

They Translated ‘Hamilton’ Into German. Was It Easy? Nein.

For the musical’s Hamburg premiere, a team wrestled with language and cultural differences to bring the story alive for a new audience.



By Michael Paulson

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HAMBURG, Germany — “Hamilton” is a mouthful, even in English. Forty-seven songs; more than 20,000 words; fast-paced lyrics, abundant wordplay, complex rhyming patterns, plus allusions not only to hip-hop and musical theater but also to arcane aspects of early American history.

So imagine the challenge, then, of adapting the story of America’s first treasury secretary for a German-speaking audience — preserving the rhythm, the sound, and the sensibility of the original musical while translating its dense libretto into a language characterized by multisyllabic compound nouns and sentences that often end with verbs, and all in a society that has minimal familiarity with the show’s subject matter.

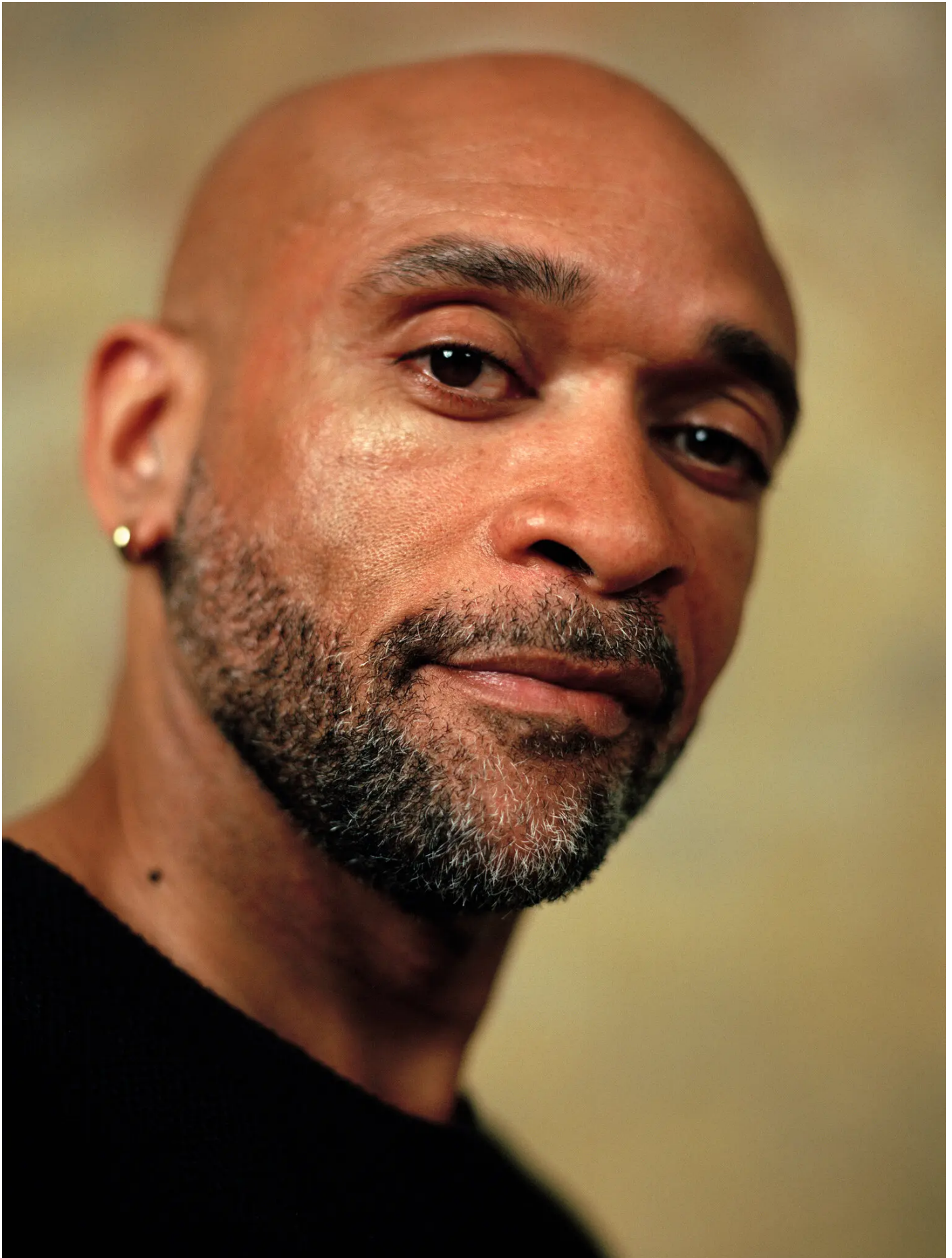
For the last four years — a timeline prolonged, like so many others, by the coronavirus pandemic — a team of translators has been working with the “Hamilton” creators to develop a German version, the first production of the juggernaut musical in a language other than English. The German-speaking cast — most of them actors of color, reflecting the show’s defining decision to retell America’s revolutionary origins with the voices of today’s diverse society — is now in the final days of rehearsal; previews begin Sept. 24 and the opening is scheduled to take place Oct. 6.

