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Art As Truth: The Post-Truth Reception of *Hamilton* (2015) and *The New Prince* (2017)

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Abstract: This paper examines the reception of Lin-Manuel Miranda’s musical *Hamilton* (2015) and Mohammed Fairouz’s “operatic revue” *The New Prince* (2017) within the context of post-truth identity politics. Neither of these stage works aimed for historical accuracy—*Hamilton* famously uses a racially diverse cast and relies on vernacular 20th- and 21st-century music styles, while *The New Prince* displays an eclectic musical language and mixes historical figures from incongruous times and places. And yet, both pieces were embraced by critics and audiences as powerful and truthful statements about the nature of power in the era of Brexit and Trump.

When the *Oxford Dictionaries* selected “post-truth” as its word of the year in 2016, their definition juxtaposed “objective facts” on the one hand with “emotion and personal belief” on the other.¹ The latter can now sway public opinion, even when contradicted by the former. The arts would appear to fall under the purview of “emotion and personal belief,” and it is easy to imagine that our current volatile cultural and political climate would inspire artists to embrace even more fully the emotional over the rational. History can give us multiple examples of artistic movements prizing chaos and nonsense in response to other uncertain times: Dada, for example, flourished as Europe descended into the First World War; and Surrealism thrived in its aftermath. Fluxus’ anarchic critique of artistic and cultural status quo paralleled the social and political upheaval of the 1960s.

And yet, it would seem that some of the musical works that have resonated the most strongly in our post-truth world often do so because their audiences find in them some insightful truths about our contemporary condition. “Emotion and personal belief” may, in fact, succeed *as* “facts.” We are, after all, living in the *Daily Show* era, when a significant number of people place their trust in comedians over journalists in their search for factual information about our current political climate. When facts can now be “alternative,” public statements stretch linguistic semantics to their breaking point, and journalists reporting reality are under constant attack for being “fake,” the arts can respond by critiquing power, grappling with contested questions of identity, and even by participating directly in the political process.

In this paper, I discuss two recent stage works that, on the surface, seem to fall squarely on the emotional and personal side of the post-truth dichotomy: Lin-Manuel Miranda’s musical *Hamilton* (2015) and Mohammed Fairouz’s opera *The New Prince* (2017). Neither work aims for complete historical and factual authenticity, and yet the reception of both pieces shows that even when historical figures in the American Revolutionary War rap or Niccolò Machiavelli lives in 2032 as he writes *The New Prince*, critics and audiences

value the fantasy not just as fantasy, but also as expressions of powerful truths about our contemporary condition. The *Oxford Dictionaries* placed their choice of “post-truth” within the context of the 2016 US elections and the Brexit vote in the UK; indeed, *Oxford* notes post-truth’s particular usage in the phrase “post-truth politics.”² Read within these political realities, both *Hamilton* and *The New Prince* participate in public conversations about the increasingly urgent issues surrounding citizenship, power, and national identity.

On the surface, Lin-Manuel Miranda’s acclaimed hit *Hamilton* aggressively eschews historical verisimilitude. Based on historian Ron Chernow’s biography of Alexander Hamilton,³ the musical tells the personal story of the titular character—one of America’s Founding Fathers and its first Treasury Secretary—against the backdrop of the formation of the United States. While the costumes pay lip service to the late 18th century, the production deviates significantly from historical record in its decision to use a racially diverse cast to portray the white men and women who people the historical narrative. The original cast features African American actors Chris Jackson, Leslie Odom Jr, Daveed Diggs, and Renée Elise Goldsberry, as well as Asian American Phillipa Soo, and Miranda himself (the son of Puerto Rican parents) playing leading roles. This policy of racially diverse casting continued through the various Broadway replacement casts to productions in other cities. A casting call for “NON-WHITE men and women, ages 20s to 30s” audition triggered accusations of discrimination, but *Hamilton*’s producers insist that, “It is essential to the storytelling of *Hamilton* that the principal roles, which were written for nonwhite characters ... be performed by nonwhite actors.”⁴ In a provocative challenge to prevailing notions of “otherness,” the only main character routinely played by a white actor is the outsider King George III.⁵

