

JOAN MARCUS

Meet the few who didn't like 'Hamilton'

It's not that these people will never be satisfied — some attendees found the rap gimmicky and the characters unmoving

BY ZACHARY PINCUS-ROTH

After the final performance of "Hamilton" at the Kennedy Center last Sunday, Jim Barnett and Faye Elkins stood on the terrace overlooking the Potomac River. The couple, from Bethesda, had bought the tickets three days earlier, when they realized the show was about to end, spending \$1,200 for the pair on StubHub. ¶ I asked whether "Hamilton," the groundbreaking musical by composer-lyricist Lin-Manuel Miranda, had lived up to their expectations. They actually hadn't talked about it yet. Elkins quickly said yes. But Barnett shifted his feet, turned his head, scrunched his face. He was preparing to disagree.

I imagine that's a difficult thing to do. "Hamilton" has won Tony Awards, Olivier Awards, a Grammy, a Pulitzer Prize and the first Kennedy Center Honors ever given to a work of art and not a person. It has been hailed as a landmark for bringing hip-hop seamlessly into a Broadway musical, for its nontraditional casting of minorities as white Founding Fathers, and for its thrilling execution of the American origin story. Who are the few poor souls who don't actually like this thing?

It's hard enough to exit a theater and hear your spouse hail a work as brilliant and then look them in the eye and declare

that they're wrong. Imagine disputing thousands of fans, every possible awards-bestowing body and Michelle Obama. An aesthetic disagreement can often feel like a moral one.

But in a search over a few days, I found that there are more detractors than one might think. And, it turns out, they aren't snowflakes. They can handle the consequences.

One "Hamilton" skeptic I found via a callout on Facebook was, in fact, my musical theater writing teacher from college, Jay Kerr, who runs (and is trying to sell) a theater in Upstate New York.

"The writing is sloppy," Kerr says. "Rhymes are not true" — some are not exact rhymes, but merely sound similar to rhymes — "and could be if he spent five more minutes. Good writing takes second place to the overall concept."

"It's not PC to criticize it," he says, "and the common retort is, 'If you know so much, how come [Miranda] is the famous one and no one [cares] what you think?'"

Via the Reddit forum "unpopularopinion," I found Alice Harrington, an administrative assistant in Boston, who says she found the show "simply average" — in part because "the rap-esque songs felt gimmicky." She prefers shows like "Wicked" and "South Pacific."

Most people, Harrington says, "couldn't care less" about her reservations, though she did get into a fight with a fellow theater-loving friend at a community theater audition. "She gave me the most horrified look," Harrington says, and called her "uncultured." (They laughed it off the next day.)

Also through Reddit came Romy Fischer, a paralegal living in Brooklyn, who felt unmoved by the show but told hardly anyone: "My feelings just come across as really negative, so there's no point in spreading that kind of bad juju."

"My co-workers are all obsessed," she adds, via direct message. "I just couldn't bear to disappoint them."

ABOVE: "Hamilton" drew packed crowds during its three-month run at the Kennedy Center. It ended its run a week ago.

Even some public figures have been critical. The actress Casey Wilson has expressed her distaste for "Hamilton" on her podcast. On LeBron James's HBO talk show, "The Shop," actor-comedian Jerrod Carmichael called it "terrible" and "the best community center performance" he'd ever seen.

"It just sounded like when they sent people to rap multiplication to me when I was an inner-city youth, 'cause they're like, that's the way we're going to get through to them," he said.

Several academics have picked the show apart, while acknowledging they couldn't help but enjoy themselves.

Lyra D. Monteiro, an assistant professor of history and American studies at Rutgers University at Newark, has written that "Hamilton" perpetuates the trend of "founders chic," which venerates figures such as George Washington while forgetting their slave-owning sins, as the race-blind casting masks this issue.

"For goodness sake, why are we still venerating these guys?" Monteiro says in an interview. "If you had to put all the slaves owned by Washington, Jefferson and Madison on that stage, they wouldn't fit."

"I am not at all shy about how much personally I love it as a show," she adds. "But for me, understanding what's problematic about it helps me appreciate it more and helps me understand more what is possible."

Donatella Galella, an assistant professor of theater history and theory at University of California at Riverside, who has also written about the show, feels similarly. "There is that deep ambivalence — I am moved by the show, I admire it so much, and at the same time it's seducing me with its nationalistic ethos," she says.

She feels that "Hamilton" offers a "celebratory American nationalism and mythmaking that a lot of people long for. It offers this assurance that if you work hard enough you'll be successful," while playing down the systemic obstacles.

Galella takes pride in expressing unpopular opinions. She considers herself a "feminist killjoy," a term in academia for "a figure who points out how everything is terrible and people blame her for the problem rather than the troubling material," as she describes it.

Still, Galella once saw Miranda on the New York subway as they headed uptown. She recalls that as she got out at 168th Street, she turned to him and said, "You are a genius" — and he bowed his head.

On Sunday, after that last performance at the Kennedy Center, I talked to 20 people who probably would have been even more effusive. They were over the moon just fine, thank you very much.

Barnett, however, standing on the terrace next to his wife, wasn't one of them. "I've seen a lot of plays where I've had that rush of emotion," he says. "I didn't have that."

"I want to be careful about saying 'didn't like.'" He was grasping for why — he wanted to explain. "I had a hard time falling in love with the characters," he adds. "There wasn't that moment where I wanted to leap out of my seat and applaud enthusiastically."

The only other semblance of a malcontent I could find was Madelyn McClung, of Carroll County, Md., who bought a \$600 ticket to see it with her brother. She called the show "a little clunky" and said "the exposition was a little forced." But she hadn't expected to love it anyway.

"I know the history, dude," she said. "He was kind of a rat."

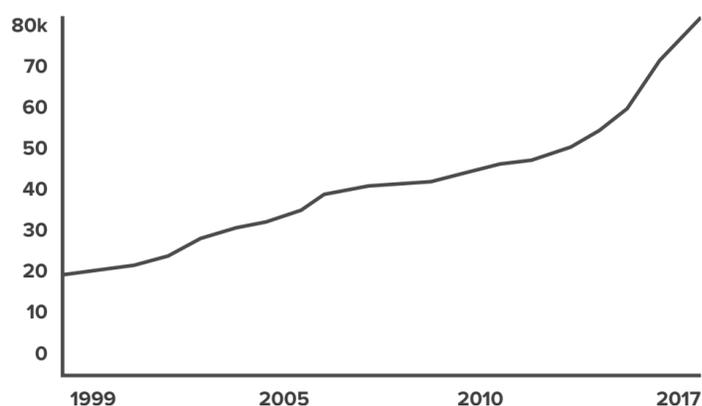
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BELOW: When "Hamilton" tickets went on sale to the general public on March 26, the line stretched outside the Kennedy Center.



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