

Live Spectacles, Paratexts, and Ancillary Outlets

“Beyond ‘The End of the Millennium’: *RENT*, *Hamilton*, and Digital Transformations in Musical Theater Fandom”

Jennifer Margret Smith, *University of Wisconsin-Madison*

This past May, *Hamilton* creator Lin-Manuel Miranda released a digital #Ham4Ham in which he sang a song from *RENT* alongside original *RENT* cast member Adam Pascal. The video gleefully bridged the gap between two of the biggest modern Broadway hits, both of which were hailed as welcome innovations of the musical form and quickly attracted a young, social justice-minded fanbase as a result of their casting and subject matter. But *RENT* premiered in 1996, and *Hamilton* in 2015 – the #Ham4Ham duet, in fact, was a tribute to *RENT*’s 20th anniversary. Despite their abundant similarities, the temporally-influenced *differences* in the reception of each of these shows can help us to explore the transformations in online fandom, fan hierarchies, fan-creator interaction, and the significance of liveness to musical theater over the past two decades.

RENT was born into the world of Web 1.0. Its official website, siteforrent.com, was one of the first dedicated websites for a Broadway show, and its fandom community was built of hard-to-find mailing lists and message boards with names like “Compulsive Bowlers,” an obscure lyrical reference. Though the show’s immediate success meant that *RENT*, like *Hamilton*, was a hard ticket to come by in the early years, the show began offering \$20 seats in the first two rows of the theater for every performance on a first-come, first-serve basis. That meant that dedicated fans would sleep on the sidewalk outside of the theater to be first in line – the ultimate method for accumulating cultural capital within the fandom. In later years, that rush transitioned into a lottery, which kept sleeping bags off the sidewalk but still privileged those who had the leisure time and economic capital to come to the theater hours before showtime to try their luck. As ticket prices dropped and touring casts traveled the country, a new form of

cultural capital emerged – the number of performances a fan had seen. By 2002, those who had seen the show 60+ times were fandom royalty, proudly displaying their “show count” in their message board signatures, and those who had not yet seen a production were second-class fans at best. The live text was primary, and even audio bootlegs recorded on cassette tapes held more cachet than the widely-available Original Broadway Cast Recording.

Hamilton, on the other hand, is the first Broadway sensation born of the Web 2.0 era. Even *Wicked*, the last Broadway blockbuster that doubled as a significant fandom text, premiered in 2003, before the advent of YouTube and widespread broadband internet. The *Hamilton* fandom coalesced on decentered social media platforms like Twitter and Tumblr rather than closed communities, making their activities easy to find and accessible to even the most casual fans. These fans also found themselves able to engage with a host of video clips and other digital media paratexts, particularly the daily #Ham4Ham performances outside the theater that fans captured with cell phone videos and distributed on YouTube before Miranda himself began to do so. While seeing #Ham4Ham live still required leisure time and proximity to New York, no tickets were required, and the recordings could be watched from anywhere. Meanwhile, the show’s producers quickly moved from an in-person lottery modeled after *RENT*’s (but \$10 cheaper) to a digital version, removing the requirement to arrive at the theater hours before the performance

Hamilton’s tenure on Broadway is still in its early days, and it is possible that hierarchies of fandom based on viewings of the show will develop as the original cast departs and tickets inevitably become cheaper and more available to those who still prioritize being in “the room where it happens.” Yet the pervasive acceptance, from the beginning, of digital paratexts as legitimate ways to experience *Hamilton* lead me to believe that this is unlikely to have the same

impact it had on *RENT* fandom. What's more, *Hamilton* has another significant advantage over *RENT* – the accessibility of its auteur. Jonathan Larson, *RENT*'s composer, died the night before the show's first Off-Broadway preview performance, but even if he'd lived, the opportunities for him to directly connect to the show's globally-distributed fans in 1996 would have been slim. In contrast, Miranda, who was himself inspired by Larson, has consistently acted as the *Hamilton* fandom's ringleader and cheerleader, encouraging fanart, fanfiction, and other fan production and responding to fans directly on Twitter and Tumblr. Though these interactions have not been without friction, and legitimate concerns exist about the intensity and power imbalance of this fan-creator connection, Miranda's presence has shaped the fandom in ways that have actively discouraged fan hierarchies based on liveness.

As scholars, we need to take note of this shift in reception and respond accordingly, treating musicals like *Hamilton* as the hypermediated texts they are in 2016. Only then will we be able to explore the contours of fandom, mediation, and performativity as they currently exist, beneath and beyond the bright lights of Broadway.