

# Lin-Manuel Miranda is in the show

The creator of 'Hamilton' has been working toward this moment since sixth grade

BY HOWARD SHERMAN

ON THE WEDNESDAY before Thanksgiving, Lin-Manuel Miranda—book-writer, lyricist, composer, and star of the Broadway hit musical *Hamilton*—has already given a matinee performance and served as master of ceremonies for a streetside #Ham4Ham show. He is optimistic there will still be time for a nap after talking with this writer and before a second performance of *Hamilton* in less than two hours.

"The sense of community I get from doing it is really why I'm here," he says, sipping a cup of tea. "That's joyous to me. That's the thing that I loved most about doing high school theatre. I always try to stay connected to that same impulse. It's the running joke that Jonathan Groff and I have:

*Lin-Manuel Miranda, front and center, with members of the company in the Off Broadway incarnation of Hamilton. Miranda wrote the book, lyrics, and music and plays the title character in the groundbreaking musical.*

'We're in the play.' There's nothing better than being in the play, of being chosen from everyone in your school and showing the world what you have."

At thirty-five, with *Hamilton*, Miranda is at the top of the theatre world after only three Broadway musical credits, following his Tony Award-winning *In the Heights* and his contributions of music and lyrics to *Bring It On*. He's already broken into film, writing cantina music for *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* and writing the score for an upcoming Disney animated feature, *Moana*, to be released next fall. He has performed at the White House, and the president has come to see him in New York. He's welcomed at events from the Kennedy Center Honors to gatherings of historians who seem to love *Hamilton* just as much as die-hard musical theatre buffs. In the midst of all this attention and activity he's still very connected to his roots. Anyone who follows him on Twitter can find him relating stories about his parents, his

wife, his young son, his relatives, and his countless friends, as well as chatting with as many fans as he can.

The experience of high school theatre never seems to be very far from Miranda's mind. He speaks of it often, and his school theatre experiences are the explicit topic of our interview. He tells me his earliest artistic goal was to be in his sixth grade play.

"We had an extraordinary music teacher at my elementary school who started the tradition of the sixth grade play," Miranda recalls. This was at Hunter College School, a public elementary and high school for gifted students. "I'm very lucky that she started it just when I got there. I think the first sixth grade musical they did was *West Side Story* when I was in kindergarten.

"The entire school would watch the sixth grade play. I remember as a young as second or third grade already fantasizing, 'What's going to be the sixth grade play when we get to sixth grade?' It's funny in retrospect to think how much of my life was spent



As a sixth grader, Miranda played Conrad Birdie in a musical revue at the Hunter College School.

thinking, ‘What show are we going to do?’ which is not the usual elementary school concern.

“Then, the crazy thing that happened was we got to sixth grade and they said, ‘We’re going to do the previous six years’ shows. We’re going to do short versions of all of them.’ So we get this lethal dosage of musical theatre at age twelve. I was a cow-hand and a son in this unwatchable four-hour show that our parents had to sit through. But for me, it was the greatest experience of my life.”

Miranda didn’t go out for theatre at all in seventh grade but returned as an eighth grader with the encouragement of his English teacher, Rembert Herbert, whom he thanked in his Tony acceptance speech.

“He really got me engaged as a student first. He told me, ‘You’re writing all this stuff in the back of my class, but none of it is for class. So can you join us?’ Pressed on what he was writing at the back of class, Miranda confesses, “Bad love songs to girls.”

“What caught Dr. Herbert’s attention,” he explains in more detail, “was that we had an assignment where we were put into groups and we had to

teach three chapters of Chaim Potok’s *The Chosen*, which was a book I really love. I decided we’re going to make a musical version. I wrote a song for each chapter, and I was such a control freak that I recorded them all a capella and the other kids lip-synced to my voice.”

Herbert encouraged Miranda to contribute to the annual student-written, student-directed Brick Prison show, and beginning in ninth grade, Miranda also began auditioning for shows.

“I was in Lillian Hellman’s *The Little Foxes* and in *You Can’t Take It with You*. Those were my plays. In ninth grade, I got cast as the Pirate King in *The Pirates of Penzance*, which was huge, because I beat out the seniors. Then, *Godspell* in tenth grade. I started dating the assistant director and she became my high school girlfriend. Then she directed *A Chorus Line* junior year and I was her assistant director, so I kind of apprenticed into the directing track. Then I directed *West Side Story* my senior year.

“So I got too busy to [act in] the plays. But I was a president of

Hunter Theatre, even though I didn’t participate. I would do their budgets. We all hung lights. We all did all the stuff.”

Directing *West Side Story* as a senior was an important time for Miranda.

“*West Side Story* is such a controversial show, because everyone’s unflattering in that show. The Puerto Ricans say, ‘That’s our only thing and we’re all gang members.’ I’m sensitive to that. At the same time, for me, it was an incredible teaching experience. I got to bring Puerto Rico to school. My dad came in and gave dialect lessons to my white and Asian Sharks. There was no brownface, nothing stupid like that.