Musically, Miranda tells centuries-old events not only in the contemporary vernacular, but, more significantly, in genres that mark the music as multiracial its cast: most notably R&B and the music critic Alexis Petridis claims as “most notably from the streets”: hip-hop.⁶ Miranda virtuosically delineates his main characters through their rapping styles: George Washington, for example, is a mix of Common and John Legend, while Hamilton’s rhyming style “goes from Rakim to Big Pun to Eminem.”⁷ The debate between Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson over the America’s banking system is reimagined as a rap battle that Miranda has likened to a scene from the Eminem vehicle *8 Mile* and includes an obvious reference to Grandmaster Flash’s “The Message.”⁸ That the historically inaccurate use of hip-hop presents no barriers to an audience’s belief in Miranda’s *Hamilton* story is a testament to what Jonathan Marshall argues as the genre’s inherent “mobility” and capacity to enact a historiographic model.⁹ Although the fully scored and non-improvised *Hamilton* is a step removed from the boom boxes, tape decks, and street parties of samples-based hip-hop that prompts Marshall’s study, it still shares the music’s ability not only to tell stories, but to create a didactic space in which to stage history.¹⁰

Hamilton’s first public outing intertwined it inextricably with, if not “objective facts” exactly, then certainly real-life public debate. In May 2009, Miranda was invited to take part in an “evening celebrating poetry, music, and the spoken word” at the Obama White House. The official statement positioned it as an event designed to encourage dialogue and to show how important it is “in every aspect of who we are as Americans.” Taking place mere months into after the inauguration of the first African American president, this event was also intended as a public, official embrace of diversity—one that would help “ensure that all voices are heard, particularly voices that are often not heard.”¹¹ Closing the evening, Miranda performed what would end up as *Hamilton*’s opening number. Announcing it to an audibly

amused audience as a track on an upcoming concept album about “someone who embodies hip-hop: Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton,” Miranda rapped about this character’s humble upbringing in the Caribbean before he travelled to America as “another immigrant comin’ up from the bottom.”¹² The positioning of a Founding Father as (just) another immigrant grabbed many critics’ attention. As one journalist noted, there was a particular poignancy to witnessing the child of an immigrant (Miranda), singing in the White House about the child of an immigrant (Hamilton), to a child of an immigrant (Obama), who had just become the first African American president in the history of the United States.¹³

Political reality had changed significantly when *Hamilton* finally opened on Broadway in 2015. Immigration, diversity, and citizenship had become central issues in a contentious Republican presidential primary campaign that can claim much of the credit for post-truth’s eventual win for Word of the Year. *Hamilton*’s reception focused as much on its ability to speak truths about “who we are as Americans” (to borrow a phrase from its 2009 debut event) as it did on its considerable artistic merits. The title of Kendra James’s prescient review says it all: “Race, Immigration, and *Hamilton*: The Relevance of Lin-Manuel Miranda’s New Musical.” Starting her review by placing *Hamilton*’s opening night within the context of the first Republican presidential debate, James juxtaposes the musical’s recognition of the vital role of immigrants in American life with statements from politicians that likened immigration to invasion.¹⁴ While Republican candidates were using anti-immigration rhetoric to drum up support, *Hamilton*’s “Immigrants, we get the job done” line became so popular that the production had to add extra measures of vamping to accommodate the increasingly lengthy and raucous applause. James also found *Hamilton*’s message of the urgent need for change resonating with the Black Lives Matter movement. While “objective facts” about black deaths at the hand of the police and the need for immigration reform may fail to gain traction, the “emotion and personal belief[s]” of Miranda and the creative team did not provide a fantastical alternative.¹⁵ Rather, they were embraced as deeper and even more meaningful truths.

The early reaction to *Hamilton* was notably bi-partisan. Obama famously quipped that love of Miranda’s musical was the only thing he had in common with former Vice-President Dick Cheney.¹⁶ But closer to 2016 election and beyond, *Hamilton*’s politics became more outspoken and partisan. Miranda, for example, leveraged the huge demand for tickets into fundraisers for Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign and for Planned Parenthood. After the election, Vice-President-Elect Mike Pence’s visit prompted a speech directed at him from the cast urging the incoming administration to embrace diversity.¹⁷ Lines from the musical became unexpectedly present and apt as political commentary. “You don’t have the votes” for example, made the social media rounds after the Republicans failed to repeal the Affordable Care Act in 2017. The emotion and personal beliefs of art have come full circle to confront the objective facts of real-world politics.

