

EXHIBIT REVIEW

Hamilton: The Exhibition

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I got to be in the room where it happens.

Well, the room where it *happened*, technically. I'm speaking of *Hamilton: The Exhibition*, the unexpected, brilliantly designed 35,000-square-foot cultural attraction inspired by the 2015 musical from Pulitzer Prize-winning creator Lin-Manuel Miranda that was presented on Chicago's Northerly Island from April through August of 2019. I use the vague descriptor "cultural attraction" because HamEx, as it was dubbed by fans and the smart social media team behind the musical, is a bit of an enigma to define. It's not a museum, though it's large enough to be one. It's not a performance, but it certainly is theatrical. And it's much more content-rich and substantive than those blockbuster-type commercial exhibitions that are presented outside of museums (think of popular installations such as *Titanic: The Artifact Expedition* at the former Discovery Times Square in New York City). More like history-museum-meets-immersive-theater, with a side of traveling circus? Miranda himself struggled with a definition of the exhibition: "I'm still wrestling with the language to describe it... We kept [coming back to], 'Let's do what only we can do!' Which is *not* put out a thing of artifacts, but create a world that you don't want to leave" (Di Nunzio, 2019). And that they do. While it may defy traditional definition, HamEx offers many lessons that museums can learn from

when it comes to strategically using theatricality and metaphor to connect visitors to an exhibit and deepen audience engagement, particularly when it comes to the display of ephemeral history and culture.

Some context for our non-American readers who may not be as familiar with the cultural phenomenon that is *Hamilton: An American Musical*: Based on the life of Alexander Hamilton, one of America's founders who played a central role in the revolution and, as the first Secretary of the U.S. Treasury, created the country's financial system, the Lin-Manuel Miranda musical, inspired by Ron Chernow's biography *Alexander Hamilton*, opened on Broadway in 2015 to unprecedented acclaim, receiving a record sixteen nominations at the 2016 Tony Awards, winning eleven - including Best Musical. With a hybrid score of hip hop, rhythm and blues, pop, and traditional show-tunes and the casting of primarily non-white actors, *Hamilton* portrays an America that is more representative of its citizens and welcomed a new generation of theatre-makers and audiences. Tapping into the popularity of the musical and new found public interest in early-American history, members of *Hamilton's* creative team (led by its scenic designer David Korins and including music director Alex Lacamoire, director Thomas Kail, producer Jeffrey Seller, and Lin-Manuel Miranda) partnered with scholar Joanne B. Freeman, US

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Figure 1. Visitors observing the hanging-balance scale in the St. Croix gallery. Photo by Joan Marcus, courtesy of Hamilton: The Exhibition.

Historian and Professor of History and American Studies at Yale University, to create *Hamilton: The Exhibition*.

I should confess that I am, by trade and passion, the target audience for *Hamilton: The Exhibition*. Equal parts theater kid, history nerd, and political junkie, I found this cultural mashup of mediums relevant to so many layers of my identity that it was unlikely I would not enjoy myself. That said, my expectations were high as I entered the hangar-like event facility that housed the exhibition. I queued with others in my timed entry group and was given a headset with a remote-control. This technology differed from typical audio accessories given at museums, as the earpieces did not cover my ears but rather sat about an inch away, allowing me to move seamlessly between conversations with other visitors and listening to the narration. I

was instructed that the audio segments would be triggered automatically as I entered different galleries, and to keep an eye out for areas in each room that offered optional additional information and backstory with the click of your remote. (This was a nice touch, but more on that later.)

In the first gallery of the exhibition, a large-screen film of Miranda and his Hamilton co-star Phillipa Soo welcomed us and primed us for what to expect ahead: a deep dive into the history of Alexander Hamilton, the historical figure. While obviously inspired by the Broadway show, today's experience was not going to be about the musical but rather about the namesake founding father and the events of his time. (So perhaps this is an Alexander Hamilton pop-up history museum, but at an unusually major scale?)

Lin and company weren't lying. I turned the corner to enter the St. Croix gallery and was



Figure 2. Barrels, clothing, and furniture fly through the air as visitors pass through the Hurricane gallery. Photo courtesy of the author.

immersed in the life of young Hamilton. My attention was caught by a giant replica of a hanging-balance scale, calling to mind the tools Hamilton used as a young barterer in the Caribbean, and more metaphorically the scales of justice he would so frequently consider during the early years of our new nation. On closer examination, I discovered that the scales hovered over a pool of water, wherein old oak barrels would light up with facts of the time period; for example: “The unpaid labor of millions of slaves created the Caribbean economic powerhouse of the 1700s” (Figure 1).