“But I wanted to make sure that while they’re in America, they’re yelling Puerto Rican things like ‘Wepa!’ It was a way for me to actually engage the part of me that only existed at home and bring that into school. That was really lovely.”

Were there any parts Miranda wished he could play again or roles he missed out on?

“If I could do the Pirate King again,” he says, laughing, “having more than a reliable half-octave of range, I’d love another crack at it. That being said, I have no regrets. I had a wonderful time doing everything. Those are the shows that are just in your bloodstream forever—because you did that. It’s a totally different thing than loving a cast album or seeing a show and loving it.

“That’s why, for me, a show I write becomes real when a high school gets to do it. Because I know there are kids who had their first kisses as Benny and Nina [in *In the Heights*]. I know there are salon ladies who are going to be friends for life because they were Daniela and Carla together. I had that experience with my friends on the shows we worked on. That’s what I love most about being on this side of the process now, being the one who makes the musicals.”

Theatre wasn’t Miranda’s only interest in high school. In addition to writing some short musicals, he



as making films as well, pulling his friends together from all of their other activities to work on them. But he relates that experience back to theatre.

"I think that one of the best things getting to be in a position of authority in theatre in high school gets you is that you have no power to hire or fire or replace anyone. So the only voice you have is your self-created authority. I learned to harness that: 'All right, guys, this is the plan,' knowing at any point that anyone could say, 'I don't want to do this. I want to go home.'"

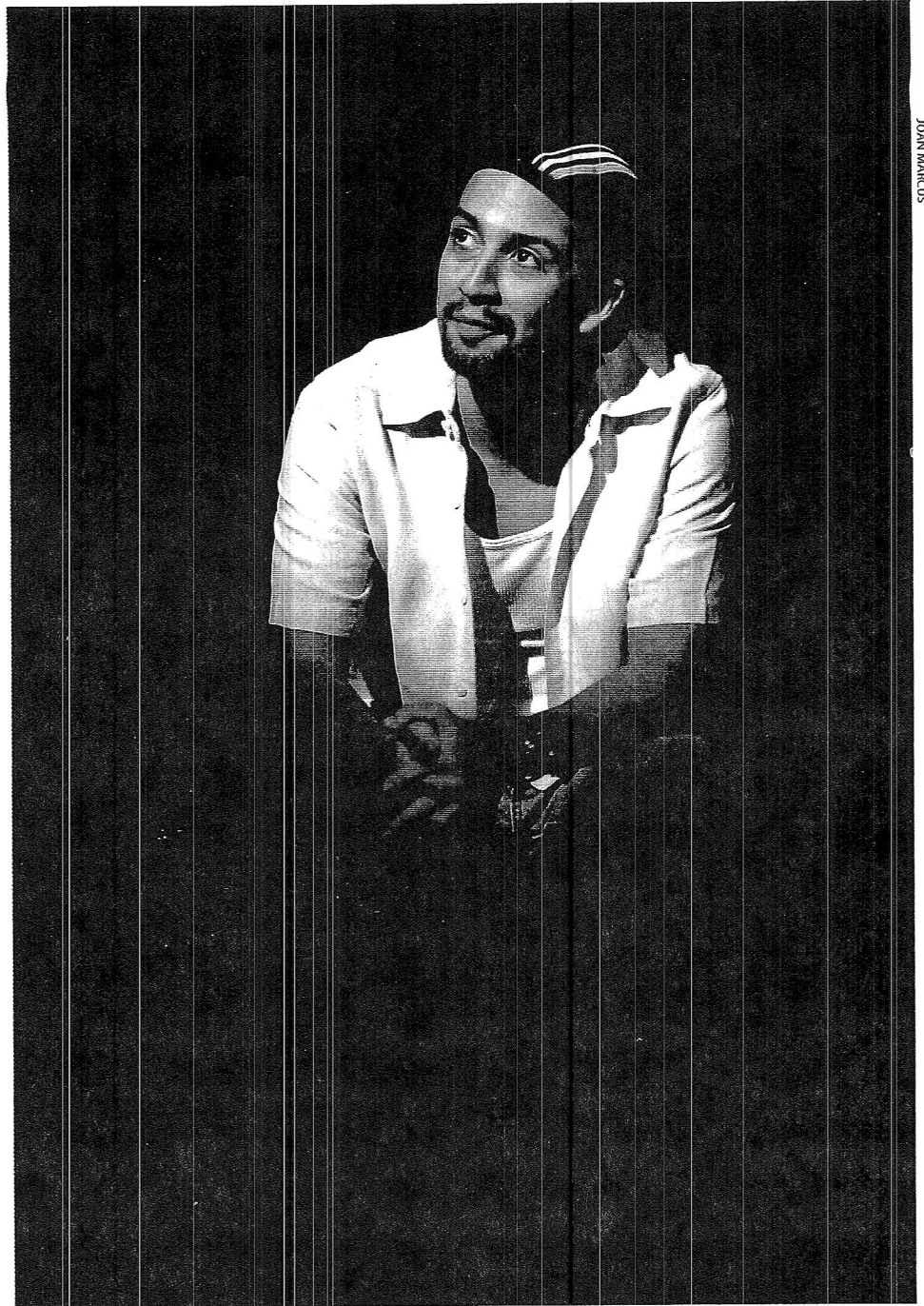
Given the wide variety of skills Miranda displays as writer, composer, and lyricist, I ask him about his musical training.

