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THEATER

Review: 'Hamilton,' Young Rebels Changing History and Theater

Hamilton | NYT Critics' Pick | Broadway, Musical

2 hrs and 55 min. | Richard Rodgers Theatre, 226 W. 46th St. | 212-221-1211

By **BEN BRANTLEY** AUG. 6, 2015

Yes, it really is that good.

At this point, it would be almost a relief to report that “Hamilton” — the musical that opened at the Richard Rodgers Theater on Thursday night — has shrunk beneath the bloat of its hype. Since it was first staged at the Public Theater this year, this brave new show about America’s founding fathers has been given the kind of worshipful press usually reserved for the appearances of once-in-a-lifetime comets or the births of little royal celebrities.

During the past several months, while it was being pumped up and trimmed down for its move from the East Village to Broadway, Lin-Manuel Miranda’s rap-driven portrait of the rise and fall of Alexander Hamilton (this country’s first secretary of the Treasury) has been the stuff of encomiums in both fashion magazines and op-ed columns. A friend of mine recently said that there were three subjects she never wanted to see in a newspaper again: Caitlyn Jenner, the Harper Lee novel “Go Set a Watchman” and “Hamilton.”

Even I, one of the many critics who enthused about “Hamilton” in

February like a born-again convert in a revival tent, was beginning to think, “Enough already.” Then I saw the show at the Richard Rodgers.

I am loath to tell people to mortgage their houses and lease their children to acquire tickets to a hit Broadway show. But “Hamilton,” directed by Thomas Kail and starring Mr. Miranda, might just about be worth it — at least to anyone who wants proof that the American musical is not only surviving but also evolving in ways that should allow it to thrive and transmogrify in years to come.

A show about young rebels grabbing and shaping the future of an unformed country, “Hamilton” is making its own resonant history by changing the language of musicals. And it does so by insisting that the forms of song most frequently heard on pop radio stations in recent years — rap, hip-hop, R&B ballads — have both the narrative force and the emotional interiority to propel a hefty musical about long-dead white men whose solemn faces glower from the green bills in our wallets.

Washington, Jefferson, Madison — they’re all here, making war and writing constitutions and debating points of economic structure. So are Aaron Burr and the Marquis de Lafayette. They wear the clothes (by Paul Tazewell) you might expect them to wear in a traditional costume drama, and the big stage they inhabit has been done up (by David Korins) to suggest a period-appropriate tavern, where incendiary youth might gather to drink, brawl and plot revolution.

But these guys don’t exactly look like the marble statues of the men they’re portraying. For one thing, they’re black or Hispanic. And when they open their mouths, the words that tumble out are a fervid mix of contemporary street talk, wild and florid declarations of ambition and, oh yes, elegant phrases from momentous political documents you studied in school, like Washington’s Farewell Address.

And you never doubt for a second that these eclectic words don’t belong in

proximity to one another. In mixing a broad range of references and rhythms in one percolating style, Mr. Miranda — who wrote the book, music and lyrics of “Hamilton,” which was inspired by Ron Chernow’s 2004 biography — does what rap artists have been doing for years. It’s the immoderate language of youth, ravenous and ambitious, wanting to claim and initial everything in reach as their own.

Which turns out to be the perfect voice for expressing the thoughts and drives of the diverse immigrants in the American colonies who came together to forge their own contentious, contradictory nation. To quote from an oft-repeated phrase in this almost entirely sung-through show: “Hey, yo, I’m just like my country, I’m young, scrappy and hungry, and I am not throwing away my shot.”

Those words are declaimed by Mr. Miranda as Hamilton, an impoverished orphan newly arrived in New York from St. Croix, but they might be tattooed on the consciousness of most of the characters in the play. These include Burr (the suavely brooding Leslie Odom Jr.), Hamilton’s friend, rival and nemesis, who functions as a wondering, embittered narrator to his confrere’s meteoric rise; Washington (Christopher Jackson); Jefferson (a delightfully dandyish Daveed Diggs, who doubles as Lafayette) and Madison (Okieriete Onaodowan).