In this gallery and throughout the exhibition, we heard ambient underscoring which, I later learned, was recorded by a forty-piece

orchestra performing a symphonic rearrangement of the musical’s score, created exclusively for HamEx. This ambitious decision paid dividends: the music evoked the emotions and urgency of the Broadway show without hitting us over the head with the connection between those numbers and the themes of each gallery. The underscoring had no lyrics, since those would’ve conflicted with the narration and with reading the wall-texts. This subtle use of music got me thinking about how museums can do a better job tapping into the emotional aspects of their content, rather than simply the intellectual.

This first gallery also set a precedent that would be followed throughout the exhibition: it shed light on the liberties that were taken in the



Figure 3. Visitors walk in Hamilton's footsteps as they descend the ramp into the New York gallery. Photo by David Korins, courtesy of Hamilton: The Exhibition.

musical's script, adding detail and nuance and correcting the facts where necessary. For example, those familiar with the show may assume that Hamilton was an abolitionist. A framed label on the wood-paneled walls informs us that this isn't the case, but that "he did oppose slavery." (Quite the important distinction, and typical of the trust the HamEx creators place in the intelligence of their visitors.)

Leaving St. Croix, I found myself in the midst of the hurricane that Hamilton survived before writing his way out of the Caribbean. This design element was particularly dramatic, with exquisite lighting effects as barrels, desks, and gowns slowly twisted past me, evoking the natural disaster that took the lives of so many. (Many, but not Hamilton.) What could easily have been a simple hallway to the next gallery instead continued the story of Hamilton's survival. Fans of the musical will be reminded of an emotional number from the second act and feel as if they've been sucked into its epicenter (Figure 2).

The hurricane gallery is where museums can take a valuable lesson from HamEx: The theatrical, visual, and musical elements aided the forward momentum of the intellectual *and* emotional narrative in ways that simply displaying artifacts behind glass cannot. This is not to confuse *theatricality* with *spectacle*, which may be lavish yet lacking in ideas, creativity, and depth. A major distinction between *Hamilton: The Exhibition* and other major commercial exhibitions was its ability to educate through the historical information delivered via text panels and narration while also inspiring complex feelings and even wonder through theatrical storytelling.

I turned a corner to enter the next gallery and found myself "on the bow of a ship heading for a new land." A wooden ramp led me down into Hamilton's New York. Of this gallery, Lin-Manuel Miranda has said that "[w]e wanted to recreate what it was like for me in the show, walking down the gangplank from the ship into New York City for the first time"



Figure 4. Statues of the players in Hamilton’s life await visitors in the Schuyler Mansion gallery. Photo by David Korins, courtesy of Hamilton: The Exhibition.

(*Playbill*, 2019). Dramatic entrance aside, this gallery was probably the most comparable to a traditional history museum experience. Large paintings, documents, and maps hung on the walls, interspersed with touchscreens that allowed visitors to dive deeper into many facets of this period of Hamilton’s life. At the center of this gallery was a sprawling model of the city of New York as Alex would have known it. I’m always a sucker for a good city model, and the juxtaposition of this slice of 18th century New York in the center of this vast hall of history was particularly effective in evoking the complexities and challenges of the time (Figure 3).

As we continued on, we learned more about George Washington’s army and the various ways he leaned on Hamilton during the Revolution. This is where we started to see another thread that I loved throughout the exhibition: the use of text as a design element. Fans of the musical will recognize the centrality of this

theme (“*Why do you write like you’re running out of time?*”), but the beautiful weaving of language and text in the exhibition will also resonate with those unfamiliar with the show. We observe replicas of the workspaces Washington and Hamilton would have used, with illuminated, wall-size excerpts from letters they exchanged leading up to the Battle of Yorktown. Simple, yet stunning.

Next I was transported to the Schuyler Mansion, where the 1780 Winter’s Ball was frozen in time as life-size statues of the players in Hamilton’s life linger, each seemingly eager to share their story. Deep blue walls and chandelier lighting expertly balanced the room, allowing the figures to stand out in an intimate manner. This gallery was one of my favorite places to use my remote to trigger those additional narration segments on my headset. Each figure, voiced by either the original cast member who played them on Broadway or Historical Advisor Joanne



Figure 5. A glimpse of opulence in King George’s hallway. Photo courtesy of the author.