"I took orchestration and composition, which was a class available in high school, but really just piano lessons and basic music theory. I actually have a couple of friends I would call up in the middle of the night and ask, 'Hey, I'm playing an F#, an A and a C. I don't know what this chord is called. What is it?' And they'd say, 'You're playing an F# diminished.' I kept thinking I was going to invent a new chord. And they'd say, 'No, they all exist.'"

Miranda discovered the friendships he made while working on shows gave him shortcuts across the usual boundaries of the school's social order.

"The saving grace of being a theatre kid," he explains, "is that you get to make friends in every grade. So if your grade is kicking your butt, which was true for me some of the time, I had friends in other grades. The heartbreak that comes with that is sometimes your best friend will graduate because they're two or three years older than you.

"And that's something. I knew even then that was something my peers weren't sharing. They were relentlessly involved with who is friends with who, and what clique is big, and who is in and who's out in my grade. Being a theatre kid allows you to have this birds-eye view of it. I would spend my lunch period with at least four different groups. So I was always



JOHN MARCUS

In the Heights, 2008.

a little friends with everyone."

Miranda went off to college planning on a dual major in film and theatre, and those interests narrowed the schools he applied to very quickly, since few offered both. He chose Wesleyan University in Connecticut, where he eventually dropped his plans to also study film.

"I got to college thinking I knew everything. I got the rude awakening of, 'Oh, I don't know anything. I know how theatre at my high school worked. There's still so much I have to learn.' I was both humbled and

empowered by this. We thought we were hanging lights right—we didn't know what the heck we were doing. And that's the fun of it. You learn the skill set you need to prepare you to work with lots of different kinds of people."

Although we agreed the interview would focus on Miranda's school experiences, it's impossible to talk with him right now and not ask about *Hamilton*. Hip-hop, rap, and historical biography are not the usual ingredients of musical theatre. Had he always envisioned it on Broadway?

"I mostly thought of it like *Jesus Christ Superstar*," he says. "I thought, this will be a show, but I'm going to write it by writing the music first, which is exactly how Andrew Lloyd Webber did *Superstar*. It was a concept album. I had the good fortune to ask him about that. I peppered him with questions like 'How did you get these for-real rock singers on that concept album?' He said, 'Because they were just around. We recorded the *Jesus Christ Superstar* concept album next door to where Led Zeppelin was recording album number 1. You would just say, 'Hey, do you want to come in and sing this part?'"

"My vision for having rappers play the founding fathers started as 'I'm going to get the artists first.' Then we just started writing the show and I stopped worrying about landing the rapper and said, 'Let me make the singing.' Now we're reverse-engineering it. We've got this mix tape coming out

*I'm just writing communities for myself. That's what I get from being in the show, too.'*

and hip-hop artists are going to be covering songs from the show.

"It worked out the way it was meant to work out. I was going to make a concept album that someone else was going to stage. It turns out I made a staged piece that someone's going to turn into a concept album."

Given the enormous demands on his time right now, one has to wonder, is Miranda having fun?

"What I'm enjoying so much about the success of *Hamilton* is it's an op-

portunity to get together everyone who loves musicals. I know a lot of people who don't love musicals like our show, but you can get them in because of history. You can get in because of politics. You can get in via hip hop.

"For me the fun is getting on Twitter and talking about *Les Mis* or *Wicked* for a little while, talking about the shows we all love, and reminding the pop culture world at large. Because you know what? We all do love shows. I know everyone likes to think of musical theatre as this niche genre. But a lot of us did the school play. A lot of us watched *Glee*. A lot of us, even if we never saw a Broadway show, could sing a few show tunes because of school and because of our parents. So it is this secret thing that we all know that we don't all talk about together. That's what I'm enjoying about this part of the process."

What part of the creative process gives him the greatest pleasure?

"For me, it's all about what I can bring, because musicals are such a hybrid art. They're fourteen art forms mashed into one. So it becomes a simple calculus for me of 'What can I bring into the room?'"

"One of the things I love best about writing is being able to bring a song to my creative team—walking into a room with people you trust, showing them a new song, which is like being naked in front of them, to be honest. That's why it's important to get the right people in the room, and knowing you're going to leave with a better song because of the people you've allowed. That's an exhilarating process.

"Expand that to the whole show entirely. That's a pretty great moment," Miranda continues, enthusiastically. "Seeing a cast read your work for the very first time, that's a really exciting part of the process.

"You know, it's not lost on me that as someone who kind of felt like an outsider in my own community growing up, I'm just writing communities for myself. That's what I get from being in the show, too." ▼