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CULTURE

The Mixed Reception of the *Hamilton* Premiere in Puerto Rico

Political discord coupled with the lingering effects of 2017's Hurricane Maria challenged the arrival of the famed musical.

DANIEL POLLACK-PELZNER JAN 18, 2019



Lin-Manuel Miranda, pictured with cast members, raises the Puerto Rican flag at the close of the *Hamilton* premiere in San Juan on January 11, 2019. (EMILIO MADRID-KUSER / BROADWAY.COM)

Heading into the opening night of *Hamilton* in San Juan, Puerto Rico, on January 11, I wasn't sure what to expect. The musical was supposed to begin previews three days earlier at the theater of the University of Puerto Rico, the alma mater of Lin-Manuel Miranda's father, Luis, under a new million-dollar roof financed by the show's fundraising

campaign to repair hurricane damage. Some students and staff had other ideas, however, leading to a controversy that redefined what it meant to take the show to Puerto Rico.

When Miranda went to the island in 2010 as the star of his Caribbean diaspora hip-hop musical, *In the Heights*, he received a joyous welcome. One festive number included a Spanish-language call to raise the Puerto Rican flag; the audience members pulled 500 *banderas* from their pockets, the producer Jeffrey Seller told me over lunch at the Condado Vanderbilt Hotel, in San Juan. Although Miranda was born in New York, he spent childhood summers in Puerto Rico in his family's hometown of Vega Alta, where his grandfather ran the local credit union. Lacking fluent Spanish, Miranda passed many days alone making home movies. To be cheered by a Puerto Rican audience, he told Oprah last spring, "closed something in me I didn't even know was open."

Hamilton—another hip-hop story of a man born in the Caribbean who comes to New York to reinvent himself and his nation—opened on Broadway to rave reviews in 2015. Miranda then called Seller and said he wanted to take his second show to Puerto Rico. (Broadway tours seldom visit San Juan because of the time and cost of shipping sets from the mainland, the producer explained.) Then, in 2017, Hurricane Maria devastated the island. "The hurricane changed our mission," Seller recalled. Instead of a simple homecoming, *Hamilton* in Puerto Rico would become a fundraising venture, a tourism lure, and a declaration of support for the island's recovery. Miranda had already helped to raise \$43 million through his father's Hispanic Federation for immediate relief. Revenue from *Hamilton* in Puerto Rico, which runs until January 27, with Miranda returning to the title role, is expected to bring in \$15 million to benefit arts organizations on the island.

[*Read: How Lin-Manuel Miranda shapes history*]

At the center of the discord over the show was the fact that UPR, like much of the island's education and economic system, is in crisis. Puerto Rico owes a reported \$72 billion in municipal bonds, accumulated over the past two decades to pay for social services as businesses and residents left for the mainland. PROMESA, a financial oversight board appointed in 2016 by President Barack Obama, had imposed unpopular austerity measures: hundreds of school closures, along with tuition hikes and budget cuts at UPR.

Miranda initially supported PROMESA, invoking Hamilton's plea for governmental relief after a hurricane hit the Caribbean in 1772, and implored Congress to pass a debt-restructuring bill. ("I write about Puerto Rico today just as Hamilton wrote about St. Croix in his time," he said in a *New York Times* op-ed.) As the star and creator of a musical that champions America's first Treasury secretary, and that was famously hatched and hallowed in Obama's White House, Miranda appeared closely linked to the federal authority that had taken away Puerto Rico's control over its own economy. When Miranda gave a talk at UPR in 2017 to announce a *Hamilton* production on the island, a group of students marched onstage with a sign that read, in Spanish, "Lin-Manuel, our lives are not your theater." (According to Carmen Haydée Rivera, a UPR English professor who interviewed Miranda during the talk, he listened thoughtfully to the protest and explained afterward that his views on PROMESA had changed.)

More obstacles arose as hurricane restoration work continued at the UPR theater and *Hamilton* began rehearsing there in December 2018. A university-employee association, facing slashed benefits, sent Miranda a letter last November stating that demonstrations might

occur if *Hamilton* were performed on campus. Seller worried about security; police routinely patrolled *Hamilton* events in New York, but they are restricted on the UPR campus (and recently clashed violently with university protesters). Another option emerged: Ricardo Rosselló, the governor of Puerto Rico, offered *Hamilton* the Centro de Bellas Artes Luis A. Ferré, a government theater with more seating and no obstacles to police protection. Only a few weeks before opening night, the producers decided to cancel the UPR engagement and move to Bellas Artes, the same theater where *In the Heights* had played in 2010.

Instead of quelling controversy, the change of venue fueled it. Now *Hamilton* was officially associated with a pro-statehood governor whose administration had drawn ire for suppressing Puerto Rican cultural celebrations in the school curriculum. In a post on *8ogrados*, a left-leaning journal, the activist Amárilis Pagán Jiménez asked in Spanish why San Juan should welcome a show that chronicles “the history of the same damn country that has us under an unworthy colonial state and that ended us with PROMESA.” The musical that had been celebrated for the revolutionary diversity of its cast was now being aligned with the American political establishment that *Hamilton* had tried to reimagine.

[Read: The situation in Puerto Rico is untenable]

These criticisms were compounded by disputes over whether a Nuyorican like Miranda had the authority to speak for Puerto Rico, and whether the arts were a luxury amid crippling austerity. Rivera, the UPR professor, wrote to me that “while many people in Puerto Rico appreciate Lin-Manuel’s efforts and support, these are, at times, eclipsed by the climate of uncertainty brought about by the current fiscal crisis and politically tense relationships between the island and

the U.S.,” especially after the hurricane.