B. Freeman, spoke a more detailed and richer history of their role in the narrative (Figure 4).

An intimidating collection of cannons pointed directly at an army tent housing the next gallery, where we would witness the battle of Yorktown. This was one of few areas in the exhibition where we were not allowed to take photos, and for good reason as we were treated to a dose of old-fashioned magic that would have been a bummer to have spoiled for the next visitors via social media exposure. Within the tent, we sat on benches surrounding a table detailed with a map of the colonies. Miniature model ships, soldiers, and horses moved magically as Christopher Jackson, the actor who played Washington in the musical, and

Miranda talked us through the events of the Battle of Yorktown, where the colonies defeated the British and won their freedom. Notably, apart from the introductory film and a surprise in the final gallery, this was the only space where guests played the role of passive observer, a nice break from the level of interaction and immersion elsewhere.

“What comes next?” Perhaps the starkest transition within the exhibition, as we found ourselves passing through an opulent hallway in pink lighting, where a portrait of King George exuded the same sarcasm announced on the neon sign beside him: “Awesome. WOW.” Obviously this is a not a literal quote from the king, but a fun easter egg for fans of the musical

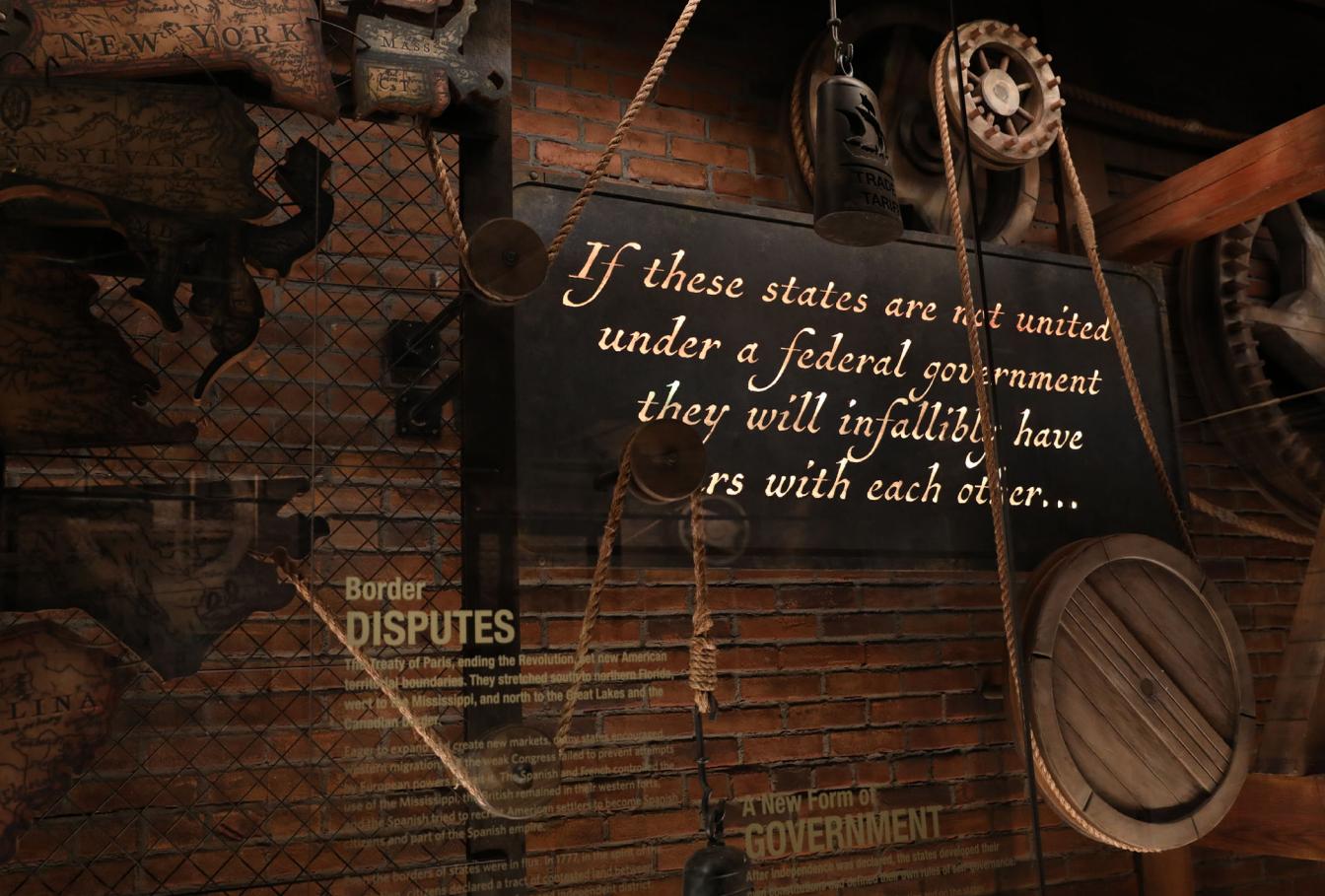


Figure 6. Ropes yank and pull wooden carvings of the states to represent the forming of a new government. Photo by Joan Marcus, courtesy of Hamilton: The Exhibition.

