

# The Timeliness of *Hamilton*: An American Musical

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“This is a story about America then, told by America now,” Tommy Kail said of Lin-Manuel Miranda’s not-yet famous musical in its pre-publication stages; in 2020, Kail and Miranda have not given up this claim (Miranda and McCarter 33). Miranda, the writer and original star of the 2015 Broadway musical hit, *Hamilton: An American Musical*, entertained a vision that would be both historically true to the life of an American Founding Father, and an honest representation of the modern America that Alexander Hamilton helped form. After reading Ron Chernow’s biography *Alexander Hamilton* in 2008, Miranda knew he wanted to develop a concept album centered around the titular historical figure, and the genre would be rap and hip-hop. Miranda did not know until 2012 that his *Hamilton Mixtape* project would ultimately be formed into a Broadway show (Miranda and McCarter 10, 32, 46), the first rap and hip-hop display to ever make it big on the famous New York City stage (Viagas).

When *Hamilton* premiered at The Public Theater in 2015, everyone knew this production was something special. Not only was it a tremendous display of talent, it seemed to speak emotional volumes to the viewers; performers and audience alike were in tears (Miranda and McCarter 113). Later, when matinee shows for school children became available, inner city kids who had never seen a musical and never cared about the founding of America suddenly could not stop talking about this new show centered around a mostly-forgotten Founding Father (Miranda and McCarter 157). *Hamilton: An American Musical* became an unprecedented pop culture sensation, with the Original Broadway Cast Recording (OCR) album ranked number two on the “*Billboard* 25 Best Albums of 2015” (Viagas). Presidents visited the theater. Cast members performed at the White House. The U.S. Treasury Department even renounced their decision to remove Alexander Hamilton from the \$10 bill (Paulson).

When a revolutionary production like *Hamilton* sweeps the nation, the question immediately raised is: Why? Why this musical and not one of the plethora of others

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The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 8 No. 2.5  
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on Broadway? Why this unprecedented success of rap and hip-hop on the Broadway stage? What makes *Hamilton* so special? I suggest that the reason *Hamilton: An American Musical* has been received with overwhelming positivity by everyone from Barack Obama to Dick Cheney to “Weird Al” Yankovic is its perfectly placed rhetorical situation (Hayes and Gale 42-3). It is difficult to say whether, in another time and place, this Broadway smash hit, with its “mostly Black cast [that] ‘turns the tables on the practice of using white actors to portray ethnic characters,’” (Yankovic qtd. in Hayes and Gale 42) would have succeeded, or if it could have been created at all. After all, the makers of art are the products of their time. Could someone like Lin-Manuel Miranda, the son of an immigrant, even have conceived something like *Hamilton* fifty years ago? The exigence of *Hamilton* created the kairos of the production. Put simply, America was ready for *Hamilton*.

Michael Harker, in his article “The Ethics of Argument: Rereading *Kairos* and Making Sense in a Timely Fashion,” suggests that a functional definition of kairos has been largely omitted “as a key term in composition studies” (79). Drawing on many scholars and rhetoricians, Harker proposes that kairos should not be understood merely as “saying the right thing at the right time”; rather, this Greek word implies the *perfect* time, the *right* time, the *fullness* of time, “a significant season...poised between beginning and end” (Kermode qtd. in Harker 81, emphasis in original). In the critically acclaimed song, “My Shot,” Hip-Hop Hamilton raps about the American Revolution, saying, “This is not a moment. It’s the movement, where all the hungriest brothers with something to prove went” (Miranda, *Hamilton OCR*). Like the revolution of the historical Alexander Hamilton, Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton* came to realization in the fullness of time, when the moment was right to begin a cultural movement.

In this paper, I will examine the rhetorical elements of *Hamilton*, particularly its exigence and kairos, exploring the needs that drove this production, the manner in which the show answers those needs, and the impact of saying the right thing at the right time. *Hamilton* is an extremely self-aware and highly philosophical production, addressing the issues of “post-racial” America through intentional cross-cultural casting, a wide variety of musical styles, and an emphasis on the role of immigrants in the American founding. Being “a story about America then, told by America now,” *Hamilton* creates a radical juxtaposition between the colonial America of the eighteenth century and the diverse colors, cultures, and music of America today (Miranda and McCarter 33). Since premiering in 2015, between the last term of America’s first Black president and an upcoming push against

immigration by the Trump administration, *Hamilton* continues to exist in a space that correlates with the racial tensions of the American people.

