Arts & Humanities

Hamilton is in the House

Move over, Washington and Jefferson. Alexander Hamilton is the coolest Founding Father.

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|
Winter 2015-16

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It's not every day a musical about the American Revolution and the early years of the republic becomes a smash hit on Broadway. (Sure, there was *1776*, but that was in 1969.) Nor is it every day that such a period piece casts African-Americans and Latinos as America’s Founding Fathers. And it is decidedly not every day that said

production presents George Washington conducting cabinet meetings with a handheld mic; Thomas Jefferson offering blown kisses and razzle-dazzle waves of the hand; and the maverick star of the show rapping, “You know I’m just like my country / I’m young, scrappy, and hungry”; or thirty-four songs that throb with the pulse of R&B, jazz, Tin Pan Alley, and, above all, hip-hop.

Now, in 2015, that day has arrived: Alexander Hamilton is busting rhymes, and *Hamilton* is busting musical-theater conventions. These are interesting times indeed for this Founding Father.

H*amilton*, which opened off-Broadway in February at the Public Theater and moved to the Richard Rodgers Theatre this past summer, plays like a thrilling mixtape of US history and popular culture. At its heart is the improbable, often overlooked story of a man who rose from virtually nothing to American immortality. “I wrote my way out of hell,” sings Lin-Manuel Miranda, the show’s star and the author of its book, music, and lyrics. “I wrote my way to revolution / I was louder than the crack in the bell.”

But the current Hamilton renaissance really began a decade ago, led by Ron Chernow’s biography *Alexander Hamilton* in 2004. That same year — the bicentennial of Hamilton’s duel with Aaron Burr — the New-York Historical Society mounted the exhibition “Alexander Hamilton: The Man Who Made Modern America,” two versions of which traveled to forty libraries. In 2007, the Museum of American Finance on Wall Street permanently installed its Alexander Hamilton Room, where it has offered exhibitions like 2011’s “Alexander Hamilton: Lineage and Legacy.”

Add to that the sprucing up of Hamilton’s personal properties: in 2008 the Grange, Hamilton’s long-neglected Harlem home, was relocated to St. Nicholas Park in Upper Manhattan and renovated for $14.5 million; and last year saw the rededication, at Lower Manhattan’s Trinity Church, of Hamilton’s restored gravesite. Even the Florida-based Alexander Hamilton Awareness Society reports that whereas only a “handful” of people used to attend its annual observations of Hamilton’s birthday, more than a hundred showed up in January 2015.

Then there was the backlash against Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew’s announcement last spring that Hamilton would share his space on the ten-dollar bill with a woman yet to be named. Opponents included former Federal Reserve chairman Ben Bernanke (“I was appalled”) and Hamilton’s great-great-great-great-great-grandson,

Doug Hamilton, who calls his forebear “somebody the younger generation should look up to.”

And now we have *Hamilton: An American Musical*. So what’s with the big revival?

“It’s like the stock market,” says Richard Brookhiser, author of *Alexander Hamilton, American* and the curator of the New-York Historical Society exhibit. “The Founding Fathers are all blue chips. But some fluctuate more than others.”

“I think we’re past the idea that because the Founding Fathers were flawed you can’t say anything good about them,” suggests Willard Sterne Randall, who teaches history at Champlain College in Vermont and is the author of *Alexander Hamilton: A Life*. “My God, this man created our entire modern economy. If nothing else, he should be honored for that. I’ve never had him off the pedestal and out of the pantheon.”

Robert McCaughey, a professor of history at Barnard and the author of *Stand, Columbia*, agrees, saying that the moral outrage at Hamilton’s being “an adulterer, or at least a womanizer” has softened. “That’s become a more tolerable attribute for a public figure,” McCaughey says. “He’s coming out from under a cloud.”

In his relatively short life, Hamilton amassed a record that still boggles: author of the majority of the Federalist Papers, New York’s sole signer of the Constitution, first US Secretary of the Treasury, architect of our financial system (including the First Bank of the United States and the US Mint), visionary of an industrial America, father of the Coast Guard, inspector general of the US Army, founder of the Federalist Party, and, of course, the man who gave us the *New York Post*.

He has also loomed large in Columbia’s psyche. Hamilton never graduated from King’s College, having withdrawn to fight the Revolution and become George Washington’s aide-de-camp. But ten years after first entering the school in 1774, he became a regent and, subsequently, a trustee of its rechristened successor, Columbia College. Before there was a Hamilton Hall on Morningside Heights, there was one on the 49th Street campus. Naturally, when the Columbia College Alumni Association first presented its highest honor in 1947, it was named the Alexander Hamilton Medal.

And yet, more than any other Founding Father, Hamilton has struggled for his place in history. This is due in part to a lingering whiff of dubiousness about the man, starting with his impoverished and illegitimate origins in the foreign climes of the Caribbean island of Nevis. His affair with Maria Reynolds was *the* great sex scandal of the day. And the unfortunate face-off with Burr in Weehawken is still considered a low point for civility in public discourse.