—and a contemporary encapsulation of how the British crown might have felt about the break-away republic (Figure 5). Would a museum dare to take such creative license?

From there, we began to witness the post-war process of uniting the states. If I had to pick a favorite room in HamEx, it would likely be this large, brick-and-fencing lined gallery. Here, the exhibition’s creative director David Korins (who was also the Tony Award-winning set designer of the musical) continued to pull in visual elements of his Hamilton stage, specifically the theme of ropes and pulleys: America lifting itself up, country on the rise. Wooden carvings of the states were pulled apart and awkwardly reassembled within the walls, reminiscent of puzzle pieces that should fit together but which friction makes it difficult to connect. A large rope can be seen running in the floor, and

as I walked its path I felt myself called back to the musical’s choreography, as if I had become one of the cast members. I felt the grit of those who actually pulled those ropes, physically and metaphorically, during the founding of the United States. The wonder of the many moving pieces simultaneously had me feeling exhausted and awestruck; the visual storytelling in this space clearly evoked the world-building of the early United States (Figure 6).

The next few galleries walked us through the complexities of creating a new government. As the musical teaches, “Winning was easy, young man. Governing is harder.” We were treated to a delightful animation depicting the conflict between Hamilton and his fellow Federalist proponents of the Constitution, and Patrick Henry and those who vehemently opposed it. Another highlight of the exhibition



Figure 7. A hallway of carnival games demonstrates economic hardships of the time. Photo by Joan Marcus, courtesy of Hamilton: The Exhibition.

for me was the carnival-esque hallway of games: “Step right up to play Economic Depression plinko!” (Spoiler alert: everybody loses) (Figure 7).

The creation of the National Bank, one of Hamilton’s chief legacies, was demonstrated through a room-sized ball-track contraption in the form of a national sorting machine: Spin the wheel at your local bank (I chose Charleston) and watch your “money” make its way through the tubes across the ceiling before being deposited in the Philadelphia Federal Reserve. Engaging children and adults alike, this design element was a fun and effective way to visualize the functionality of the new (and hotly contested) financial system (Figure 8).

The election of 1800, notorious for being an electoral tie between Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr, was realized in a brightly lit,

circular gallery with a cyclone of ballots flying within a pillared rotunda – one pillar for each then-existing state. Following the election, any remaining kinship between Hamilton and Burr dissolved, as I read in a hallway lined with text from letters the two exchanged leading up to their infamous final confrontation. Which of course both history and the musical have told us is coming: the duel. Along with statues of both men hauntingly staged on a large plinth, guns aimed at each other, a timeline projected on the wall depicted the events of the 32 hours that Hamilton survived after leaving home for the dueling ground that fateful day—and, in ironic parallel, the 32 years that Burr continued living after that shared moment. This dual timeline was one of the most revelatory elements of a powerful gallery, and it included a handful of facts of which I was previously unaware—most



Figure 8. Visitors learn about the creation of the National Bank via a gravity powered ball sorting mechanism. Photo by Joan Marcus, courtesy of Hamilton: The Exhibition.

interestingly that on the day Aaron Burr died in 1836, Hamilton's son, Alexander Jr., presided over the divorce proceedings filed by Burr's wife, Eliza Jumel. Talk about a nail in the not-so-proverbial coffin (Figure 9).

Nearing the end of the exhibition, we were confronted with what I believe to be the most profound theme of the musical: the question of legacy. As we've learned both from the show and the exhibition, Alexander Hamilton was nothing short of obsessed with his legacy. To quote the fictional Hamilton of the musical as he's about to die, "What is a legacy? It's planting seeds in a garden you never get to see." The pen was then put in our hands as we were invited to contribute answers to prompts such as, "How can democracy do better?" and "What is your wish for America?" (Figure 10).

As we wrote our words on the post-it notes, I couldn't help but be moved by the central design element of this final gallery: a simple writing desk built on spirals of fabric containing Hamilton's writings, which flowed to the ceiling and over the entire space. This celebration of the power of the pen—bringing ideas to life and watching them take root, flourish, and (hopefully) become something bigger than us—to me, that's legacy (Figure 11).