While *The New Prince* looks and sounds nothing like *Hamilton*, the two works do share certain similarities. The character of Alexander Hamilton, for one, and, more significantly, *The New Prince* also flaunts its lack of historical authenticity: “We decided really early on,” composer Mohammed Fairouz said, “that we were not going to have people prancing about in Renaissance costumes in Florence for two hours” in an opera about Machiavelli.¹⁸ *The New Prince*’s musical language is eclectic, and, although based on Machiavelli’s infamous political manifesto, Fairouz’s work mixes powerful historical figures from incongruous times and places. The conceit of the opera is that Machiavelli returns in 2032, five hundred years after he published *The Prince*, to update the content of his most

famous work. In addition to *Hamilton*, the cast of characters also includes Henry Kissinger (who works here as Machiavelli's assistant), Bill Clinton, Osama bin Laden, Dick Cheney, Mao Tze-Tung, Hillary Clinton, and Donald Trump.

Both Fairouz and librettist David Ignatius operate in both the worlds of fact and of art: Fairouz is a composer who regularly pens political op-eds; and Ignatius is a *Washington Post* journalist with ten novels to his name.¹⁹ Given the fact that Fairouz is an Arab American composer who, according to his press kit, is “an artist involved with major social issues,” it comes as no surprise that the question of identity—musical and personal—infuses his works and their reception. Indeed, directors Lotte de Beer and Pierre Audi chose Fairouz as the composer to work on their Machiavelli project in part because they believed his identity as a well-travelled Arab American and his interest in politics would bring the project greater complexity and a global perspective.²⁰ Fairouz has form in this regard. Earlier works include his 4th Symphony *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2012), a 9/11 commemoration piece. The next opera after *The New Prince* is *Bhutto*, which will focus on both the life of assassinated former Prime Minister of Pakistan as well as her significance as a female world leader.²¹

The Dutch National Opera, which premiered *The New Prince* in March 2017, billed it as a “blood-curdling revue about power.”²² The work's dizzying hyperreality was not read as a surrender of reason in the face of a post-truth world, but instead—just like *Hamilton*—as a powerful critique of the contemporary nature of power. Fairouz may have called it “sci-fi geopolitics,” but for some critics, *The New Prince*—an opera that flaunts its fantasy and imagination—became a meditation on truth and power at a time when the relationship between the two had become strained to breaking point. Fairouz wants to claim for his opera a universality of human expression that leads to diversity.²³ But the premiere of *The New Prince* two months into the Trump administration meant that the proclivities of the new US president would become the lens through which critics and audiences viewed the opera. Librettist Ignatius expressed surprise at the unexpected relevance of *The New Prince*: “I didn't know at the time”—when he finished the libretto—“that there would be such a direct parallel to our times.” Even those who disliked it on artistic merits and dismissed the opera as “pretentious bombast” recognized the work's reception as a “stunning piece of contemporary social criticism.”²⁴ *The New York Times* published its review under the title: “A Machiavellian Opera for Trump-Era Issues of Truth and Lies.”²⁵ *The New Prince* may revel in the absurdity of Dick Cheney and Osama bin Laden singing a duet together or casting Machiavelli as a Hillary fan, but the end result was received not as nonsense, but the very opposite.

In May 2015, nearly two years before *The New Prince* premiered, Fairouz and Ignatius went on *Morning Joe*—a morning political show on MSNBC—to discuss their collaboration. Host Willie Geist coupled *The New Prince* with *Hamilton* to express surprise that these works would bypass traditional dramatic topics as “love, lost, heartache and all these different emotions” in favour of politics.²⁶ Fairouz rejected the premise of the question and replied that opera has always had a social conscience—it has always been political. While it is undoubtedly true that opera commented on affairs of state, two notable features are worth pointing out. First: opera—from Lully in the court of Louis XIV to French Revolutionary works to Ludwig II's support of Wagner and beyond—usually comes down on the side of the state as a result of the significant resources needed to mount this art form. Second: when composers found themselves in trouble for seeming to critique power, it was because their works were deemed too close to uncomfortable truths—too close to “objective facts.” In the post-truth context *Hamilton* and *The New Prince* share, the relationship between

fact and fiction becomes more complicated as the very notion of “fact” becomes questioned. Perhaps in a world where “truth” can be manufactured, works like *Hamilton* and *The New Prince* that embrace music-historical falseness can find real resonances with their audiences. As both these works demonstrate, works of staged musical fiction may play increasingly more significant roles as legitimate and powerful critiques of our contemporary political situation.

Endnotes

All URLs accessed April 2018–March 2019.