On a philosophical level, Hamilton has never fully escaped charges of elitism, monarchism, and even warmongering. It hasn't helped that he never wholly embraced the chief article of American faith — the notion of personal freedom.

"He wasn't as taken as people like Thomas Jefferson were with the idea of American exceptionalism," says Stephen Knott, a professor at the US Naval War College and the author of *Alexander Hamilton and the Persistence of Myth*. "He loved this country, but I don't think he saw us as a shining city on a hill. You don't see him write with a lot of Jeffersonian rhetoric about this place being a bastion of liberty."

Compare his statue on the Morningside campus with that of his archrival Jefferson in front of Pulitzer Hall: Jefferson is standing, slightly bowed, courtly, deep in thought. Hamilton is strutting, confident, perhaps even arrogant. He's got swagger.

Hamilton's star rose from the time of the Civil War, with its spirit of union, through the Gilded Age, with its spirit of capitalism. President Theodore Roosevelt called Hamilton "the most brilliant American statesman who ever lived." But with the financial collapse of 1929 and the Great Depression that followed, he fell out of favor. The failure of the banking system was one reason. Another was the effort of a certain president to exalt a certain Virginian.

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“I think FDR almost single-handedly put Jefferson into the American pantheon,” says Knott. “He wanted to make him a Democratic standard-bearer, with everything from the Jefferson Memorial to the nickel.”

But now, some of the bloom has come off the Jeffersonian rose. The third president's notion of a largely agrarian, militarily mild, loosely confederated nation has long ago been cast aside in favor of the urbanized, industrialized mercantilism of an economic superpower. Moreover, Jefferson's ownership of slaves and the evidence that he fathered children with at least one of them, Sally Hemings, is being scrutinized as never before. As McCaughey says, "When you look at who's up and who's down, Jefferson has had a couple of bad years." By contrast, Hamilton was a member of the abolitionist New York Manumission Society.

Also, a growing number of scholars feel that Hamilton has simply gotten a posthumous bum rap. Certainly the charge of monarchism is nonsense, says Brookhiser.

"The guy fights against Britain; he's in uniform from 1775 to Yorktown! What more do you want? He literally has horses shot out from under him."

Joanne Freeman, a Yale University historian who edited the Library of America edition of Hamilton's writings and was a historical consultant for the Grange project, suggests that in these uncertain times, Americans are grasping for a strong central government — one of Hamilton's primary visions.

"At this moment, people feel that a lot is on the line," she says. "This isn't new. But the stakes feel higher. I think people are scared of terrorists, they're scared of immigrants, they're scared of the Chinese economy, they're scared that America is going down."

McCaughey adds, "We're watching Federal Reserve meetings as if they're going to indicate the Third Coming. In that sense, we're looking for public figures who seem to have a mastery of the vocabulary and the issues that are involved in government finance — so Hamilton's your man."

Then, too, Hamilton's flight from the impoverished Caribbean to the pinnacle of power is a uniquely American assimilation story that now resonates afresh — as reflected in the multicultural identity of the musical *Hamilton*'s cast and score. Brookhiser argues further that Hamilton's vision of a nation of burgeoning commerce that would lift the lives of its citizens remains highly attractive.

"What's so moving to me is that he wants to improve the odds for other Alexander Hamiltons," he says. "He wants to maximize opportunities for all different sorts of

people.”

Not everyone agrees that Hamilton deserves to be in vogue.

“Hamilton’s stock hasn’t really risen,” says Andrew Burstein ’74CC, a professor of history at Louisiana State University and (surprise) an authority on Thomas Jefferson. “Looking at the historical Hamilton, we find someone who sucked up to the 1 percent and looked down on and betrayed the interests of ordinary Americans. As a politician he was an unstable partisan — he saw politics as a gladiator would, trying to eliminate any who stood in the way of his ambition.” Burstein also dismisses any depiction of Hamilton as “a modern economic planner, the father of Wall Street banking, sensible and pragmatic” as sheer “wish fulfillment.”

Granted, Hamilton “didn’t make modern America single-handedly,” says Freeman. And, yes, she acknowledges, Hamilton was ambitious. “You can’t deny he was committed to the interests of the rich and powerful. And rich and powerful men helped him along. But in his mind, he was trying to create a dynamic economy that could hold its own in the world.”

So while a Broadway hit may be pumping up the Hamilton cult, it could also be symptomatic of our growing awareness that the America we know is in many ways Hamilton’s. A potent executive branch, an independent judiciary, a professional standing army, and a dynamic industrial economy are just some of the Hamiltonian touchstones we have come to take for granted.

“It is an auspicious time to reexamine the life of Hamilton,” wrote Ron Chernow. “He was the messenger from a future that we now inhabit. We are indisputably the heirs to Hamilton’s America, and to repudiate his legacy is, in many ways, to repudiate the modern world.”

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