### Wait for It

Lloyd F. Bitzer defines exigence as “an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be” (qtd. in Miller 111). While exigence is “something waiting to be done,” Arthur B. Miller argues that the rhetorical situation must be rightly timed (*kairos*) for that thing to be effectively received by the listeners. In other words, the need must speak to the constraints of the hearers for it to function as exigence. If the need is not perceived as relevant to the audience, Miller claims, then the constraints of the speaker and hearer do not agree, and the phenomenon of exigence does not occur (117).

While exigence is “something waiting to be done,” this does not mean that the materials or concepts which prompt an exigent work must be new or unique in nature. The thing that is waiting to be done may sleep until the constraints of the audience are prepared to receive that idea or concept. The story of Alexander Hamilton was certainly not new when *Hamilton* hit the Broadway stage in 2015; in fact, it was largely forgotten by the American public. Neither was Ron Chernow’s biography, *Alexander Hamilton*, particularly new when it fell into Lin-Manuel Miranda’s hands in 2008. Rap and hip-hop were not new, having been popular music forms for decades. What, then, about this combination of nothing-new elements (and a historically unreceptive audience) creates rhetorical exigence for *Hamilton*?

According to musical giant Questlove, who Miranda and McCarter refer to as “the Pope of hip-hop [or at least a high-ranking cardinal],” there had been a long string of attempts to bring hip-hop to Broadway prior to *Hamilton*:

A man of [Questlove’s] stature ends up sitting through a lot of pitches from people who want to bring hip-hop to Broadway. These long ago took on a wearying familiarity: “You know, aerosol spray cans, ‘up in da Bronx,’ breakdancing in the first act—that sort of thing,” he says. When people told him about *Hamilton*, he assumed it had to be another entry in this grim parade. (Miranda and McCarter 196)

However, what Questlove saw in this new musical floored him. *Hamilton* did not appeal to any of the formulas of previously attempted hip-hop musicals. There was

no spray paint and breakdancing. The New York on stage was historical, yet echoed the urban inner city of today. The music was fresh. This play had managed to revolutionize, not only Broadway, but hip-hop itself (Miranda and Carter 196). This was accomplished in part because the sounds of *Hamilton* were only emphasized by the other facets of the play, which continued to tie-in history, Broadway masters, and hip-hop greats in a way that appealed to a broad audience.

In *Hamilton*, the historically unreceptive audience encounters not only the boom-bap beat, but also visual and lyrical ties to both Broadway classics and rap roots. While avoiding the “hip-hop clichés” cited by Questlove, as well as showcasing rap, hip-hop, and R&B genres alongside showtunes, the play makes bold visual statements in terms of set, choreography, and costume design. Calling upon theater of yesteryear, costume designer Paul Tazewell drew inspiration from designers and artists like Joe Papp and Kehinde Wiley to design period clothing for contemporary characters; choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler brought his love for *A Chorus Line*; and David Korins designed an innovative set that implied everything about historical New York as well as modern hustle and bustle all in one place (Miranda and McCarter 38, 113, 181). Their attention to purpose, detail, and timing culminated in a show that would bring hip-hop a success on the stage never seen before, grabbing hold of the rhetorical situation.

Despite its popularity, hip-hop had had little success in musical theater up to the time of *Hamilton*'s release. While some commercially successful musicals like *Rent* in 1996 and *Bring It On!* (for which Miranda was a writer) in 2011 occasionally utilized rap and hip-hop genres, it was uncommon for this to be the primary mode of any successful show. According to John Bush Jones in *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theater*, this may be owed in part to Broadway ticket prices soaring in recent decades. Musical theater is produced with an audience in mind, and for the last several decades, that audience has been older, wealthier, and whiter (Jones 3). Jones writes:

Therefore, with certain ethnic and “radical” exceptions (such as *Hair*), socially relevant shows have mirrored the concerns and lifestyles of middle Americans, their primary audience. The reality of commercial theater dictates that, no matter how brilliant or artistic, if a show doesn't interest or entertain its audiences, it won't run long enough to make back its investment. (3)

Given the standard Broadway audience and social conditions, it is no surprise that although hip-hop and rap had been used on Broadway before *Hamilton*, its success

in popular circles was limited; the intersection of the audience, content, and time did not generate the necessary constraints of exigence.

