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11-2018

### Review of Alex Horwitz, *Great Performances: Hamilton's America*. PBS, October 21, 2016, streaming

Elissa Harbert

DePauw University, [elissaharbert@depauw.edu](mailto:elissaharbert@depauw.edu)

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#### Recommended Citation

Accepted manuscript made available under a Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND license. The accepted manuscript is of a review originally published in: Harbert, Elissa, "Review of Alex Horwitz, *Great Performances: Hamilton's America*." PBS, October 21, 2016, streaming. *Journal of the Society for American Music* 12 no.4, November 2018, pp. 528-530.

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Elissa Harbert, Review of Alex Horwitz, *Great Performances: Hamilton's America*. PBS, October 21, 2016, streaming.  
*Journal of the Society for American Music* 12 no. 4, November 2018, pp. 528-530.

With *Great Performances: Hamilton's America*, PBS brings Lin-Manuel Miranda and his phenomenally successful Broadway musical into your home or classroom. The 82-minute documentary not only chronicles the creation and reception of *Hamilton: An American Musical* (2015), but also teaches viewers about the historical life and times of Alexander Hamilton and his compatriots, all the while making the past relatable for contemporary audiences. As one of several high-profile *Hamilton* paratexts, the documentary is valuable for scholars, students, and especially fans of the musical. The production is entertaining and informative, and it provides insight into the meanings of the musical and its motivating philosophy.

The documentary features numerous interviews with *Hamilton's* cast and crew as well as celebrated figures such as Barack Obama, Stephen Sondheim, and Hamilton biographer Ron Chernow. However, the most compelling scenes are the excerpts of the show performed by the original Broadway cast and video footage of the early stages of *Hamilton's* genesis. Fortunately, director Alex Horwitz, a college friend of Miranda's, had the foresight to document Miranda's early work on *Hamilton* for posterity.

The documentary is obsessed with origins: the origins of the musical and, in parallel, the origins of the nation. It frequently draws connections between the show and its historical subject, and between Miranda and Hamilton. The underlying purpose of the film, and in many ways the musical itself, is to render the American Revolutionary era alive and meaningful to our own time. This focus on similarities between then and now is an ubiquitous theme in the interviews and even in the film's structure. For example,

during a visit to the Museum of American Finance, Miranda and Leslie Odom, Jr. read the increasingly tense letters exchanged by Hamilton and Burr leading up to their infamous duel, after which Odom explains how much more quickly the feud could escalate today: “I might piss you off on Twitter and then you send me a text and I send you a text back, and then it’s on” (1:10:19).

The filmmakers also structure the documentary by interweaving historical record, the musical, and the present-day lives of the cast and crew. In one rousing scene, “The World Turned Upside Down” from *Hamilton* underscores Miranda’s interview from the show’s debut week at the Public Theater. He exclaims, “Our show opened on Tuesday and the WORLD blew up! This is crazy! I don’t know what the future holds. I know that our show opened and everyone freaked out” (36:30)! Furthermore, the film features stylish graphics of both period documents and newly made illustrations in the style of early American art. It treats Miranda’s early drafts of *Hamilton* lyrics with similar reverence, thus juxtaposing artifacts of the past and the present. Even the cinematography subtly recreates the same golden and sepia color scheme of the musical, creating an antiqued look. Although this emphasis on connections is an effective way to unify the documentary and marry it with the message of the musical, it also creates two problems: it deceptively erases the considerable differences between Hamilton’s time and ours; and it disregards the two centuries in between, as though we have jumped through a wormhole from the Revolutionary era to today.

Like all artistic works, the documentary is a product of its time. It aired October 21, 2016, just weeks before the US presidential election. In that context it was amiably bipartisan, featuring interviews with prominent political figures from both sides of the

aisle, such as Republicans George W. Bush and Paul Ryan, and Democrats Barack Obama and Elizabeth Warren. Many of these interviews remark on the similarities between then and now, or on the impact the Founders still have on the nation. The documentary carefully avoids divisive issues of 2016, with no mention of pertinent topics such as gun control, which would have added depth to the musical's depiction of the shooting deaths of both Hamilton and his son Philip; or the Black Lives Matter movement, which would have been appropriate alongside the weighty interviews with cast members Christopher Jackson and Daveed Diggs, who expressed their ambivalence about portraying the enslavers Washington and Jefferson. The film's only firm political stance is its unwavering support of immigrants.

Despite its nod to bipartisanship, the documentary, like the musical, is not politically neutral. It uses the Obama White House to mark the musical's progress from the first performance of a song from *Hamilton* at an arts event hosted by the Obamas in 2009 to its culmination in the company's 2016 performance at the White House in the twilight of the Obama administration. However, by attempting to avoid controversy, the documentary began to show its age immediately after Donald Trump's election; in the new context of the Trump era it seems mild and conciliatory in its politics.

Although the documentary has many strengths, it does fall short in a few respects. Discussion of dance is restricted to a mere thirty-second interview with choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler, which is frustrating because dance is an essential part of the show.<sup>1</sup> As Anne Searcy writes, "Take away the show's lyrics, and you would still have a

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Searcy, "Bringing Dance Back to the Center in *Hamilton*," *American Music* 36, no. 3 (forthcoming, Winter 2018).

two-and-a-half hour dance piece about Alexander Hamilton.”<sup>2</sup>

Also disappointing is the under-representation of women. The documentary provides only a brief discussion of the female historical figures. The two-minute segment on the women of *Hamilton* does not appear until thirty minutes in, at which point we hear from women cast members for the first time. Although the documentary features interviews with prominent historians Joanne Freeman and Annette Gordon-Reed, as well as public figures Elizabeth Warren, Laura Bush, and Fox News anchor Maria Bartiromo, the film is dominated by men’s voices. Indeed, women speak for only 11% of the airtime, not quite nine minutes.<sup>3</sup>

Given the popularity of *Hamilton*, it is no surprise that the eagerly anticipated documentary drew a large viewership, over 4.6 million people, on television and multiple online streaming platforms during its first weekend.<sup>4</sup> The documentary is now available in perpetuity on the donation-based streaming service PBS Passport ([www.pbs.org/passport](http://www.pbs.org/passport)).

*Hamilton’s America* is the documentary *Hamilton* deserves. It is one of the finest films about an individual Broadway musical, thus joining several other high-quality programs such as *Hair: Let the Sun Shine In*, *No Day But Today: The Story of Rent*, and previous PBS *Great Performances* productions like *In the Heights: Chasing Broadway Dreams*, a natural companion to *Hamilton’s America*. These documentaries are valuable

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<sup>2</sup> Searcy.

<sup>3</sup> Tabulated using Cathy Deng’s tool at <http://arentalkingtoomuch.com/>.

<sup>4</sup> Adam Hetrick, “*Hamilton’s America* Draws 3.6 Million Viewers,” *Playbill*, October 26, 2016, <http://www.playbill.com/article/hamiltons-america-draws-36-million-viewers>.

learning tools and entertaining, accessible chronicles of the history of Broadway and, by extension, of the United States.

**Bio:** Elissa Harbert is an Assistant Professor at the DePauw University School of Music. Her PhD in Musicology was awarded the Alvin H. Johnson AMS 50 Dissertation Fellowship. Her articles “‘Ever to the Right’? The Political Life of *1776* in the Nixon Era” and “*Hamilton* and History Musicals” appear in *American Music*. She has contributed several chapters to edited collections on musical theater and is working on a monograph about history musicals.