As we handed over our headsets, we were given a pair of 3D glasses and led into a theater for the final experience, a film of the opening number from Hamilton: An American Musical, starring none other than Miranda alongside members of one of the touring casts of the show. For exhibition visitors who may not have had



Figure 9. Statues of Hamilton and Burr mid-duel, with dualing timeline depicting the final 32 hours and 32 years of Hamilton and Burr’s lives (respectively). Photo courtesy the author.

the opportunity to catch the creator himself in the title role while on Broadway (or his quick run in Puerto Rico), this was quite a treat.

At the ribbon-cutting for *Hamilton: The Exhibition*, Miranda was asked, “In the history of theatre, has there ever been any kind of an exhibit like this one?” He responded, “I don’t think so, but I’d love to walk around the Les Mis exhibition one day!” (Hetrick, 2019). And wouldn’t that be great? I would be first in line for any equivalently thoughtful and emotionally powerful exhibitions derived from other major theatrical works, musical or not. I know there are others like me, many of whom were no doubt eagerly awaiting their chance to visit the Hamilton exhibition on its planned tour to

other U.S. cities. Sadly, HamEx closed in Chicago several months earlier than projected, and its subsequent tour was canceled. Of the change in plans, Hamilton producer Jeffrey Seller said, “You can put it down to my naiveté. I built something that was too big, too beautiful, too gigantic, to move around” (Jones, 2019). That’s not hyperbole. Per Korins, the exhibition would have required 80 trucks to tour, as it contains approximately “25 Broadway sets worth of stuff.” Much like the historical Alexander, this team certainly has no small ideas. But it’s also worth noting that, while figures are hard to obtain, there were signs that the \$13 million exhibition was not meeting visitation expectations.



Figure 10. Visitors contribute thoughts on how to improve America in the Legacy gallery. Photo courtesy the author.

How do we make this kind of concept sustainable? Why did an experience so original and exquisitely crafted not see the success that one would expect from a spinoff of one of the most talked-about pop-culture brands in years? What lessons can future attempts at this theatrical style of exhibit innovation learn from HamEx? I wouldn't be the first to point out that the location of the exhibition was not ideal. While relatively near Chicago's museum campus, where other cultural institutions such as the Field Museum, Shedd Aquarium, and Adler Planetarium stand, Northerly Island is off the beaten path and unfamiliar even to some lifelong Chicagoans. Perhaps more advertising and

education about getting to the exhibition would have been helpful, or even a partnership with a neighboring cultural institution.

Another issue may have been the cost of admission. At \$39.00, a full-price ticket was more expensive than entry to many museums, and while I'd argue that the experience was well-deserving of that investment (and significantly less than the price of a Broadway show), it likely limited access financially. The producers eventually offered discounted tickets to the exhibition (an unexpected move given the popularity of the musical, which still sells out nightly in New York, London, and elsewhere), as



Figure 11. Spirals of fabric containing Hamilton's writings flow from a replica of his writing desk in the Legacy gallery. Photo by David Korins, courtesy of Hamilton: The Exhibition.

well as free group admission to all Chicago Public Schools students in grades four and higher. It's unfortunate that more of those students weren't able to take advantage of the opportunity due to the exhibition's limited run.

I don't have the answers, but I know more people deserve to experience this type of historical and cultural engagement, regardless of how we may categorize it. Theatre journalist Kris Vire, writing for *Chicago Magazine* upon the announcement of the exhibition's premature closing, noted that many of the objects on display were not authentic documents: "Visitors would be paying to see a collection of renderings, reproductions, and reenactments" (Vire, 2019). While he makes a fair point, I would argue that those objects, authentic or reproduced, were not what folks were there to see. Rather, they were paying for the immersive narrative experience, the living, emotionally complex history lesson—the human *story* behind the history. And that's what theatricality allowed HamEx to do, and what made it different than what a history museum might have done with the same content. In this case, the theatricality was brought to the exhibition by theater people: the creative team behind the musical. But museum people can also learn how to do this. These kinds of theatrical elements can help dust off and bring to life the museum experience, allowing visitors to become more fully engaged and immersed by taking a multisensory step back in time and into the story.

"God help and forgive me, I wanna build something that's gonna outlive me," sings the musical's Hamilton. My hope for the legacy of *Hamilton: The Exhibition* is that it inspires other practitioners and institutions to create museum-like experiences with such voracity and creativity that this style of innovation becomes part of the cultural vernacular, so much

so that the need for a strict definition no longer exists. Perhaps then more people will have the opportunity to be "in the room where it happens."
END

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