### Look Around at How Lucky We Are to Be Alive Right Now

Although met with more limited success, musical theater's history of rap, hip-hop, and a dialogue on race did in fact begin long before *Hamilton*. However, despite noteworthy exceptions such as *Shuffle Along*, which was written, produced, and performed by Black artists in 1921, Broadway remained a white sanctuary for decades after the Harlem Renaissance (Maloney), with people of color often appearing on the mainstream stage in roles written by and for the entertainment of white people. Heyward and Gershwin's 1935 *Porgy and Bess*, which starred Black characters and is often touted as America's most famous opera, was written and produced entirely by white people. While such plays reveal much about the white American psyche, they did not accurately depict life for people of color in America (Noonan 1-2).

Courtney Bliss, in her article "From B-Boys to Broadway: Activism and Directed Change in Hip-hop," chronicles the history of rap and hip-hop, tracing it from an urban grassroots movement to one of self-empowerment and commercial success for people of color and residents of the inner city. This self-representation in music, rather than the traditional white-created roles often seen on Broadway, allowed activism and directed change to become a prominent part of the rap and hip-hop scene as young people spoke to communities like their own. Despite the rise in popularity of hip-hop and rap as a self-empowerment tool as early as the 1970s, its place on Broadway was hit and miss at best; hip-hop and rap were most successful in the communities they came from, while The Great White Way remained just that (Bliss 225).

By the 1990s and early 2000s, ethnic Broadway plays had begun to challenge traditional white narratives. Unlike early iterations of Black minstrelsy, which relied on stereotypical character models and appealed to the fantasies of a white audience, plays like *Bring in 'Da Noise, Bring in 'Da Funk*, a Tony Award winning rap/tap which premiered on Broadway in 1996, "dare[d] to challenge the mythology and re-educate the miseducated masses of America" using a historical lens of Black experience (Terry-Morgan 678). Others were less successful, such as *Holler If Ya Hear Me*, a jukebox musical featuring the music of Tupac Shakur, which received mixed reviews and was criticized for the use of stock characters, despite terrific

music (Hetrick). Conversely, in 2007, Lin-Manuel Miranda's release of *In the Heights* featured an original score and generated roles written by and for people of color, eventually earning a place on Broadway and three Tony Awards in 2008 (Grein).

Drama critic Jeremy McCarter, who would eventually partner with Lin-Manuel Miranda in the early days of the *Hamilton Mixtape* project, advocated for years before *Hamilton* that "hip-hop can save the theater" (Miranda and McCarter 10). While acknowledging that the older, wealthier, whiter Broadway audience did not exactly match the typical hip-hop audience, McCarter recognized that this was the music of American youth, and it had the power to make theater accessible and relevant again (McCarter). For decades, the appearance of rap and hip-hop on Broadway was relegated almost exclusively to musicals *about* rap and hip-hop. Before *Hamilton*, Lin-Manuel Miranda mixed hip-hop, salsa, and ballads in his first musical, *In the Heights*, in a way that astounded McCarter. Miranda had, without genuine precedent, written a hip-hop musical "[telling] a story that had nothing to do with hip-hop—using it as form, not content" (Miranda and McCarter 10).

McCarter proposes that *Hamilton* is a long-awaited answer to current American culture, utilizing history and hip-hop to offer both a reflection and a preview of American diversity. While Miranda is deeply influenced by Broadway hit shows like *Les Misérables*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, and *West Side Story* (Miranda and McCarter 174), *Hamilton* is also a testament to Miranda's love of popular genres, referencing numerous rap and hip-hop greats such as Eminem, Big Pun, Jay Z, Wu-Tang Clan, and the Notorious B.I.G. (Vozick-Levinson). By bringing these elements together, *Hamilton* pays homage to both Broadway and hip-hop roots, utilizing the music that shaped a generation of "young, scrappy, and hungry" Americans. McCarter calls the show a "revolution...a musical that changes the way that Broadway sounds, that alters who gets to tell the story of our founding, that lets us glimpse the new, more diverse America rushing our way" (Miranda and McCarter 10). After decades of whiteness on Broadway, *Hamilton* came at the right time, when the nation was ready to receive a musical that reflected its changing culture.