They are each fully rendered individuals, as are the three women in Hamilton’s life, blissfully embodied by Phillipa Soo (as his wife, Eliza); Renée Elise Goldsberry (as her sister, Angelica Schuyler); and Jasmine Cephas Jones (as Maria Reynolds, the adulterous lover who brings about Hamilton’s fall from grace). The ballads that define the triangular relationship among Hamilton, Eliza and Angelica have a romantic urgency and ambivalence that had me in happy tears.

There’s a breathless rush to those numbers. And nearly all of the score — directed and orchestrated with precise and infinite variety by Alex Lacamoire

— is infused with the same sense of momentum, of a wave that you ride or drown in. And the gymnastic corps de ballet, choreographed by Andy Blankenbuehler, gives further, infectious life to that feeling of perpetual motion, of a speeding, unceasing course of human events. (The use of a revolving stage in a set has seldom seemed more apt; this world never stops spinning.)

Mr. Miranda's *Hamilton*, a propulsive mix of hubris and insecurity, may be the center of the show. But he is not its star. That would be history itself, that collision of time and character that molds the fates of nations and their inhabitants. You might even call history the evening's D.J., making sure there's always something to dance to.

Mr. Kail beautifully sustains this sense of collective lives in motion throughout. It feels right that while the numbers here have been scaled up and shined up for a big Broadway house (Mr. Odom's jivey "The Room Where It Happens," a wicked meditation on being a political outsider, is now a full-fledged showstopper), you never feel that any single performer is pushing for a breakout moment. Well, with one exception.

That's King George III (a delicious Jonathan Groff, who replaced Brian d'Arcy James during the run at the Public). He sings an entirely different tune as he observes, from across the Atlantic, that his colonial subjects are revolting, in all senses of the word. His is the voice of vintage Britpop, rendered in a leisurely, ironic, condescending vein to a distant population he regards as savages.

George is funny, fun company. But ultimately, it's not his story. "Hamilton" is, among other things, about who owns history, who gets to be in charge of the narrative. One of its greatest accomplishments is that it leaves no doubt that these scrappy, adrenaline-charged young folks, with their fast way with rhyme that gives order to chaos, have every right to be in charge of the story here.

In temperament, they're probably a lot closer to the real men who inspired this show than the stately figures of high school history books. Before they were founding fathers, these guys were rebellious sons, moving to a new, fierce, liberating beat that never seemed to let up. "Hamilton" makes us feel the unstoppable, urgent rhythm of a nation being born.

Hamilton

Music, lyrics and book by Lin-Manuel Miranda, inspired by the book "Alexander Hamilton" by Ron Chernow; directed by Thomas Kail; choreography by Andy Blankenbuehler; music direction and orchestrations by Alex Lacamoire; sets by David Korins; costumes by Paul Tazewell; lighting by Howell Binkley; sound by Nevin Steinberg; hair and wig design by Charles G. LaPointe; music coordinators, Michael Keller and Michael Aarons; technical supervisor, Hudson Theatrical Associates; production stage manager, J. Philip Bassett; company manager, Brig Berney; arrangements by Mr. Lacamoire and Mr. Miranda; general manager, Baseline Theatrical/Andy Jones. Presented by Jeffrey Seller, Sander Jacobs, Jill Furman and the Public Theater. At the Richard Rodgers Theater, 877-250-2929, hamiltonbroadway.com. Running time: 2 hours 45 minutes.

WITH: Daveed Diggs (Marquis de Lafayette/Thomas Jefferson), Renée Elise Goldsberry (Angelica Schuyler), Jonathan Groff (King George), Christopher Jackson (George Washington), Jasmine Cephas Jones (Peggy Schuyler/Maria Reynolds), Lin-Manuel Miranda (Alexander Hamilton), Javier Muñoz (alternate Alexander Hamilton), Leslie Odom Jr. (Aaron Burr), Okieriete Onaodowan (Hercules Mulligan/James Madison), Anthony Ramos (John Laurens/Philip Hamilton) and Phillipa Soo (Eliza Hamilton).

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