

Live Spectacles, Paratexts, and Ancillary Outlets

“The Ethics of Access: Broadway’s Finances and Underrepresented Audiences”

Karen Petruska, *Gonzaga University*

“Accessibility is deeply important to me. It’s deeply important to Lin and to our entire team. It always has been. I know what it’s like to not be able to afford a full-price theater ticket.”
~*Hamilton* producer Jeffrey Seller

There is a central, troubling paradox at the heart of *Hamilton* mania: this is a show that celebrates Americans of color on stage even while its audience remains largely and glaringly white. *Hamilton* is expensive (the cheapest ticket is \$179), it is sold out into 2017, and as NPR’s *Code Switch* blogger Gene Demby has noted, Broadway simply doesn’t have a strong history with minority communities. A documentary about the making of *Hamilton* will air on PBS this fall, but it will decidedly NOT present a recorded version of the stage production. For a variety of reasons, then, many fans of *Hamilton* will develop their fandom entirely apart from experiencing the live production.

I started this project thinking about liveness, questioning whether the varied ways folks experience *Hamilton*—through Miranda’s social media feed, his Ham4Ham videos on YouTube, or endless repeated listenings of the soundtrack—exist as supplemental or subservient to the show. Might these paratexts in fact have become performances in their own right, distinctive and essential elements to the *Hamilton* experience, such that missing the stage performance isn’t such a loss after all?

With this in mind, I read more about the show and became fascinated by deeper questions about the politics of *Hamilton*’s discourse of access. The demographic challenge of making Broadway accessible to new and underserved audiences is not something that escapes Miranda or his producers. Explaining that a digital lottery increases the diversity of the audience (rather than asking prospective attendees to queue in person), *Hamilton* producer Jeffrey Seller expressed a goal for the producing team: “It is part of our mission to make *Hamilton* available to everyone.” In an editorial in the *New York Times*, Miranda attributed high ticket prices to the secondary ticket market—with sites like StubHub reportedly making up to \$60 million a year off of *Hamilton* alone. Miranda called for New York to make what is currently a misdemeanor offence—using robotic software to grab all available tickets—a felony, in order to discourage the marketplace.

In lieu of government action, Seller raised the highest category of premium tickets from \$477 to a whopping \$849. As the producer noted, prices for *Hamilton* must be high enough that they narrow the margin available to secondary ticket sellers to discourage price gouging. From the perspective of capitalists, though, \$849 is in fact *too low*, an underestimation of what the market will bear. Pricing strategy consultant Rafi Mohammed has argued in the *Harvard Business Review* that the lack of consumer backlash suggests producers should not worry about charging high rates. To what extent should marketplace logics determine costs for Broadway tickets, considering the industry’s struggle to attract young and diverse attendees?

I'm intrigued by Miranda and Seller's apparent anxiety about the moral stakes of their success. One counterpoint to the \$849 rate is their simultaneous doubling of the seats offered for the \$10 lottery—with 49 seats offered in the first two rows of the theatre. Through the lottery, about 19,000 people will get access to *Hamilton* for the bargain basement rate of \$10. Other \$10 tickets are available for school groups, subsidized by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. While team *Hamilton* did not invent the idea of a lottery—that credit apparently goes to *Rent* producers (including Seller), according to theatre historian Logan Culwell—the \$10 rate is unique among all the current shows offering some version of discounted last-minute ticket. Now that Miranda and many of the original cast members have departed the New York production, the secondary market may not be able to charge the astronomical rates that likely peaked this summer at almost \$9,998.96 per ticket for Miranda's final performance, but prospective audience members will continue to struggle to afford *Hamilton*, even as it appears in places like Chicago and in other cities through a touring production. Does the historical content of *Hamilton* or the racial/ethnic demographics of its cast produce some sort of ethical mandate to increase access to the live stage production?

Another interesting twist in the discourse of *Hamilton*'s producers is the repeated use of the word "fair." Producer Seller has complained that "It's not fair that my product is being resold at many times its face value and my team isn't sharing in those profits." In talking about third-party robots used to buy tickets, Miranda called the practice unfair to audiences. The original cast pushed for and earned a profit-sharing stake in the show (1% to be split among 30 performers and crew who helped launch the show), citing a lack of fairness at their exclusion. Another Broadway producer and theater owner, discussing star-driven limited runs and rising ticket prices, noted, "the playing field is not exactly even for the average theatergoer." What are the stakes for Broadway in terms of access and finances? Can Broadway be a populist art form?