### It Must Be Nice to Have Washington on Your Side

"Sometimes the right person tells the right story at the right time, and through a combination of luck and design, a creative expression gains new force," Miranda

and McCarter write of the first time Miranda performed at the White House Poetry Jam in 2009. Although Miranda was invited to perform because of the success and cultural implications of *In the Heights*, he chose the occasion to perform, for the first time in public, a song from the *Hamilton Mixtape* project. The video of his performance now has over one million views on YouTube and features a standing ovation from President Barack Obama (Miranda and McCarter 15).

Standing before America's half-Kenyan, first Black president, the then 29-year-old Nuyorican rapped, "How does a bastard, orphan, son of a whore and a Scotsman, dropped in the middle of a forgotten spot in the Caribbean by providence, impoverished, in squalor, grow up to be a hero and a scholar?" (Obama White House). Variations on this refrain are reiterated many times throughout the published version of *Hamilton*, describing the adverse conditions of Alexander Hamilton's early life, and his defiance of circumstance to become the first U.S. Secretary of the Treasury. At a turning point in America's history, the election of the nation's first Black president, a cultural shift in the minds of American citizens began to be realized, making room for the immigrants of our nation's narrative. Terming Hamilton as "another immigrant comin' up from the bottom," Miranda speaks of this American Founding Father in terms that are relatable to people like Miranda's own father, President Obama's father, and a plethora of other American citizens (Miranda, "Alexander Hamilton," *Hamilton OCR*). In Miranda's eyes, Alexander Hamilton, the bastard, orphan immigrant, "embodies hip-hop," the music of an American generation (Obama White House).

Another three years would pass before the idea of the *Hamilton Mixtape* went from concept album to musical theater production. As individual numbers turned into ensemble performances, one thing that became clear was the need for diverse voices to appropriately express the rap and hip-hop genres Miranda employed. Ron Chernow, who acted as a historical adviser to Miranda for *Hamilton*, was taken aback the first time he saw a preview performance of Act I, when he realized that the men playing America's Founding Fathers were all Black and Latino. Like Miranda and Kail, Chernow quickly became a "'militant' defender of the idea that actors of any race could play the Founding Fathers" (Miranda and McCarter 33). As America's first Black president sat in the White House, the Black first president took the stage in New York.

A Plot Blacker Than the Kettle Callin' the Pot

Alexander Hamilton and all the American Founding Fathers were, of course, white males. However, this is not what the audience sees and hears when they witness a performance of *Hamilton*. Asserting that “history is entirely created by the person who tells the story,” (Miranda and McCarter 33) a prominent theme in *Hamilton*, Miranda believes that part of the beauty of the show is that it changes who has the right to tell the American story. The historical Hamilton was an immigrant, and, “although the Founding Fathers were white, the fact that they were colonial subjects marked them as inferior; they were marginalized and did not enjoy the same rights British citizens had” (Ahumada and Jung 175). For Miranda, the Founding Fathers represent the marginalized peoples of America’s history. In modern America, those marginalized peoples are best represented by people of color, women, and other minority groups. As part of this vision to tell the story of the “young, scrappy, and hungry,” *Hamilton* utilizes intentional cross-cultural casting, with little or no regard to race and gender.

Miranda’s choice to intentionally cast non-white actors as the Founding Fathers also gained some legal pushback in 2016, when a casting call for non-white actors for the show’s national tour was called discriminatory by a New York lawyer. Among discussions of “reverse racism” and “Black privilege” (Kornhaber), the producers of *Hamilton* adamantly defended the casting call as legal, and true to the intentions of the author (Deerwester). Miranda fully intended for the main characters to be played by people of color as part of the message of the play, and to open avenues for minority performers. The realm of musical theater is white dominated, and creators like Miranda have particular goals in mind to produce opportunities for non-white actors. Without intentionality regarding casting, a show like *Hamilton* can easily end up with a mostly white cast in later iterations. This had already happened in Miranda’s previous musical, *In the Heights*, when one Chicago theater cast a white actor of Italian descent to portray the show’s main character, Usnavi, who is Dominican (Greene). Determined to end this cycle, the decision for non-white casting in *Hamilton* has been upheld by its creators, and the only main character portrayed by a white performer is King George III (Deerwester).

