

How Lin-Manuel Miranda Shapes History

By [Edward Delman](#) September 29, 2015

Works of art have long informed how people understand the past, and *Hamilton* is no exception.



Charles Sykes / Invision / AP

Art has a long tradition of shaping public perceptions of history. Shakespeare transformed Richard III, a brutal monarch in a typically brutal time, into a physically-deformed, Machiavellian tyrant. Leon Uris romanticized the story of Israel's founding for a generation of Americans with *Exodus*. *Evita* immortalized a controversial Argentinian icon as a cynical, power-hungry entertainer. Now, Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* has the opportunity to change the way people consider one of the Founding Fathers and the era he lived in.

Miranda is the writer, composer, and star of *Hamilton*, as well as the newly minted recipient of a [“genius” grant](#) from the MacArthur Foundation. His show follows the trajectory of Hamilton’s life from an orphaned upbringing in the West Indies to his death at the hands of Aaron Burr. *Hamilton*’s core elements—its [hip-hop and R&B-inspired music](#) and its racially diverse cast—are geared specifically towards making history as relatable as possible. “This is a story about America then, told by America now,” Miranda explains, “and we want to eliminate any distance between a contemporary audience and this story.”

Hamilton, then, has the potential to strongly influence the way Americans think about the early republic. For one thing, as my colleague [Alana Semuels writes](#), it understands Thomas Jefferson to be a deeply flawed individual. It presents an American history in which women and people of color share the spotlight with the founding fathers. The primarily black and Hispanic cast reminds audiences that American history is not just the history of white people, and frequent allusions to slavery serve as constant reminders that just as the revolutionaries were fighting for their freedom, slaves were held in bondage.

Perhaps the most significant lesson the show might teach audiences, and one that has particular relevance today, is the outsized role immigrants have played in the nation’s history. Alexander Hamilton was an immigrant—a fact that Miranda repeatedly emphasizes throughout the show—and the musical also prominently features the Marquis de Lafayette, a French nobleman who played a crucial role during the revolutionary war.

I spoke with Miranda last week about the process of translating history onto the stage; the ways in which *Hamilton* could alter our perception of history; and the role artists play in shaping historical narratives. An edited and condensed transcript of the conversation follows.

Edward Delman: What do you make of the idea that the show could

become the basis for how many people understand the revolutionary period and Alexander Hamilton? In the same way that *Evita* is the way most people see Eva Perón, and Shakespeare doomed Richard III as a villain.

Lin-Manuel Miranda: That's so interesting you say that, because I'm theater people, and theater people, the only history they know is the history they know from other plays and musicals ... So to that end, I felt an enormous responsibility to be as historically accurate as possible, while still telling the most dramatic story possible. And that's why Ron Chernow is a historical consultant on the thing, and, you know, he was always sort of keeping us honest. And when I did part from the historical record or take dramatic license, I made sure I was able to defend it to Ron, because I knew that I was going to have to defend it in the real world. None of those choices are made lightly.

Delman: Obviously the show is adapted from Chernow's biography. Was that your first exposure to Hamilton, the founding fathers, and the revolutionary period in general?

Miranda: Yes. I wrote a paper on Hamilton in high school. And it was just about the duel. That's what most people focus on. And that's really all I knew when I grabbed Ron's book off the shelf. The sort of thinking that went into it was, "This will have a good ending." Ron's book was a really acclaimed, well-reviewed book and biography, and I was just looking for a good biography to read on the beach.

Delman: How did Chernow keep you honest?

Miranda: I think the strength of his book is he approaches his history novelistically. It's always historically accurate, but he is able to keep a through-line of relentlessness that I think characterizes Hamilton as a person, and I was able to plug into that. I didn't know Hamilton was an immigrant, and I didn't know half of the traumas of his early life. And when he gets to New York, I was like, "I know this guy." I've met so many versions

of this guy, and it's the guy who comes to this country and is like, "I am going to work six jobs if you're only working one. I'm gonna make a life for myself here." That's a familiar storyline to me, beginning with my father and so many people I grew up with in my neighborhood. So ... every play or work of fiction kind of has to start with you identifying a character and saying, "I know this guy. I could write that guy." And I kind of ran with that.

Delman: Did you talk to or consult with any other period experts, or bring in outside opinions other than Chernow's?

Miranda: I read a lot of outside opinions. I read *The Heartbreak of Aaron Burr* by H.W. Brands. Burr was important for me to get because I knew he was narrating, and there's not a lot of stuff about Burr, or there is, but the tone is super defensive—rightfully so, because he's the Richard III of American history—and so the people who write about him, choose to write about him, often just write from this place of, "No no no no no, you don't understand!" Which is not always the most compelling reading. So I was really looking for facts and figures and ways for me to understand him, and H.W. Brands was very helpful in that respect because he largely focused on the family and that's a great way into anyone, to have empathy with anyone. And then, Joanne Freeman's book *Affairs of Honor*. She's since become a friend, but *Affairs of Honor* was great in terms of understanding the dueling code, and also her collected book of Hamilton's writing that she published through Yale Press, which was sort of my touchstone. You know, anytime I was in the wilderness I could go back to what Hamilton wrote and kind of figure it out from there.

