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History Has Its Eyes on You

Why is musical theatre important?

Musicals have the whole package. You have got everything you need from an amazing plot and script to breathtaking musical numbers performed by talented actors and great lessons and morals hidden within each musical. Granted, you can get all of these just by reading a book, watching plays and movies, but you do not experience them all at once; with musicals, you do! Getting the whole experience is what brings theatre-goers together to watch a spectacular musical.

In early 2015, Lin-Manuel Miranda braced us with the national phenomenon that is *Hamilton: An American Musical*. Thanks to the catchy music and high energy dancing, *Hamilton* helped America by bringing up important conversations to a younger audience, which is always a struggle for theatre.

I am a perfect example of that! I am a huge musical theatre nerd, but I am not a big history buff. If it was not for my love of musical theatre, I would not have thought twice about seeing *Hamilton*. I learned a lot just by watching a 2 hour and 40 minute musical than I would reading a chapter from a history textbook. I learn better when I am doing something I like, or I like what I am learning. In this case, I am doing something I like; seeing a musical.

According to an article by the Business Insider, Lin-Manuel Miranda's work ethic was "Non-Stop" to make *Hamilton* the success that it is today. It was as if he wrote "like he was

running out of time.” He was inspired to write the hip-hop musical 11 years ago when he read a biography called “Alexander Hamilton.” He saw bits and pieces of who Alexander Hamilton was through his own eyes and was inspired to make it into a hip-hop story. Alexander reminded him of a well-known rapper, Tupac Shakur, which is how the musical came to be.

Of course, this musical is not historically accurate. I mean, the founding fathers did not break out into musical and rap songs during a duel or battle. Having the musical be full of memorable tunes and over the top (in the best way) dance numbers made it more relevant to America today. This will get younger theatre-goers talking about the importance of the history behind the Founding Fathers, and they may even look up the story of Hamilton to get more of an insight on his life! If it was not for the musical *Hamilton*, they may not have had those conversations otherwise. They may not have learned as much in a history class than they would memorizing every word of every song in the musical. During my sophomore year of high school, I was guilty as charge!

I took a US History class during my junior year of high school, and one of the topics we learned was about Alexander Hamilton and the Founding Fathers. You could say I was excited to learn about this topic. The teacher had the class listen to the song “Cabinet Battle #2,” and you could hear me quietly singing along in the back of the classroom. If it was not for this musical, I would not have been as excited to learn about important history. This is what musicals with important messages does to me, as well as many others. It gets me excited and interested in the subject. It gets me wanting to know more about the subject matter. It gets me to have tough conversations I have never had before.

Every musical I see, I become “obsessed” with it. Not only do I listen to the cast recording for a month, but I always find the important message of the musical and apply it to my

everyday life. Anywhere from being more aware of what is going on or has happened in the world to applying what I have learned in my own actions and behaviors. The three musicals that have had the biggest impact on me are *Hamilton*, *Hairspray*, and *Dear Evan Hansen*.

These three musicals have led me to wanting to better educate myself with the subject matter as I was not as educated as I wanted to be on the history being told in the storylines. With *Hamilton*, it was on the legacy of Alexander Hamilton and the Founding Fathers. With *Hairspray*, it was about black lives and how everything used to be segregated (very important today!), and *Dear Evan Hansen* on anxiety and mental health. Having seen these musicals and doing research on the topics behind it, I can now say I have a better understanding of our history and important topics going on in the world today.

Additionally, another aspect of the musical that caught people's attention is the amount of diversity in the cast, excluding King George III. Lin-Manuel Miranda has made diversity a big part of his work, he wanted differences in skin color when he was casting the musical. He wanted to represent Alexander Hamilton, the Founding Fathers, and the American Revolution more than the historical accuracy of the visuals.

According to an article by the New York Times, diversity is increasing on Broadway with 35% of all roles going to people of color in the 2015-16 season. This was the season *Hamilton* was in, so I am not surprised the numbers increased. The previous season, 30% of the roles went to people of color, and the season before that, 24%. During the 2015-16 season, 23% of the roles went to actors who were African American, 7% went to Latino actors, and 4% who were Asian-American.

Musicals such as *Hamilton*, *On Your Feet!*, *The Color Purple*, and *Hairspray* to name a few have provided many opportunities for people who are African-American and Latinos. When

I saw *Hamilton* in Chicago, I was completely blown away by the amazing storytelling, and I felt so inspired seeing people of color on that stage doing what they loved.

It is extremely important for young theatre-goers to see how much diversity is being presented on that stage, especially if they are a person of color. Almost all the shows I have seen being performed on stage, more than 80% of the actors were white. What does that say towards people who are different? What does that say towards people of color? Especially in the world we are living in today, diversity is more important than ever. They need to know that they do matter, and there is a place for them in this world to do what they love.

Musical theatre is an incredible piece of art and bringing in more diversity would make the story even more inspiring and evocative. I am hopeful as the years go on (whenever Broadway re-opens) that there will be even more of an increase in diversity based on the data presented above. Furthermore, as we are seeing numbers increase for musicals, I am hoping that will be the case for plays as well. Plays have not had as much of an increase as musicals, but with everything going on in the world right now with the BLM movement, I am more hopeful than ever.

As I mentioned earlier, I was fortunate enough to be able to see *Hamilton* even if it was in Chicago. Even though I was not able to see it in New York City with the Original Broadway Cast, I found out I was seeing the musical from Leslie Odom, Jr. in a video. That was pretty cool, I have to admit! Anyway, I was lucky enough to see it when I did. I saw it back in 2017, a few months after it opened in Chicago.

There are multiple people that I know that are not as fortunate to see *Hamilton*. The main reason being the cost of ticket prices. I mean, they are crazy expensive! Not only that, they may not be living in or be near a city that *Hamilton* is performing at. There are a bunch of people that

have to travel miles to see this musical. Some of them fly to New York City to see it. With that, not only do you have to pay for tickets, but you have to pay for airfare, the hotel you're staying at, food, and public transportation. That is a lot of money to spend on seeing one Broadway musical. Many people just do not have the time and the money to take a vacation like that. You may have to sacrifice something amazing for something even better to come along.

Well, the people that have not seen *Hamilton* "In the Room Where It Happens" are in for a treat. The *Hamilton* musical hit the Disney Plus streaming platform on Friday, July 3, and it could not have come at a better time. The people that have not seen the musical yet had to "Wait for It" and were indeed "Satisfied" with it being on the platform. According to an article by Oregonlive, it was perfect timing with a great show.

As the musical is immensely popular, a movie version of the show was going to be made and hit movie theaters in October 2021. There was no way that was going to happen with the ongoing global Coronavirus pandemic. So, the Walt Disney Company decided to move it up a few months and announce the film version of the musical hit Disney Plus on July 3. Funny enough, this is perfect timing because of the fourth of July weekend.

Not only did it boost subscribers on the Disney Plus streaming platform, it got not just musical theatre lovers watching, but a wide range of people across the country that would not have even bothered to see it otherwise. In an interview, Lin-Manuel Miranda discussed how the show brings up conversations with topics such as racism and the history with enslaving black people as these topics are relevant in the musical.

The best part about having *Hamilton* on Disney Plus? We can stream it whenever we want however many times we want for \$6.99 a month! We can sing along throughout the performance if we want to as well. This is way more convenient for everybody. This will bring

in more people that will become fans of the show and learn about the important history talked about (really sung and rapped) in the musical and have conversations about important issues in the world we are living in. This will have everyone saying “Awesome! Wow!” like King George III.

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