Though not without controversy, Miranda’s diverse casting choice for *Hamilton* is an overwhelmingly celebrated decision. Historian Ron Chernow extolled Chris Jackson’s performance as George Washington, and Miranda said of the tall, athletic, Black first president, “Chris is so sure of his instrument and has this kind of moral authority onstage...He’s just f--ing majestic” (Miranda and McCarter

59). The strategy for costumes in *Hamilton* is “period from the neck down, modern from the neck up” (Miranda and McCarter 113). This leaves Chris Jackson making his grand entrance as George Washington looking very different from the man on the dollar bill, and yet commanding every bit of the revolutionary general’s authority. This unprecedented move during the Obama administration, a time when America was receptive to the idea of a Black president, still leaves performers and audience alike prepared to declare at Jackson’s appearance, “Here comes the general” (Miranda, “Right Hand Man” *Hamilton OCR*).

### This is Not a Moment; It’s the Movement

“‘The production itself was just so alive,’ says Anthony DeCurtis of *Rolling Stone* magazine. ‘You go there, and you walk out and you’re flying’” (España). *Hamilton* was an overnight sensation on Broadway, and instantly became a landmark production. Not only did the show introduce hip-hop and rap on Broadway in ways never seen before, it also opened incredible new avenues for performers of color. In a workshop at The Miracle Center of Chicago, Miranda said of his first musical, “I started writing *In the Heights* because I wanted to make a way for myself” (España). As a Puerto Rican American, Miranda admits that there are very few leading roles available in the Broadway canon for men like himself—men of color who are not ballet dancers and who have rock voices, rather than operatic voices (España). This goal of creating spaces for minority performers and increasing minority representation is not unique to Miranda or *Hamilton*; however, it is a piece of a larger movement in Western popular culture.

In the 2010s, the exigence of representation is coming to a head, while there has been a significant influx of minority roles and casting choices in popular media. From the Marvel Universe developing ethnic and minority versions of popular heroes (Miles Morales as a Black/Latino Spider-Man; Kamala Khan as a Pakistani-American Muslim Ms. Marvel; and even a female iteration of *Thor: Goddess of Thunder*) to John Krasinski’s choice to cast Millicent Simmons, a deaf actress, in the role of a deaf character (*A Quiet Place*), conscious cultural effort is being made for representation and the creation of space for minority performers. Shipla Davé, in her 2017 article “Racial Accents, Hollywood Casting, and Asian American Studies,” comments on the struggles of “nonwhite actors [deciding] to take the [racially characterized acting] job in the hope it will lead to a successful series with good money and exposure or wait for (or create) another role that allows for some

variety and flexibility” (143). Miranda is one of many such non-white actors who chose to create new roles for people of color, rather than letting racial characterization determine their careers.

Despite its apparent suddenness, the sweeping phenomenon of hip-hop, rap, *In the Heights*, and ultimately, *Hamilton*, did not spring up out of nowhere. By the time *In the Heights* premiered on Broadway in 2008, musical theater was ready for a shakeup. The majority of Broadway shows at that time were jukebox musicals, which used the pre-existing music of well-known artists (think *Mamma Mía!*), and the creative aspect of the industry was failing (España). Musical theater was ready for something new, and performers like Lin-Manuel Miranda were ready for new opportunities in theater. This exigence, this “imperfection marked by urgency...something waiting to be done” (qtd. in Miller 111) was answered by Miranda first with *In the Heights*, and was later culminated in *Hamilton: An American Musical*. Walking on paths created by musicians, writers, and performers before him, Miranda, like Alexander Hamilton, “picked up a pen, [and] wrote [his] own deliverance” (Miranda, “Hurricane,” *Hamilton OCR*).

### Immigrants—We Get the Job Done!

The meaning of *kairos* as a rhetorical device has been debated, simplified, and reimagined over the years, with an attempt by some scholars to return to the earlier roots of this Greek word. In Greek mythology, *Kairos* is a god personifying opportunity, poised for action at the right moment. Pythagoras conceived of *kairos* as “a means of coordinating the situation with response in such a way that the consequence is not simply one of propriety, but also justice” (Crosby 263). This idea of *kairos* correlates with Lloyd F. Bitzer’s concept of exigence as “an imperfection marked by urgency,” in which *kairos* results in justice for the imperfections of exigence (qtd. in Miller 111). Richard Benjamin Crosby proposes in his article “*Kairos* as God’s Time in Martin Luther King Jr.’s Last Sunday Sermon” that *kairos*, rather than being used merely as a tool of rhetoric, is an independent philosophical concept upon which rhetoric stands. For *Hamilton*, this understanding of *kairos* suggests that Lin-Manuel Miranda’s production achieved such success, not only because of intentional choices to say the right thing at the right time, but also because it steps into a space where *kairos* was already present, entering an ideal rhetorical situation.