The production is an important test for “Hamilton,” which already has six English-language productions running in North America, Britain and Australia, and is hoping to follow Germany with a Spanish version in Madrid and Mexico City. But whether a translated “Hamilton” will succeed remains to be seen.

Hamburg has emerged, somewhat improbably, as a commercial theater destination — the third biggest city for musical theater in the world, after New York and London — with a sizable market of German-speaking tourists. The market began with “Cats” and “The Phantom of the Opera,” and Disney shows are a big draw: “The Lion King” and “Frozen” are now playing side-by-side on the south bank of the Elbe River, accessible by a five-minute ferry ride.

But less familiar shows have had a harder time here — “Kinky Boots” closed after a year.

Sure, there are hard-core German “Hamilton” fans (some of them upset that the show is being performed in a different language from that of the cast album they love), but there are also plenty of Germans who have never even heard of Alexander Hamilton.



Charles Simmons (George Washington) Florian Thoss for The New York Times



Chasity Crisp (Angelica Schuyler) Florian Thoss for The New York Times

“HISTORY HAS ITS EYES ON YOU”

Original: “History has its eyes on you.”

German: “*Die Geschichte wird dabei Zeuge sein.*”

Back-translation: “History will be witness.”

“It’s not like ‘Frozen,’ which everybody knows,” said Simone Linhof, the artistic producer of Stage Entertainment, an Amsterdam-based production company that operates four theaters in Hamburg and has the license to present “Hamilton” in German. Stage Entertainment is putting “Hamilton” in its smallest Hamburg venue, a 1,400 seat house in the lively St. Pauli district. “‘Hamilton’ is more challenging,” Linhof said.

The German cast has already adopted its own take on the show: Whereas in New York, the musical is celebrated for its dramatization of America’s founding, almost every actor interviewed here described it as a universal human story about the rise and fall of a gifted but flawed man.

“People should stop focusing on that it is American history, and focus more on the relationship between the characters,” said Mae Ann Jorolan, the Swiss actress playing Peggy Schuyler and Maria Reynolds. “‘Hamilton’ is all about having the drive to achieve something.”

International productions have become an important contributor to the immense profitability of a handful of shows birthed on Broadway or in the West End, and they are often staged in the vernacular to make them more accessible. “The Phantom of the Opera,” for example, has been performed in 17 languages.

For “Hamilton,” Stage Entertainment executives invited translators to apply for the job by sending in sample songs, and then, not satisfied with any of the submissions, asked two of the applicants who had never met one another to collaborate. One of them, Kevin Schroeder, was a veteran musical theater translator whose proposal was clear but cautious; the other was Sera Finale, a rapper-turned-songwriter whose proposal was imaginative but imprecise.

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“Kevin was like the kindergarten teacher, and I was that child who wanted to run in every direction and be punky,” said Finale, who hadn’t been to the theater since seeing “Peter Pan” as a child and had to look up “Hamilton” on Wikipedia. “If you have an open mic in

Kreuzberg,” he said, referring to a hip Berlin neighborhood, “and you’re standing there with a blunt, normally you don’t go to a musical later in the night.”

Both of them were wary of working together. “I thought, ‘What does he know?’” Schroeder said. “And he thought, ‘I’ll show this musical theater guy.’”

