

What was Missing in *Hamilton*

by Julio Noboa Polanco

It is nearly impossible to ignore or escape all the hype and hyperbole surrounding the undeniable masterpiece of song, music and narrative that is the historic Broadway extravaganza, *Hamilton*.

Never have I seen it live as have many of my family and friends and hope to do so one day, but the following critique has little to do with the artistic, aesthetic or emotional power generated from a live performance. It has rather to do with the narrative itself, who tells the story, and what is missing from this retelling of the people and events related to the American Revolution.

There is no need for me to heap more praise on *Hamilton* beyond what the critics, the 11 Tony Awards, and an adoring audience have already given this outstanding labor of artistic love by Lin-Manuel Miranda which raises him to the status of genius in the eyes of many.

Having experienced his previous Broadway hit, *In the Heights* with the original cast on tour impressed me deeply and served to boost my often-beleaguered Puerto Rican pride. Being Boricua, I felt that all the praise and adulation Miranda received for *Hamilton* reflected on me as well, similar to the pride I feel for having Sonia Sotomayor adjudicating on the Supreme Court and AOC speaking truth to power.

Having seen the movie version of *Hamilton* I clearly understand beyond the aesthetic achievement of this musical, and the quality of the performers, but also the power of an historical narrative focusing on an islander, an outsider, a rebel and a driven man such as was Alexander Hamilton and is Lin-Manuel.

I was moved by the performances, and the incredible variety of musical styles, all done in an appropriate storyline and setting. But after reflecting on the entire *Hamilton* experience Three Fundamental Issues came to mind beyond the purely aesthetic aspects.

First of all, many are commenting on the fact that it is Black performers playing and singing the role of George Washington and Aaron Burr among other White historical figures and how impactful that is for Black and urban audiences to experience. However, I have a problem with Black performers playing and glorifying White men and White

history, rather than their own.

This was not a play about Toussaint L'Ouverture, who liberated Haiti from the mighty French empire and established the first independent republic in the Americas; nor was it

about Patrice Lumumba of the Congo, a visionary revolutionary dedicated to his nation's independence from Belgium who was assassinated with the collaboration of our CIA.

In fact, there is not one significant Black character in the entire musical when there could have been at least one worthy of inclusion. This was about White males, mostly slave holders who were part of a landed gentry, an elite who nevertheless had legitimate issues against the British Empire and who were justified in seeking their independence.

But this is not Black history, it is White history that is being retold, recast, and re-packaged for a wider and more racially diverse audience.

The second issue is that few have pointed out the obvious irony that a Puerto Rican, whose very homeland has for a century and until the present day been an exploited colony of the American Empire, is creating a musical masterpiece not about his own nation's struggle for independence and the outstanding men and women who championed it, no less admirable than Alexander Hamilton.

Instead it is about the independence struggle of that very same Empire that is still dominating his own homeland! This irony cannot be ignored or overlooked by Boricuas who know the history of their beloved island nation and their long struggle for independence first from the Spanish Empire and then from the most powerful nation on Earth today.

Finally, and most importantly, is the enormous gap in the narrative telling of the American history that totally ignores and makes invisible the essential contribution Hispanics made to the eventual success of the American Revolution. That this historical gap went unnoticed by the critics and commentators only reinforces how significant was this historical erasure and the incredible lost opportunity by Lin-Manuel.

What was not included in the array of persons and events depicted in *Hamilton* is the fact that many Latin Americans, under the leadership of Spanish General Bernardo de Gálvez,



Lin-Manuel Miranda, the genius behind the Broadway extravaganza, *Hamilton*.

fought and sacrificed their lives supporting the cause of American independence. Just imagine the impact that very fact would have on the prejudiced views many Americans have of Latinos and even how Latinos view themselves within the context of an American history whose textbook and cinematic retelling always left them out!

Certain historical facts about the significance of that Hispanic contribution to the American Revolution need to be considered and disseminated, among them are that:

1. Gálvez's victorious campaigns against the British in the Gulf of Mexico were pivotal and significant to the success of the American Revolution. These campaigns prevented the British from opening up a southern front against the American revolutionaries who were in no position to effectively combat the British on two fronts.
2. The men who fought in his campaigns included a wide variety of races and ethnic groups prominently among them were Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and Cubans who risked and sacrificed their lives in support of the American Revolution.
3. George Washington himself recognized the undeniable contribution of General Gálvez, who was one of the most prominent international figures in attendance at his own presidential inauguration.

So why is this not in the public-school history books, nor even mentioned in all the innumerable films and novels about the American Revolution? So, why didn't Lin-Manuel know this, include this, or have any of his historical consultants inform him?

There is, in fact, a Texas city named after Gálvez, namely Galveston on the coast near Houston. There are also a number of monuments in his honor, among others, an equestrian statue of him adjacent to the New Orleans World Trade Center and a Galvez Plaza next to Baton Rouge City Hall in the state capital of Louisiana.

All this raises the question as to why Lin-Manuel and his historical consultants were ignorant of this Spanish general and his contributions; and if they knew of his very existence, why was he left out of the narrative?

Short of featuring Gálvez as a major figure in the *Hamilton* narrative as he should have been, it would have sufficed, to at least have had one musical number honoring his contribution, and that of the Latino soldiers who made his victories possible.

In conclusion, I view *Hamilton* as an artistic masterpiece, very much like the iconic painting, *The Creation of Adam* by Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. It depicts a White Male God on a cloud extending his finger to touch that of Adam, another White Male who is supposedly the father of humanity. As much as I admire the masterful art of the painter and beauty of the painting, I totally reject the narrative depiction of the Great Spirit as a White male god as much as I disagree with the depiction of our human ancestors as European when we know they were Black Africans!

In much the same way, I recognize, value and enjoy the aesthetic masterpiece that is *Hamilton*, while rejecting the messages broadcast by its distorted and incomplete telling of American revolutionary history.

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General Bernardo de Gálvez

For more information about General Bernardo de Gálvez, his life and times and accomplishments:

Barbara A. Mitchell. America's Spanish Savior: Bernardo de Gálvez via HistoryNet:

bit.ly/spanish-savior

José Calvo Poyato. Bernardo de Gálvez: el español que salvó a Estados Unidos via La Vanguardia:

bit.ly/galvez-el-espanol

Wikipedia: Bernardo de Gálvez

bit.ly/wiki-galvez