While some of the narrative and lyrical elements of *Hamilton* were of course intentional, others were happy accidents. The emphasis on Alexander Hamilton as immigrant was done purposefully, but one of the most iconic lines from *Hamilton*, “Immigrants—We get the job done!” (Miranda, “Yorktown”, *Hamilton OCR*), was a surprise hit for Lin-Manuel Miranda. In his notes on the libretto, Miranda remarks that he simply thought the line was funny. The audience reaction was completely unexpected. “I never anticipated that the audience response would drown out the next few lines every night,” (Miranda and McCarter 121) Miranda writes, explaining that bars had to be added to the song to accommodate the inevitable applause. Miranda goes on: “Why does it get such a delighted response? Because it’s true” (Miranda and McCarter 121). Without meaning to the show struck a chord with the audience because it spoke to their existing rhetorical situation. The 2015 American audience was already prepared for the themes and content of *Hamilton*, giving the show influence and success that could not have been achieved decades before.

Caroline Miller, discussing the kairos of the rhetorical situation, asserts that “an opening can be created as well as discovered” (qtd. in Crosby 265), indicating that a rhetor might venture into territory where kairos exists already. In addition to Miranda’s unprecedented casting decisions, the kairos of *Hamilton* steps into modern political conversation by focusing on Hamilton’s status as an immigrant. Portraying Hamilton as a self-made immigrant from the Caribbean, a description fairly consistent with his early history but neglecting Hamilton’s later political stances, makes his character “contingent upon his being a bastard immigrant in a world disposed to high-born inheritance” (Magness 498). While the historical Hamilton did have a “comparatively low status” (Magness 487) next to the other Founding Fathers, this portrayal is more closely connected to Miranda’s rhetorical choices and the conversation surrounding modern immigration. *Hamilton* launched in 2015, when a Black president sat in the White House, and before the push against immigration that began with the Trump presidential campaign of 2016.

“In New York you can be a new man,” the *Hamilton* chorus sings as young Alexander arrives on the American shore (Miranda, “Alexander Hamilton,” *Hamilton OCR*), “a stranger in a strange country...[with] no property here, no connexions [sic]” (Miranda and McCarter 13). By 2016, American demographics were changing, with a surge of multiethnic influence and immigration, and *Hamilton* emerged as “the greatest artistic expression that young, multi-racial, urban America [had] yet produced” (Kasinitz 69). The appeal of 2016 presidential

candidate Donald Trump was largely related to the discomfort of an older, whiter generation of Americans who struggled with the changing face (and skin) of the America that *Hamilton* represents. On the same day that *Hamilton: An American Musical* was officially nominated for sixteen Tony Awards, Donald Trump won the Indiana Republican Primary, the last major rung on his climb to presidency (Kasinitz 69).

### No More Mr. Nice President

The kairos of a production like *Hamilton* is not limited to its influence on musical theater, or even American history. If we are to understand kairos as a philosophical construct as imagined by Richard Benjamin Crosby, then kairos can create responses that generate justice, as well as mere timeliness. Crosby writes, “[Kairos] is also a tool for social change—a way to alter the trajectory of time itself” (265). *Hamilton* did in fact become such a tool and altered the trajectory of theater and popular culture; the show generated avenues for minority performers and gave voice to the immigrants of America’s past. Miranda’s masterpiece was praised by celebrities, critics, laymen, and presidents from both sides of the aisle. However, the positive endorsement of *Hamilton* from the White House of 2015 would not last in the new administration.