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Delman: What do you feel is your responsibility as a playwright and a

storyteller when it comes to telling this kind of story?

Miranda: My only responsibility as a playwright and a storyteller is to give you the time of your life in the theatre. I just happen to think that with Hamilton's story, sticking close to the facts helps me. All the most interesting things in the show happened. They're not shit I made up. Honestly, I think of the quote, Burr's final quote in the show, "The world was wide enough for both Hamilton and me." That's a real letter from Burr later in his life. It's a reference to an author he likes—if I had read something more and Voltaire less—

Delman: Sterne and Voltaire.

Miranda: Yeah, "Sterne more and Voltaire less, I might have realized the world was wide enough for both Hamilton and me." That's a heartbreaking thing. Even though in Burr's actual telling it's kind of a joke, it's still a heartbreaking sentiment. So I guess my answer is, my job as a writer is to give you the most interesting and dramatic tale possible, and Hamilton's life affords a unique opportunity for me to do that without straying from the historical record. I got a sneak preview of the world's reception of this, because I performed that first song at the White House, and that thing's been online since the fall of 2009. And I've seen history teachers use it in their classes. So I'm just very excited that the whole thing is out in the world, because I knew that making it come alive—Ron did it for me, and I think the secret sauce of this show, at least in the writing—leaving aside the unbelievable production Tommy Kail and Andy Blankenbuehler and Alex Lacamoire have put together—I think the secret sauce in the words is my enthusiasm for learning all this stuff in the first place. It's like that scene in *Like Water for Chocolate*, where Tita cries in the recipe and suddenly everyone is eating the wedding cake but they're all bawling. Well if you're crying listening to the cast recording, it's because I cried first writing it. My tears are all up in this recipe.

Delman: You talked about seeing people use the opening song in

classrooms—how do you think your interpretation of Hamilton and this period will shape the way people understand the man and his era?

Miranda: Well, I think it's a particularly nice reminder at this point in our politics, which comes around every 20 years or so, when immigrant is used as a dirty word by politicians to get cheap political points, that three of the biggest heroes of our revolutionary war for independence were a Scotsman from the West Indies, named Alexander Hamilton; a Frenchman, named Lafayette; and a gay German, named Friedrich von Steuben, who organized our army and taught us how to do drills. Immigrants have been present and necessary since the founding of our country. I think it's also a nice reminder that any fight we're having right now, politically, we already had it 200-some odd years ago. The fights that I wrote between me and Jefferson, you could put them in the mouths of candidates on MSNBC. They're about foreign relations; they're about states' rights versus national rights; they're about debt. These are all conversations we're still having, and I think it's a comfort to know that they're just a part of the more perfect union we're always working towards, or try to work towards, and that we're always working on them. You know, we didn't break the country; the country came with a limited warranty, like it was never perfect. It was never perfect, and there's been no fall from grace. I find that heartening, honestly, that we're still working on it.

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Delman: It's interesting that Hamilton, when he reads the constitution in its fullness, is kind of ambivalent about it, but still decides to make himself its strongest defender and fights and fights for it, knowing that it's not perfect.

Miranda: Yeah, it's not perfect. Hamilton pitched his own version, and the

fact that he did that gave him a bad reputation for the rest of his career. They'd say, "Well, did you hear Hamilton's version at the Constitutional Convention—this asshole?" But the Federalist Papers are the best Talmudic discussions on the original intent of the founders that we have, because they were written around the same time. If you want to look at what the founders intended, you have to read the Federalist Papers. And some of them aren't great—Madison got stuck with defending slavery. But they are the commentary by the people who were there. You know, when you study Gospels in Christianity—I took a great class on this at Wesleyan—you know, there are scholars who, it's not about the Christian tenets but it's about, "Alright, which Gospel was written close to the time historical Jesus was alive? Which sentences agree over the four Gospels and, in researching all this, can we get close to what the actual thing historical Jesus maybe said?" That's why the Federalist Papers—you know, I had to read them all—they're fascinating to me. And the lawyers—my wife is a lawyer—lawyers really love that part because they still draw on that. We still look to that for sign of intent, and I think that's great that a parallel document exists.

Delman: What do you think is the role of artists in either shaping our national history or our sense of history at large?

Miranda: I think it's entirely self-participatory. Here's the thing about artists—their job is to fall in love for a living. Like, you could commission me to go write a historical fiction, a historical musical. If I'm not in love with it and I don't know how to get myself into the characters, you're going to be bored to tears by whatever the fuck I write. You can't assign falling in love, because it takes falling in love to write a musical. I've been writing this thing for seven years. That's longer than pretty much every relationship I've ever been in, except for my wife. And that's what it takes—waking up and knowing you've still got challenges within it, and how are you going to crack this problem, and how are you going to compress this section. You've got to be able to go into that work lovingly, willingly. So it's very hard to dictate what the artist's role should be. I'm lucky that Hamilton grabbed me. I feel lucky. But it

depends on what I fall in love with enough to put in the time and work to write, because it's hard work. And it should never feel like work. When you're in love, it doesn't feel like it.