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# Review: Hamilton's emotional centre, brilliant details and polished cast let it soar

The powerhouse production's Edmonton debut demonstrates why its become a cultural touchstone and the most popular musical of all time

Tom Murray

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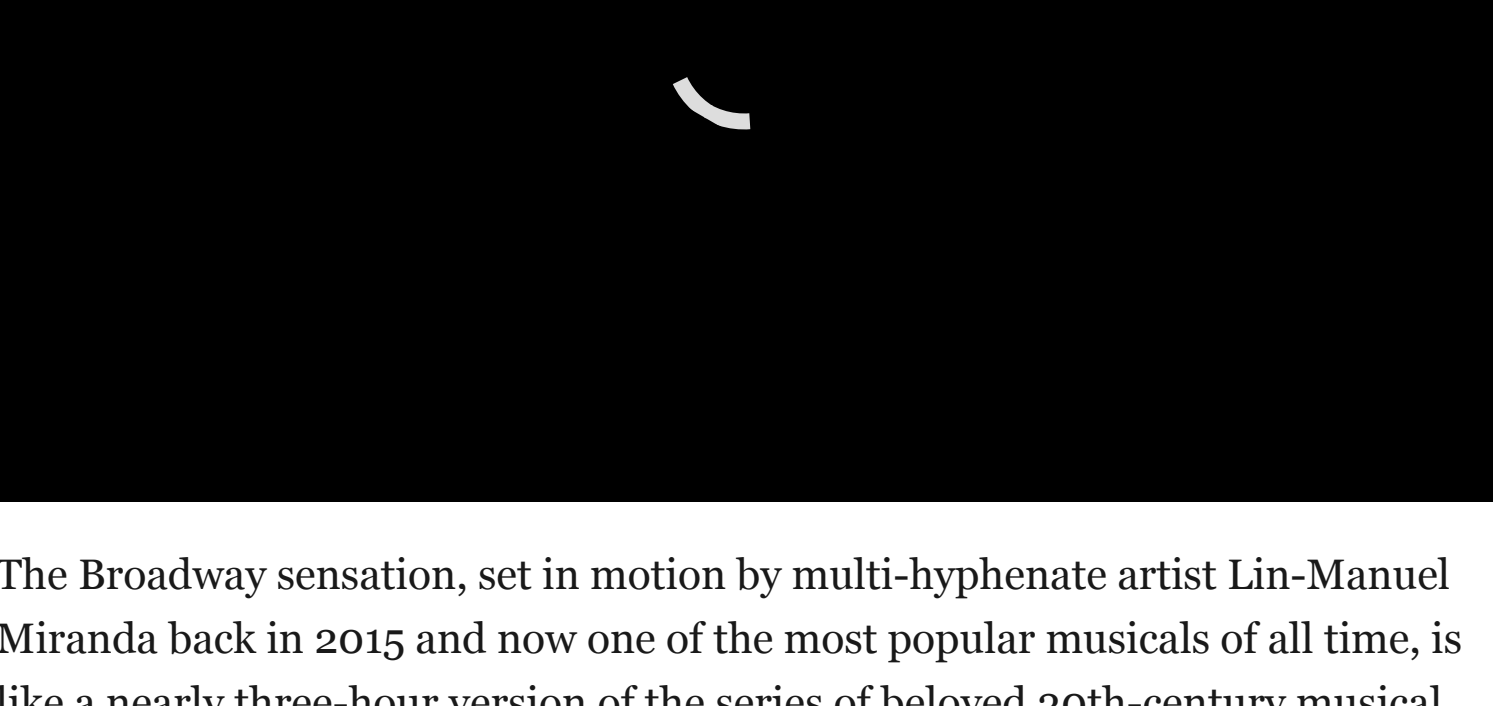
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Julius Thomas III, centre, plays Alexander Hamilton in the touring production of Hamilton which opened at Edmonton's Jubilee Auditorium Wednesday night. PHOTO BY JOAN MARCUS /Supplied

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If you're of the age to remember Schoolhouse Rock, then [Hamilton](#) will be right up your alley.



The Broadway sensation, set in motion by multi-hyphenate artist Lin-Manuel Miranda back in 2015 and now one of the most popular musicals of all time, is like a nearly three-hour version of the series of beloved 20th-century musical shorts. Except instead of hopping from lessons in math, science and grammar, Hamilton focuses on one thing: history. In particular the history of the American Revolutionary War and one of its most overlooked figures, Founding Father Alexander Hamilton.