But they gave it a go. They wrote three songs together, and then flew to New York to pitch them to Lin-Manuel Miranda, who wrote the book, music, and lyrics for “Hamilton.” Miranda can curse and coo in German (his wife is half Austrian), but that’s about it; he surprised the would-be translators by showing up for their meeting with his wife’s Austrian cousin.

“Lin is a smart guy,” Finale said, joking that the presence of the cousin ensured “that I don’t rap cooking recipes or the telephone book.”

Miranda had been on the other side once — he translated some of the lyrics of “West Side Story” into Spanish for a 2009 Broadway revival — and he remembered observing how that show’s lyricist, Stephen Sondheim, listened for the sounds of the Spanish words. Miranda applied that experience to the German “Hamilton.”

“I’m going to feel the internal rhyme, or lack of internal rhyme, of which there is a lot in this show, and so it’s important to me whenever that can be maintained without losing comprehensibility,” Miranda said. “That’s part of what makes hip-hop so much fun, are the internal assonances of it, and they did an incredible job of maintaining that.”



Mae Ann Jorolan (Peggy Schuyler/Maria Reynolds) Florian Thoss for The New York Times



Ivy Quainoo (Eliza Hamilton) Florian Thoss for The New York Times

“HELPLESS”

Original: “I have never been the type to try and grab the spotlight.”
German: “*Ich gehör’ zu den’n, die auf der Party gern am Rand steh’n.*”
Back-translation: “I belong to those who like to stand on the sidelines

at parties.”

Once Finale and Schroeder got the job, the process was painstaking, reflecting not only the complexity of the original language but also the fact that the show is almost entirely sung-through, meaning there is very little of the spoken dialogue that is generally easier to translate, because it is unconstrained by melody. They tried divvying up the songs and writing separately, but didn't like the results, so instead they spent a half year sitting across from one another at the kitchen table in Finale's Berlin apartment, debating ideas until both were satisfied. They would send Miranda and his team proposed German lyrics as well as a literal translation back into English, allowing Miranda to understand how their proposal differed from his original.

Kurt Crowley, an original member of “Hamilton” music team — he was an associate conductor and then the Broadway music director — became the point person for the project. He developed a multicolored spreadsheet tracking the feedback process; not only that, but he set about learning German, first from apps, and then with a tutor.

“A lot of the coaching and music direction I do has to do with the language,” he said. “I couldn't think of any other way to do my job besides knowing exactly what they were saying.”

In some ways, the wordiness of “Hamilton” proved advantageous. “At least we had all these syllables,” Schroeder said. “It gave us room to play around.”

Hamilton's hip-hop elements also had benefits, Schroeder said. “If you come from a musical theater background, you're used to being very correct and precise, but that's not how rap works,” he said. “You have to find the flow, and you can play around with the beat.”

There were so many variables to consider. Finale ticked off a list: words, syllables, meter, sound, flow and position. They needed to preserve the essential meaning of each element of the show, but also elide some of the more arcane details, and they needed to echo the musicality of the language.

Figures of speech and wordplay rarely survive translation, but Miranda encouraged the translators to come up with their own metaphors. One example that Finale is proud of concerns Hamilton's fixation on mortality. In English, he says “I imagine death so much it feels more like a memory.” In German, he will say words meaning, “Every day death is writing between the lines of my diary.”

There were easy pleasures: The youngest Schuyler sister's signature line, “And Peggy,” translated readily to “Und Peggy.” But for the eldest Schuyler sister, lyrics got more complicated: In “Satisfied,” a rapid-fire song set at Hamilton's wedding, “I feel like there's

a thousand extra words they added to it,” said Chasity Crisp, the actress playing Angelica. “I’m still trying to learn how to breathe in the number. It’s incredibly fast. But there’s no other way you can do it — otherwise you wouldn’t be telling the story right.”



The Schuyler Sisters: Chasity Crisp (Angelica), Mae Ann Jorolan (Peggy) and Ivy Quainoo (Eliza). Florian Thoss for The New York Times

“THE SCHUYLER SISTERS”

Original: “I’m looking for a mind at work.”

German: “*Ich will ‘nen Mann, bei dem was läuft.*”

Back-translation: “I want a man who has got something going on.”

A few English phrases — well-known to fans, repeated often, and easy to understand — remain, including a reference to New York as “the greatest city in the world,” as do some English titles and American name pronunciations.

