the historically White characters with Black actors.

At this juncture in time, it is somewhat odd to write about Broadway shows, since theatre is (mostly) shuttered by the 2020-21 Covid Pandemic. However, my interest isn't whether or not you attend the show, but in the implications of it for the reporting of history. (Besides, theatre is gearing up again, so perhaps by fall we will all have a chance to purchase a \$200 ticket to a travelling cast of HAMILTON. Since Lin-Manuel and his producers have a firm rein on their cash cow.)

As a writer of plays about American history, I have to be glad that Miranda popularized it the way he did. Maybe some of the interest has rubbed off on my shows, and given me, if not cache, at least respectability. But here is my issue with the historicity of the play: it doesn't really tell you anything about Black people. Yes, it gives some living Black actors a chance to Make It Big, as well as make a good living, which is a good thing. It shows them with the power, the respectability, the authority of White males of that era, or at least what it might have looked like if Black men could have had the same opportunities. But in the end, it's another show lauding the exploits of Famous White Men. You know, those people that always end up with the opportunities, achievements, and credits. (We do learn something about Mrs. Hamilton; particularly at the end of the play she gets to show how she saved her husband's reputation, which is, of course the most important thing about her.)

Obviously I don't expect Lin-Manuel to recast; in fact I hope his casting has a big influence nationwide. But actually, I'm just using his show, because it is so well-known, to make my point about Black history as shown in American theatre. Or more correctly, mostly not shown.

When Hamilton, Washington, Burr, et al were operative on American soil, Black people were already building a lot of America, as well as keeping a lot of it together. But who were they, exactly? What did they accomplish, and where did they live? What did they build? Were any of them in charge of the building? Did they invent some of the things White men got credit for, as with the accomplishments of many White women? We know now that the Capitol and

the White House were built by slaves. Wall Street? State Capitols? Some of those slave builders must have been very accomplished in their skills and judgment, in spite of all the disadvantages they had to wallow through to get those skills. There is a story, maybe several, in the building of our Capitol, that is an important one.

Everyone knows that Frederick Douglass was born a slave, freed himself with the help of his later-wife, Anna, and became a great speaker, the editor of a nationally-known Black newspaper, the North Star, and was the most-photographed individual of the nineteenth century in America. Many people know he was a skilled boat carpenter and taught himself to read and orate by working out of a few books and observing Whites around him. Most Americans have also heard of Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman. And historians are aware that there were others. By knowing of the few Blacks who have made it into history books, many educated people suspect that Black people of the era might actually have had a lot of abilities that weren't allowed to develop. But many Americans are under the impression that the reason there weren't many others is that they were basically not as smart, or capable, that the few who made it were freaks of nature perhaps. This is why White Supremacy still lives.

In order to counter this, we ought to be showing the stories of some of the other Blacks who made big contributions, and what they struggled through to accomplish things. The Fourtens of Philadelphia are one example, including perhaps the story of Port Royal, S.C. Or the story of the first Black Regiment of the Civil War, and their huge effect on the War. Or move further on in history and show Mary McLeod Bethune and her college or the work of Ida Tarbull who worked against the hangings of Black men in the South, or about THE DEFENDER, the nationally-read newspaper that published her.

Of course you can argue that Miranda chose Hamilton and his cohort because they were the movers and shakers of the day, which makes them characters people will pay to see now. They're the main parts in our heroic democracy story. And he cast it with Black people because he wanted to show that Black people can be just as amazing as anybody (or moreso) in their acting and singing and dancing; but also because he wanted audiences to get used to seeing people of color in positions of influence and power. He did all of that very successfully, at a time the theatre was willing to accept it, and has garnered a huge reward.

Ironically, he therefore couldn't show that Alexander Hamilton, because of his origin (Barbados) and his appearance (curly hair and so-called "swarthy" skin) was whispered to be, well, Mulatto, ie, "Negro." My argument is that just to be able to show that issue, and the reality of it, and Hamilton's inherent abilities and capacities, it might have been better to cast

HAMILTON “realistically”. Show him dealing with it, and successfully overcoming obstacles. Or not.

You may say, “It’s obviously not that important what the Blacks were doing in Hamilton’s day”. How do we know? In the day, the newspapers of course reported on Important, Dynamic People, people of inherent brilliance and leadership who *of course* were all White males. (Except for a few beautiful and charming white women, like Abigail Adams and Dolly Madison, who married, serviced, and supported said Important White Men.) You can see where those White Supremacists that toddle around America these days in red hats, blasting things with their Second Amendment rights, get their idea that if we hadn’t had men with White skins to tell us what to do, the country might have gone to the Indians. (So primitive! What a tragedy!) By having a lot of statues of Robert E. Lee, you reaffirm the idea that he was a really capable guy—even though he blew Gettysburg big time, and was a traitor fighting against his country. By having a lot of plays about the same White males, you reaffirm that they were the really capable ones.

There could be a wonderful Broadway play about Frederick Douglass. The same situation is true for other minorities, or course, and for women. There are also situations and events that could make good musicals, if we did the research and found the heroes (male or female.) For example, the Chinese who built the railroads. The Okies coming to California. Appalachia. The abolitionists, the suffragists. There are a thousand stories about our great experiment in democracy, and there is a mountain of gorgeous music available for all these shows.

These shows could all make money, and could of course be wonderfully entertaining. But just as importantly, they would help build our country, and help maintain democracy. In order to make our democracy really work, we have to start telling all the stories, put all the people into the picture, show all the movers and shakers. Make it impossible to put little children of any color in cages, or to deny people of color the vote, or for a ridiculously ignorant man to wander around America blathering about the real America being White or all of some group being rapists. So Lin-Manuel, where is the musical about your own people, that could be cast with the color they really were? There’s a musical I would pay \$200 to see.