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That and the fact these historical figures are played by African-Americans, and the dialogue is mostly rapped has made Hamilton something of a cultural touchstone. The use of rap isn't done in a lazy way, either; hip-hop heads will have a field day finding vocal parallels between figures like Hercules Mulligan (Brandon Louis Armstrong) and Busta Rhymes, or nod appreciatively at the occasional tip of the hat towards classics like Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five's The Message. But the cast member's adroit spitting, declaiming, singing and rap battling wouldn't work if Miranda wasn't so intent on going deep into detail.

The fact he's able to do so and hold your interest is nothing short of amazing. Here's a dive into historical minutiae by Hamilton's nemesis, Aaron Burr (as played by Donald Webber, Jr.), from the song Non-Stop: "Alexander joins forces with James Madison and John Jay to write a series of essays, defending the new United States Constitution entitled The Federalist Papers. The plan was to write a total of 25 essays, the work divided evenly among the three men. In the end, they wrote 85 essays in the span of six months. John Jay got sick after writing five, James Madison wrote 29, Hamilton wrote the other 51." Top that, Ghostface Killah!

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You might want to research after the show to catch up on a few of the plot points, like the first cabinet battle, set up like a scene from the movie 8 Mile. It's a rap battle between the preening, sinister Thomas Jefferson (Justin Showell, who also plays French aristocrat the Marquis de Lafayette) and Hamilton (Julius Thomas III), over Hamilton's plans for the country's finances. The Adams administration, which condenses John Adams' presidency into one pithy little number, is interrupted by Hamilton dropping a large book from the upper portion of the stage, laconically declaring, "Sit down, John, you fat mother..." as he does so.

Hamilton himself is presented as hot-headed, passionate, hung up on his upbringing as an orphan. He immediately bonds with Lafayette, Mulligan and John Laurens (Ean S. Cochran, doing double duty as Hamilton's son Philip) in their eagerness to topple their British overlords. Burr, however, is a slippery customer, lacking any firm set of beliefs; he counsels Hamilton to "talk less" and be more circumspect in what he says. This sets up a relationship between the two that is sometimes contentious, sometimes guardedly friendly, but inevitably results in tragedy.

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If this was simply a witty hip-hop recounting of the birth of America it would simply be a fun novelty, but there's an emotional centre to Hamilton that resonates strongly. It's in his marriage to Eliza Schuyler (Victoria Ann Scovens) and his friendship, possibly more with her sister Angelica (Milika Cheree). Both are counterweights to Hamilton's workaholic tendencies and oft-stated dissatisfaction, both sadly ill-served by his weaknesses.

Speaking of weaknesses there are none to be found in this cast, many of whom have been playing their roles for some time. Thomas III is a whirlwind of energy and clear-eyed ambition, while Webber, Jr. shows the complicated side of a man now deemed a villain in American history. Darnell Abraham is suitably grave and cautious as George Washington, the man around whom many scheme and plot, while Cheree shines in her one-set piece, pining for the man she introduced to her sister. Showell and Armstrong are standouts in their roles, often threatening to steal the show, while Rick Negron, who makes occasional appearances as a foppish King George, is a gem.

It's Scovens, however, who deserves some extra attention in all this as the stalwart and badly treated wife. If by the very end you're not moved by both her testimony and future actions then you're probably not breathing.

For more on the production's background, read the preview in the Arts section at [edmontonjournal.com](#).

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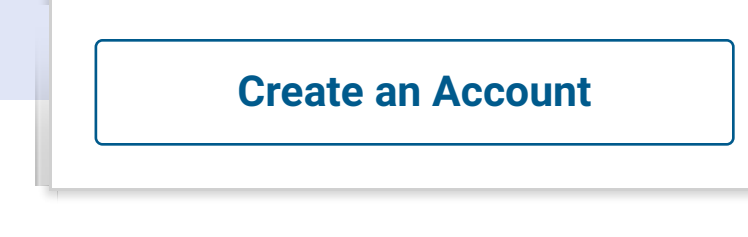
## REVIEW

### Hamilton

**When:** Through July 10

**Where:** Jubilee Auditorium

**Tickets:** Starting at \$59 before taxes, available at the door or in advance from [Ticketmaster.ca](#)



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