¹ “Word of the Year 2016 is” *Oxford Dictionaries*, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>

² “Word of the Year.”

³ Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2004).

⁴ Nigel Smith, “Broadway Hit *Hamilton* Under Fire After Casting Call for ‘Non-White’ Actors,” *The Guardian*, (1 April 2016), <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/mar/31/broadway-hamilton-musical-casting-call-nonwhite-actors>

⁵ George III’s music is also carefully delineated from the other characters. He never raps, but instead sings British-Invasion-style pop songs.

⁶ Alexis Petridis, “Break It Down: How *Hamilton* Mashed Up Musical Theatre and Hip Hop,” *The Guardian* (1 Dec 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/dec/01/hamilton-mashed-up-musical-theatre-and-hip-hop-lin-manuel-miranda>

⁷ Mark Binelli, “*Hamilton* Creator Lin-Manuel Miranda: The *Rolling Stone* Interview,” *Rolling Stone* (1 June 2016), <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/hamilton-creator-lin-manuel-miranda-the-rolling-stone-interview-20160601>

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⁹ Jonathan W. Marshall, “Staging Critical History Within the Space of the Beat, or, What Cultural Historians Can Learn from Public Enemy, NTM, MC Solaar & George Clinton,” *MEDIANZ: Media Studies Journal of Aotearoa New Zealand*, 15.1 (2015): 135, <http://dx.doi.org/10.11157/medianz-vol15iss1id9>

¹⁰ Marshall, 136.

¹¹ Jesse Lee, “Poetry, Music and Spoken Word,” *The White House: President Barack Obama*, online archive (12 May 2009), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2009/05/12/poetry-music-and-spoken-word>

¹² “Lin Manuel-Miranda Performs at the White House Poetry Jam,” YouTube video, 4:26, posted by The Obama White House, 2 November 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNf7nMIGnE>

¹³ Adam Green, “Lin-Manuel Miranda’s Groundbreaking Hip-Hop Musical, *Hamilton*, Hits Broadway,” *Vogue* (24 June 2015), <https://www.vogue.com/article/hamilton-hip-hop-musical-broadway>

¹⁴ Kendra James, “Race, Immigration, and *Hamilton*: The Relevance of Lin-Manuel Miranda’s New Musical,” *The Toast* (1 Oct 2015), <http://the-toast.net/2015/10/01/race-immigration-and-hamilton/>

¹⁵ James.

¹⁶ Jordan Fabian, “Obama: *Hamilton* is the Only Thing Dick Cheney and I Agree On,” *The Hill* (14 March 2016), <http://thehill.com/blogs/in-the-know/in-the-know/272964-obama-hamilton-is-the-only-thing-dick-cheney-and-i-agree-on>

¹⁷ “*Hamilton* Stars Give Mike Pence a Message,” YouTube video, 2:58, posted by CNN, 19 Nov 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bNfTONoEfwI>

¹⁸ Rob Garratt, “Emirati Composer Mohammed Fairouz on his ‘Geopolitical Sci-Fi Opera,’ *The New Prince*,” *The National* (22 March 2017), <https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/on-stage/emirati-composer-mohammed-fairouz-on-his-geopolitical-sci-fi-opera-the-new-prince-1.32516?videoId=5711823858001>

¹⁹ David Ignatius, “Books,” *David Ignatius*, <https://davidignatius.com/books/>

²⁰ Nina Siegal, “A Machiavellian Opera for Trump-Era Issues of Truth and Lies,” *The New York Times* (15 April 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/15/arts/a-machiavellian-opera-for-trump-era-issues-of-truth-and-lies.html>

²¹ Elizabeth Bloom, “Pittsburgh Opera to Produce World Premiere of *Bhutto*,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (20 Jan 2016), <http://www.post-gazette.com/ae/music/2016/01/19/Pittsburgh-Opera-to-produce-world-premiere-of-Mohammed-Fairouz-Bhutto-in-2018/stories/201601200038>

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²³ Siegal.

²⁴ Thea Derks, “Opera: *The New Prince*—Pretentious Bombast,” *Contemporary Classical—Thea Derks*, blog (31 March 2017), <https://thederks.wordpress.com/2017/03/31/opera-the-new-prince-pretentious-bombast/>

²⁵ Siegal.

²⁶ “Composer and Journalist Team Up for Opera,” *MSNBC* (18 May 2015), <https://www.msnbc.com/morning-joe/watch/composer-and-journalist-team-up-for-opera-447080003746>