



Renee C. Romano, Claire Bond Potter, eds. *Historians on Hamilton: How a Blockbuster Musical Is Restaging America's Past*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018. Illustrations. 396 pp. \$120.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8135-9030-1.

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Renee C. Romano and Claire Bond Potter's *Historians on Hamilton* offers readers a fascinating and challenging examination of Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* and the historical interpretations and topics the musical emphasizes. By providing the necessary contexts for understanding the creation, marketing, and reception of the show, and by considering the ways *Hamilton* stages a selective representation of history, this wide-ranging and insightful volume delivers exactly what its audience needs.

Romano and Potter wisely divide the volume into three sections ("acts"), each containing five chapters that address a particular aspect of Miranda's musical: "The Script," "The Stage," and "The Audience." This structure highlights the variety of ways the volume contributes to readers' understandings of the show and the mania it has helped inspire. The first section focuses on how Ron Chernow's *Alexander Hamilton* (2004), the inspiration for the show and the historical source of many of the details and much of its interpretation of Alexander Hamilton's life, fits into the larger historiography of Hamilton's life and the revolutionary period. For those who are relatively unfamiliar with this era in the American past or who have learned about it most recently from *Hamilton* itself, this section will be revelatory. William

Hogeland's essay clearly details the many ways that the show reflects Chernow's understanding of Hamilton and his times, including an overemphasis on Hamilton's abolitionist credentials. Similarly, Joanne Freeman explains how the show does not, and could never, display the depth and intensity of Hamilton's politics, especially his anti-democratic and militaristic impulses. Despite this, she notes that the musical's quality and popularity have created an opportunity for historians and teachers to help people "see that he wasn't always right, or even wise; rather, he was part of a conversation that sometimes aimed high and sometimes aimed low, and in doing so, they'll discover the real complexity of America's founding" (p. 54).

While all of the volume's essayists celebrate Miranda's ability to create a thrilling and moving show (and we should never forget that it is a global phenomenon based on the life of a Treasury secretary), several of the authors effectively criticize the show for its emphases and its omissions. For example, many commentators have praised *Hamilton*'s purposeful casting decisions, crediting its producers for daring to present the American past with a multiracial cast that represents the diversity of the nation's present. In powerful essays, Lyra Monteiro and Leslie Harris remind readers that Americans "*did* look like the people in this play, if you

looked outside the halls of government” and that slavery played a central role in New York economic life and culture during the era depicted (p. 62). These essays persuasively contend that the play misses an opportunity to feature accurate and inclusive histories by having its diverse cast of performers tell an almost exclusively white story. Similarly, Catherine Allgor admits that “it seems churlish indeed to criticize such a transformative piece of theater” while also explaining that the show should do much more to include women’s history and perspectives (p. 114).

The volume’s second act focuses on the staging of the show and the “Founders Chic” version of American history it presents. In one of the most critical essays in the volume, David Waldstreicher and Jeffrey Pasley argue that “*Hamilton* departs significantly from the historical record” by “fantasizing a Hamilton who begins by identifying with flogged slaves” and concluding with the suggestion that Hamilton would have devoted his later years to abolitionism if he only had more time (p. 158). This section also includes informative essays that demonstrate how *Hamilton* corresponds with other stage and film depictions of the American Revolution and that put the *Hamilton* craze in the context of more than a century of other “hot tickets” and the many innovative shows that preceded and inspired it.

The book’s final section, appropriately enough, turns its attention to who tells the story of *Hamilton*. In their essays, Jim Cullen and Joseph Adelman remind readers that *Hamilton* has created rare and valuable opportunities to connect authentically with students and, as Adelman states, to help popular audiences appreciate that “we cannot fully know the past or even create a single narrative about it” (pp. 279). Patricia Herrera’s essay amplifies earlier essays and reflects on how dangerously seductive the production’s “utopian vision of America as a model of diversity, equality, and democracy” can be, even to her own daughter who wanted to dress up as Angelica Schuyler, a

slave owner, for Halloween (p. 261). Her essay serves as a call to action, concluding “We must dare to reckon with America’s racist past in order to manifest an equitable and inclusive present and future” (p. 274).

Historians on Hamilton concludes with Potter’s intriguing essay on the role social media platforms and communities have played in the marketing of *Hamilton*, a sample syllabus for teaching a course on *Hamilton*, and a detailed chronology of Hamilton’s life, the ways he was commemorated on currency and otherwise, and the origins and production of the musical.

This collection of brief accessible essays offers nice balance of perspectives and topics. Taken as a whole, they argue that while Miranda’s *Hamilton* is not as revolutionary, either in terms of artistic originality or disruptive historical narrative, as many have suggested, it remains remarkably entertaining and presents an almost unique opportunity for historians to engage the public in meaningful conversations about the nation’s past and the nature of history itself. Everyone who has seen the show or listened to the cast recording, especially those who teach about it, will appreciate how this provocative and informative volume not only enlightens but also prompts them to revisit the show, one last time.

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