

In Germany, ‘Hamilton’ Hangs Up Its Musket

After a year of less-than-stellar ticket sales, the German-language translation of Lin-Manuel Miranda’s stage hit is closing. But it has helped diversify German musicals.



By A.J. Goldmann

The critic A.J. Goldmann returned to Hamburg, Germany to see “Hamilton” for a last time.

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On Monday, the German-language version of Lin-Manuel Miranda’s blockbuster musical “Hamilton” won the prize for best production at the German Musical Theater Awards. But the timing of the honor was bittersweet. On Sunday, the show will play its final performance in Hamburg, after a yearlong run at the 1,400-seat Operettenhaus.

The rise and fall of “Hamilton” in Hamburg is a tale of incredible determination, sky-high expectations, critical acclaim and an uneven box office.

“Economically, it makes more sense for us to have a wonderful one-year run, instead of losing the money that you’ve made by prolonging it for too long,” said Stephan Jaekel, a spokesman for Stage Entertainment, the Amsterdam-based company that produced the show.

Although sales were healthy overall, the show performed below expectations during the Christmas season, Jaekel said. Noting that tickets for musicals are “the number one German Christmas present,” he added that the holiday season box office was a “good indicator” of whether a show is “flying, whether it’s solid, whether it’s declining.” He added that even when sales were at their most brisk, “Hamilton” never sold out completely.

When its closure was announced in March, the show had reported sales of over 200,000 tickets. Jaekel said that twice as many people will have seen it by the final performance on Sunday afternoon.

“Four hundred thousand, to us, seems like a very good number of people to have been in touch with a new form of musical,” he said, “because the German musical audience is not as developed, is not as refined, not as used to variety as, say, the British or the American musical audiences are.”



Daniel Dodd-Ellis, second from left, plays both Lafayette and Jefferson. He said the production was “a huge learning curve for German musical theater audiences.” Johan Persson

“Hamilton” has become one of the most successful Broadway musicals of all time since opening in 2015. It won a Pulitzer Prize for Drama, as well as 11 of the 16 Tony Awards for which it was nominated. A West End production has been running since 2017, and in addition to a North American tour, the show recently landed in Manila, and will head to Abu Dhabi early next year.

Unlike Hamilton’s international tour, however, Hamburg’s was the first (and still the only) production not in the English language. Sera Finale and Kevin Schroeder spent nearly four years working through the show’s more than 20,000 rapid-fire words. Their German-language version has been widely praised as a masterpiece of translation.

A little over a year ago, “Hamilton” in Hamburg celebrated a glitzy gala opening, with Miranda in attendance. It opened to strong reviews — but even the most positive critics wondered whether the show’s unique qualities might be lost in translation.

“Can this American success story also work here?” wrote Judith Liere in the German newspaper Die Zeit. She applauded the translation, but complained that the story was unfamiliar and hard-to-follow. And though Liere praised the music and the energetic performances, she also asked: “Will that be enough to excite the average German musical audience, who are otherwise used to more accessible and effects-laden material?”

At a recent weekend performance, the Operettenhaus was nearly full. I spotted young

women decked out in “Hamilton” T-shirts and hoodies, as well as couples old and young and groups of 20-somethings, but relatively few young families, who are one of the main audiences for musicals in Hamburg.

The crowd was fired up throughout the three-hour-long show, whooping and applauding as characters made their entrance (Lafayette! Washington! Jefferson! King George!) and the famous line “*Einwanderer* — we get the job done” was met with a mid-performance howl. The show was every bit as electrifying as it had been on opening night.

In an interview afterward, Denise Obedekah, a director who worked on the production, said she still considered the Hamburg production a success. It “did start something in Germany,” she said: “an awareness that there are other musicals out there than just Disney shows.”



From left, Ivy Quainoo, Chasity Crisp and Mae Ann Jorolan in the production. Johan Persson

She added that a show with “Hamilton’s” level of sophistication was able to attract people who might previously have thought “musical theater is only for old people, or is something really kitschy.”

Chasity Crisp, the actress who plays Angelica Schuyler, said that “Hamilton” in Germany had “kind of made musical theater cool.” Noting that the majority of the 34 cast members aren’t white, and hail from 13 countries, she added that it had contributed to the “ongoing development of inclusivity and diversity” in the country’s entertainment industry.

The show also opened the door for “a new generation of musicals” in Germany, she said: Stage Entertainment is set to import German-language versions of “MJ: The Musical,” “& Juliet” and “Hercules” to Hamburg in versions either partially or fully translated into German.

“Hamilton” may have struggled, partly, because it led this charge, said Daniel Dodd-Ellis, who plays Lafayette and Jefferson. Telling such a sophisticated and diverse story “was a huge learning curve for German musical theater audiences, for the German musical producers, and for marketing,” he added. The show’s promotion might have been too focused on the feat of translating “Hamilton,” rather than the merits of the show itself, he said.

Although this “Hamilton” didn’t catch fire the same way it did in New York, it would be wrong to suggest, as some in the German press have, that the show was a flop. Revisiting the production a year after its opening, my admiration for the ingenious translation was undimmed (like the original English, the verbose songs reward multiple hearings) and I was transported anew by the raw energy of the production and the performances.

Why didn’t local audiences thrill to “Hamilton?” Was the story too quintessentially American? Was its “brand visibility” too low compared to Disney and jukebox musicals? Whatever the reason, nearly half a million people here have discovered “Hamilton” *auf Deutsch* and that seems momentous. And there are lots of places where this show could find a new home: Vienna, Zurich, Stuttgart. This “Hamilton” hasn’t necessarily thrown away its shot.