In 2016, Vice President-elect Mike Pence attended a showing of *Hamilton*. There was something unusual in store for this performance. The timeliness of *Hamilton* in the wake of the 2016 presidential election resonated with audiences that night, with “many lines [landing] quite differently” (Lee and Konerman) due to Pence’s presence in the auditorium. Show stopping lines like “Immigrants—we get the job done!” and various quips about Vice President John Adams throughout the show held a different energy (Lee and Konerman). Finally, as the vice president-elect departed the auditorium, the *Hamilton* cast read him a message:

We are the diverse America who are alarmed and anxious that your new administration will not protect us, our planet, our children, our parents, or defend us and uphold our inalienable rights, sir. But we truly hope this show has inspired you to uphold our American values. We truly thank you for sharing this show, this wonderful American story told by a diverse group of men and women of different colors, creeds, and orientations. (Lee and Konerman)

Vice President-elect Pence, who was booed by audience members when he entered the theater (an action discouraged by the *Hamilton* cast), stated later that week that he understood the cast's message and was not offended by it, even conceding that the boos from the audience were "what freedom sounds like" (Bradner).

However, this attitude was not perpetuated by President-elect Trump, who took to social media the day after the performance. Trump's anti-*Hamilton* tweets demanded an apology from the cast and triggered #BoycottHamilton. *Hamilton* remained sold out, and fans of the show responded to the twitter barrage with #NameAPenceMusical (Bradner). *Hamilton: An American Musical* and its supporters grasped the kairos that had been "discovered" by Lin-Manuel Miranda and continued to intentionally "create" kairos of their own (Crosby 265).

When *Hamilton* was written, and even at the time of its early performances, Lin-Manuel Miranda was not yet aware of the outcome of the 2016 election or the pending pushback on immigration in America. This demonstrates a combination of intentional rhetorical choices on Miranda's part as well as the type of kairos explained by Caroline Miller, in which an opening for kairos is "discovered" rather than created (Crosby 265). Kelly A. Myers suggests that kairos does not usually appear alone but is often accompanied by *metanoia*—another Greek term representing the sorrow of those who miss opportunity (Myers 2). *Hamilton: An American Musical* has both discovered kairos and taken advantage of *metanoia* by seizing the opportunity available (exigence). Through such an endeavor, made at the opportune time, makers of art "[remind] the audience of their responsibilities as American citizens...to fight against the ills of society...[creating] a reinvigorated interest in history and social change" (McMahon and McMahon-Smith 130).

### I Am Not Throwing Away My Shot!

In the face of the American Revolution, Hip-Hop Hamilton looks to his friends and peers, Hercules Mulligan, Marquis de Lafayette, John Laurens, and the infamous Aaron Burr, and poses the question:

What are the odds the gods would put us all in one spot,  
poppin' a squat on conventional wisdom, like it or not,  
a bunch of revolutionary manumission abolitionists?  
Give me a position, show me where the ammunition is!  
(Miranda, "My Shot" *Hamilton* OCR)

Even within the world of the play (and reflecting some of the real attitudes of the historical Hamilton) Alexander takes action, acknowledging that the elements at hand (exigence) have been brought together purposely for the right time (kairos). The gods, he suggests, have “put us all in one spot.”

Kairos, the Greek god of opportunity, is often depicted as “[balancing] on a ball or wheel to illustrate his unpredictability and [carrying] a razor to warn of the sharp nature of his entrances and exits” (Myers 1). This balancing act of kairos, or opportunity, and the *metanoia*, the sorrow of missed opportunity (Myers 2), requires a perfect timeliness, the act of launching the words, the idea, or in this case, the play, at the opportune moment. Hip-Hop Hamilton raps of his refusal to “throw away [his] shot” (Miranda, “My Shot,” *Hamilton OCR*). Even declaring, “I wish there was a war! Then we could prove that we’re worth more than anyone bargained for,” the young upstart Hamilton is poised for the chance to prove his worth and create his legacy (Miranda, “Aaron Burr, Sir,” *Hamilton OCR*). While Alexander Hamilton (both Hip-Hop and historical) chose to seize the moment of the American Revolution, Lin-Manuel Miranda and supporters of *Hamilton: An American Musical* are using this unique shot to promote representation and American unity.

In her master’s thesis on rhetoric and theater, Anna Sanford Low argues “that the best way to understand the impact and influence of a play is not by examining the artifact directly but the public and its discourse in response to the experience of encountering the play” (i). Not only does *Hamilton* enter a rhetorical situation which allows the production to encourage social change, the kairos of the play also directly impacts audience reception of the content. Despite the White House backlash in 2016 and #BoycottHamilton, *Hamilton: An American Musical* has had an oddly unifying effect on the American public in a time of extreme political polarity (Low 15).