During my time in San Juan leading up to the show, my taxi drivers all cheered Miranda. “Everyone loves him here,” one man told me. “He’s done so much for the island.” A UPR student who had performed in *In the Heights* during high school said she had waited in line overnight to get tickets for two *Hamilton* shows: “The first one to cry, the second one to watch.” She understood the concerns of student protesters—she had gone without power for months after the hurricane and had to drop out of UPR after tuition went up—but didn’t think Miranda was at fault. “He didn’t have to come here,” she said. “It means everything to us that he did.”

On the website for the San Juan daily paper, *El Nuevo Día*, however, Spanish-language comments on a pro-*Hamilton* article were contentious. One said that Puerto Ricans who enjoyed *Hamilton* would be “happy colonized subjects applauding like seals at the victory of the independence struggle of the United States.” January 11 was Hamilton’s birthday; it was also the birthday of a Puerto Rican revolutionary hero, Eugenio María de Hostos. “Why not create a play about the life of Hostos, instead of *Hamilton* (who nobody in PR knows)?” another commenter asked. When I raised these criticisms with Luis, he replied, “It’s easier to criticize than to create,” adding that if someone wrote a musical about Hostos, the Mirandas would celebrate it.

Outside Bellas Artes on the night of the premiere, a line of police officers cordoned off the street. A small group of pro-statehood protesters appeared and caused little disturbance. In the lobby, patrons who had flown in from the U.S. mingled with Puerto Rican celebrities and original *Hamilton* cast members. Shonda Rhimes, Jimmy Fallon, and Questlove were in the audience. Then the show

began.

The performance itself brought three indelible moments. The first came when Miranda entered as Hamilton. There's often applause for his entrance, but arguably nothing like this time at Bellas Artes, where the entire audience rose, as one, for an ovation that lasted more than a minute and seemed like an epoch. It was as though all the tension of the preceding months was being released in a collective exhalation; the people in the theater, at least, wanted Miranda to know they wanted him there. ("It was the first time I *felt* a cheer," Miranda recalled at a press conference after the show. "I felt my hair move.")

The second moment came when Hamilton, enmeshed in a political scandal, thought back to the hurricane that destroyed his childhood island. "In the eye of a hurricane, there is quiet," Miranda sang, with an emotional depth that belied his customary ebullience. The hall was hushed. ("I feel like I'm going back to Maria when I sing it," he later explained.) The show had become about the island's trauma after the disaster. "Hurricane" sounded like an echo of the *West Side Story* lyric from "Maria" that Miranda had remixed for a benefit single: "Say it soft, and it's almost like praying."

The final moment came at the curtain call, after Miranda had thanked his co-creators and invited his father onstage. "Lin-Manuel always said, and I take that to heart, that it was not only to experience *Hamilton* in its artistic value, but also to leave Puerto Rico a little better than we found it," Luis said, speaking of their fundraising efforts. Then his son reached into the breast of his Hamilton costume and whipped out a giant Puerto Rican flag. The crowd erupted. Miranda appeared to be in tears. Where 500 flags had greeted *In the Heights*, what looked like thousands of cellphones came out to capture Miranda waving *la bandera puertorriqueña*. I showed my cellphone

video to my Airbnb host the next day, and she started crying. “We’re a colony,” she said. “We’re treated as American, but we speak Spanish. When Lin-Manuel takes out the flag, it’s like, *Yes, we exist.*” Did it matter that *Hamilton* was a show about America’s Founders? “Not at all. It’s a great story!”

Hamilton has always been about the slipperiness of political narratives. “You have no control who lives, who dies, who tells your story,” Washington tells Hamilton on the eve of the American Revolution. In San Juan, the musical’s strength lay in its complexity, its eagerness to embody conflicting points of view. Was Hamilton a brilliant son of the Caribbean who used his wit and determination to change the world? Or was he an incorrigible motormouth who inserted himself into debates over a colony’s independence, argued for a centralized financial system to control local debt, and antagonized so many people that he brought about his own demise? Was the audience rooting for America to rebel against King George III (played with aplomb by Rick Negron, the only Puerto Rican-born actor in the cast)? Or did the drama of a colony trying to unshackle itself from a superpower across the sea, ruled by a narcissistic buffoon, have a different resonance in PROMESA-era San Juan?

Before seeing the show in Puerto Rico, I hadn’t noticed that Hamilton’s nemesis, Aaron Burr, sings his anthem, “Wait for It,” to a reggaeton beat. (“I wanted to change it, but Lin knew his people,” the cast album’s producer, Questlove, told me at the opening-night party.) When Burr later sings that he wants to be “in the room where it happens” while Hamilton and Jefferson negotiate a debt plan, the applause in Bellas Artes stopped the show. Could the audience hear in Burr’s song a longing to participate in decisions about Puerto Rico’s economic future?

At the post-show press conference, Miranda was asked about his support for PROMESA (he had seen it as the only bipartisan solution, but doesn't support the austerity it imposed and now sees debt forgiveness as the only way forward); his response to Trump's plan to divert disaster-relief funds to build the border wall ("absolutely monstrous"); his stance on violent crime in San Juan ("It's a virus that is everywhere in the U.S."); and his reasons for moving the show from UPR ("If there's the slightest chance something goes wrong, I cannot have that on my conscience."). He spoke Spanglish, jumping between languages mid-sentence, and returning contritely to Spanish at the request of local reporters. With his desire to please, he seemed no longer the visiting star. About bringing his creation back to his family's island, Miranda said, "I'm like a little kid with it; I just want you to be proud of what I made."

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