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MEDIA REVIEWS

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

With *Great Performances*: *Hamilton's America*, PBS brings Lin-Manuel Miranda and his phenomenally successful Broadway musical into the home and classroom. The 82-minute documentary both chronicles the creation and reception of *Hamilton: An American Musical* (2015) and teaches viewers about the historical life and times of Alexander Hamilton and his compatriots, while also 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 a ubiquitous theme in both the interviews and the film's overall 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, 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.

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Although this emphasis on connections is an effective way to unify the documentary and marry it with the message of the musical, it 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, despite dance being an essential part of the show.[1] As Anne Searcy writes, "Take away the show's lyrics, and you would still have a two-and-a-half hour dance piece about Alexander Hamilton."[2]

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 cast members Phillipa Soo and Renée Elise Goldsberry 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 percent of the airtime, not quite nine minutes.[3]

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

[2] Searcy, "Bringing Dance Back to the Center in *Hamilton*."

[3] Tabulated using Cathy Deng's tool at http://arementalkingtoomuch.com/.

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

Hamilton's America is the documentary *Hamilton* deserves. It is one of the finest films about an individual Broadway musical, 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 learning tools in the form of entertaining, accessible chronicles of the history of Broadway and, by extension, of the United States.

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Dixon, Kyle, and Michael Stein. *Stranger Things Vol. 1*. Lakeshore Records LKS 348342, 2016, CD.

Dixon, Kyle, and Michael Stein. *Stranger Things Vol. 2*. Lakeshore Records LKS 348462, 2016, CD.

When it first aired in July 2016, the Netflix series *Stranger Things* received immediate attention for its striking homage to 1980s pop culture. Drawing on the aesthetics of blockbuster films from the period, such as the oeuvre of filmmaker and composer John Carpenter, and leaning heavily on eighties icons like *Dungeons & Dragons*, amateur radio, and Winona Ryder, the series' creators—brothers Matt and Ross Duffer—capitalized on the recent rise of retro culture (a trend evident in the *Blade Runner* sequel [2017], the screen adaptation of Stephen King's 1988 novel *IT* [2017], and Marvel's *Guardians of the Galaxy* films [2014–Present]). The series' story, a science fiction horror narrative exploring the trauma of losing a child, struck a chord with viewers, and the series was nominated for eighteen primetime Emmy awards in 2017, of which it won five. One of these awards went to the series' composers, Kyle Dixon and Michael Stein, for the show's title cue.

Dixon and Stein are members of the Austin-based, synthwave quartet Survive, hired by the Duffers after the brothers used the band's "Dirge" (2012) in the show's demo reel. Dixon and Stein rely on vintage, modular analog synthesizers to recreate the sounds of '70s and '80s soundtracks by artists like Vangelis, Tangerine Dream, and John Carpenter, and cite as further influences '90s experimental groups like Aphex Twin, Autechre, and Bogdan Raczynski. Their retro

[4] 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.

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