The long-awaited window for representation and unity *Hamilton* provides is celebrated by liberals and conservatives alike (Low i). Lynne Cheney, wife of former republican Vice President Dick Cheney, claims that she and her husband both loved the show, describing *Hamilton* as “a play about human beings who achieved greatly” (qtd. in Hayes and Gale 43). Former President Barack Obama even jokes that *Hamilton* “is the only thing that Dick Cheney and I agree on” (Obama). With Alexander Hamilton, “the bastard, orphan, son of a whore and a Scotsman” (Miranda, “Alexander Hamilton,” *Hamilton OCR*), fighting to better his country as an immigrant alongside Marquis de Lafayette, “America’s favorite fighting Frenchman” (Miranda, “Guns and Ships,” *Hamilton OCR*), *Hamilton*

reframes America's roots, emphasizing the role of immigrants and imagining that anyone can succeed with the right determination (Obama). But what about this musical is allowing these polarized groups to see more eye to eye?

Alexander Hamilton and his musical counterpart often considered the impact of legacy, using time wisely, speaking at the right time, and protecting personal history for posterity. The historical Hamilton got the war he so desired and the opportunity to make a name for himself. However, he died before his time, allowing his "enemies [to destroy] his rep [and] America [to forget] him" (Miranda, "Alexander Hamilton," *Hamilton OCR*). His contemporaries did not know that, at the right time, America would remember Hamilton in a new way. While the historical Hamilton often shied away from his lower-class immigrant status, Lin-Manuel Miranda uses this in another time and place as a source of pride and unity. By combining a variety of musical styles and appealing to many tastes, *Hamilton* allows "members of a diverse audience [to] feel connected to the story...[opening them] to new and disparate ideas being promoted" (Low 16). Developing "a new rhetorical understanding" (Low 16) of the American founding and the role of diversity in America is thus connecting groups of people who would not otherwise have encountered one another. Those disparate groups who encounter *Hamilton: An American Musical* together can sing along with the Schuyler Sisters: "Look around, look around at how lucky we are to be alive right now!" (Miranda, "The Schuyler Sisters," *Hamilton OCR*).

### What Is a Legacy?

"What is a legacy?" Hip-Hop Hamilton asks in the potent number, "The World Was Wide Enough" (Miranda, *Hamilton OCR*). This theme, reiterated from Hamilton's youth until the moment of his fatal duel, expresses much of the underlying purpose of *Hamilton*. The question of merit and legacy, at a time when America was open to a new understanding of leadership and opportunity, gives this musical the emotional impact that resonates so deeply with audiences. In the final moments before his on-stage death, Hamilton sings acapella a frantic, impassioned soliloquy:

Legacy. What is a legacy?

It's planting seeds in a garden you never get to see.

I wrote some notes at the beginning of a song someone will sing for me.

America, you great unfinished symphony, you sent for me.

You let me make a difference.

A place where even orphan immigrants can leave their fingerprints and rise up. (Miranda, “The World Was Wide Enough” *Hamilton OCR*)

The historical Hamilton wrote in *The Federalist No. 36*, “There are strong minds in every walk of life that will rise superior to the disadvantages of situation and will command the tribute due to their merit” (qtd. in Eberl 44). *Hamilton: An American Musical* has come to the Broadway stage at a time when society is striving to achieve that very aim, opening opportunities for the determined but historically disadvantaged of our time.

Little could the historical Alexander Hamilton have known that his legacy would be written by a “young, scrappy, and hungry” Nuyorican centuries after his fatal duel with Vice President Aaron Burr. A man with a history not unlike Hamilton’s own tells of that legacy, sung and rapped on a New York City stage in a Broadway sensation that wrecked the musical world. Hamilton’s legacy, and the success of *Hamilton: An American Musical*, is owed not only to the quality of the content, but to its exquisite rhetorical situation. The rhetorical choices of *Hamilton*’s creative team, framing Hip-Hop Hamilton as a scrappy young immigrant rapping his way through the American Revolution, combined with the exigence of the musical world and the kairos of American politics ensured success with the American audience. If kairos can be described as the precise moment of opportunity, then with *Hamilton*, Lin-Manuel Miranda has not thrown away his shot.

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