

# Review: ‘Hamilton’ in German? It’s a Thrill.

The hit musical arrived in Hamburg with its verve, ingenuity and idealism intact. And it gains unexpected depth from being staged in Germany.

By **A.J. Goldmann**

Published Oct. 7, 2022 Updated Oct. 13, 2022

HAMBURG, Germany — Early on in “Hamilton,” Aaron Burr offers the founding father of the title some “free advice”: “Talk less. Smile more.”

In the German-language premiere of the blockbuster musical that opened here on Thursday, that line is one of the few retained in English — and a flummoxed Hamilton immediately asks what those words mean.

There’s a slinking, mischievous irony to Burr’s advice. This is one of the wordiest musicals in the history of theater, a show so drunk on the exuberance of its language that it almost never stops to catch its breath. As much as it is a musical tour de force, “Hamilton” is a love letter to the English language’s tonal richness and malleability. So, when Hamilton prompts Burr for a translation in this early exchange, it teasingly registers as a meta-commentary on the artistic challenges facing the production — and as both a taunt and a dare.



The “Hamilton” cast in Hamburg comes from 13 countries, including Brazil, the Philippines and the United States. Johan Persson

Ever since a German-language version of Lin-Manuel Miranda's Pulitzer and Tony-winning "Hamilton" was announced, a number of urgent questions have swirled about. How, in God's name, could this, of all musicals, convince in German, a language with a vastly different syntax and repertoire of sounds? In a theater landscape that lacks diversity, where would producers find the mammoth multiracial cast the show requires? And why should German audiences even care about the story of an American founding father whose likeness on the \$10 bill most here would not even recognize?

A lot could have gone wrong. So I'm pleased to report that "Hamilton" has transferred to Hamburg with its verve, ingenuity, idealism and courage intact. The show here is every bit as electrifying as the one currently running on Broadway, and it gains unexpected depth from being performed in Germany, and auf Deutsch.

Perhaps most fundamentally, this "Hamilton" is a masterpiece of translation. The translating team of Kevin Schroeder and Sera Finale spent four years working on the German version of Miranda's densely wordy and rhythmically propulsive lyrics. (In the end, Miranda vetted the final version of each line himself.) The result is some of the most vivid, fresh-faced and dynamic German I've heard in the theater in a long time. Schroeder and Finale approached their herculean assignment with unstinting resourcefulness and shrewd musical instinct.

The punning, exuberant text results in a genuinely German version, a "Hamilton" eminently, entirely at home in the language. Nearly every word in translation rings true.

This makes it possible for the large cast to convincingly inhabit both show's musical landscape — with its mix of hip hop, R&B, pop and show tunes — as well as its inner world. Although David Korins's brick-and-wood set is identical to the one used in the six English-language productions, directed by Thomas Kail and currently running worldwide, the performers succeed in making it their own. Indeed, the German cast seems to rejuvenate the 7-year-old show, whose haunting lighting by Howell Binkley, frequently stage rotations and energetic, near-constant dancing (Andy Blankenbuehler's Tony Award-winning choreography) mirror the torrid flow of language.



Gino Emnes, center, as Aaron Burr. Johan Persson

Casting “Hamilton” in German was nearly as difficult as translating it, and the talent scouts at Stage Entertainment, the show’s producer in Hamburg, have assembled an impressive cast whose members hail from 13 countries. The Broadway-caliber performers bring the requisite bluster, lyricism and wit to their assignments. And they all get that, fundamentally, “Hamilton” is a show about collective energy and cooperation — the hard work of democracy — rather than showboating.

Benet Monteiro, who is from Brazil, plays Hamilton with wiry, coiled-up energy. He’s a man constantly overheated, which is what makes him tick, and is his tragic flaw. Gino Emnes, who is Dutch, is charismatic and elegant as Burr. Daniel Dodd-Ellis, an American, does double duty as Lafayette (with an outrageous French accent) and Jefferson. Another American, Charles Simmons, cut a striking figure as Washington.

The late 18th-century America of “Hamilton” is very much a guy’s world, but the show has a trio of finely drawn female characters, sung here by the lyrically accomplished Berlin-born Ivy Quainoo (as Eliza Hamilton), the American-born Chasity Crisp (Angelica Schuyler) and the Filipino-Swiss actress Mae Ann Jorolan (as Peggy Schuyler/Maria Reynolds).

If the translation is a rare artistic accomplishment, this casting feels like a milestone in this country. Theaters throughout the German-speaking world — both commercial theaters and the publicly funded playhouses common throughout Germany, Austria and Switzerland — have not made the push for onstage diversity that companies in the United States and Britain have. And these countries are not as ethnically homogeneous as they are often taken for; indeed, they are all becoming less white and more diverse. Even so, the theater scene here has been slow to adapt to reflect this emerging demographic reality. With few exceptions, the huge theater scene here remains overwhelmingly white

and native-born.



Charles Simmons, center, in the role of Washington. Johan Persson

“Hamilton” in Germany takes on a different charge than it does in today’s America. To see the Broadway show is to be transported to a prelapsarian time before the wreckage of the Trump years, the murder of George Floyd and the Capitol Hill insurrection. In a painfully divided country, “Hamilton” can feel like a quaint artifact from a simpler time, an encapsulation of the hope, however naïve, for a colorblind society that celebrated individuality, difference and the contribution of immigrants.

Sitting through the show in Hamburg, my impressions were different. Although the history in “Hamilton” is not Germany’s own, it leaped off the stage with force, immediacy and clarity. Who cares if local audiences only have a passing knowledge of the Federalist Papers or can’t tell James Madison from John Adams? “Hamilton’s” ability to transcend the specific cultural context of its inception is the ultimate proof that it is a great work of art with universal significance.

Hearing Miranda’s work lent a new vitality through a new language — acted, sung and danced by a multiethnic, multinational cast, the like of which has never been assembled in Germany before — was edifying, riveting and inspiring. I hope that Hamburgers thrill to this German “Hamilton” as much as I did. They would be crazy not to.

#### **Hamilton**

At the Operettenhaus in Hamburg, Germany, for an open-ended run; [stage-entertainment.de](http://stage-entertainment.de).