But most of the quotes from American musicals and rap songs are gone; in their place are

references to the German hip-hop scene, including a description of Hamilton and his friends as “die fantastischen Vier,” which means “the fantastic four” but is also the name of a band from Stuttgart, plus a moment when Burr says to Angelica, “You are a babe — I’d like to drink your bath water,” which is a line in a classic German rap song.

There were, of course, disagreements along the way — over tone (an initial translation described the West Indies, where Hamilton grew up, as “filthy,” which Miranda rejected as going too far), and content: The translators, for rhyming reasons, wanted Eliza, angry over her husband’s infidelity, to tell him, in German, “All this shall burn” rather than “I hope you burn.” Miranda sacrificed the rhyme to preserve her personalized fury.

An unexpected factor was the way that the translation affected choreography. Much of the show’s movement echoes words in the score; as those words changed, there was a risk that the movement would not make sense. For example: Initially the translators proposed to replace “The room where it happens” with a German phrase meaning “behind closed doors,” which they thought was a clearer image for the German audience. But the choreography of that song suggests a room-like space, so the choreographer, Andy Blankenbuehler, balked, and the original concept stayed. The song is now called “In diesem Zimmer,” meaning “in this room.”

But Blankenbuehler also saw — well, heard — one attribute of German that was a bonus: its percussive sound. “The thing I love is the consonants are so guttural and aggressive,” he said. “Right away it sounds awesome — it sounds like the movement.”

The principal cast members are all fluent in German, and many of them were skeptical that the translation could be done effectively. “At the beginning I was afraid that they won’t get the essence of what ‘Hamilton’ is — that they wouldn’t get these little nuances, the play on words and the intelligence of it all,” Crisp said.

Fans were worried too, and weighed in on social media. “People are skeptical when something really cool is being put into German,” said Ivy Quainoo, the actress playing Eliza. “Hamilton has all these New York rap references, and this East Coast swagger — how is this going to translate?”

The German cast is the most international ever assembled for a “Hamilton” production, hailing from 13 countries, reflecting the degree to which Hamburg has become a magnet for European musical theater performers, and also the wide search the producers needed to conduct to find German-speaking musical theater performers of color.

Miranda said assembling a diverse cast was his biggest concern about staging the show in Hamburg. “The image of Germany in the world was not of a very heterogenous society,” he said. “That was my only hesitation, born of my own ignorance.”



Benet Monteiro (Alexander Hamilton) Florian Thoss for The New York Times



Gino Emnes (Aaron Burr) Florian Thoss for The New York Times

"MY SHOT"

Original: “I am not throwing away my shot.”
German: “*Mann, ich hab’ nur diesen einen Schuss.*”
Back-translation: “Man, I’ve only got this one shot.”

Many of the actors are immigrants, or the children of immigrants, giving particular poignancy to the show’s reliable applause line, “Immigrants: We get the job done.” Quainoo, playing Eliza, is a Berliner whose parents are from Ghana; Jorolan’s parents moved to Switzerland from the Philippines. Hamilton is played by Benet Monteiro, a Brazilian who moved to Hamburg 12 years ago to join the cast of “The Lion King”; Burr is played by Gino Emnes, who was born in the Netherlands to a mother from Aruba and a father from Suriname.

Monteiro and Emnes have had long careers in musical theater in Germany, but some of the members of the cast are newer to the genre. The roles of Hercules Mulligan and James Madison are played by a German rapper named Redchild, whose father is from Benin. “I had a very negative view of musical theater,” he said. “To me it was a quite limited genre, and I didn’t have high hopes.” But he heard about “Hamilton” from a friend, watched it on Disney+, and decided to audition.

Very few of the performers had actually seen an in-person production of “Hamilton.” “I was in New York, and I wanted to, but it was too expensive,” Crisp said.

Crisp represents another demographic slice of the cast: a child of an American serviceman. She was born in Mississippi but her father was stationed in Berlin when she was just a year old, and she has spent her whole life in Germany. Charles Simmons, the singer playing Washington, is originally from Kansas City, Mo., but his father, a soldier, was twice stationed in Germany, and Simmons has made the country his home. “It’s fun to tell the story of my birthplace to my place of residence,” he said.

Many cast members said they experienced racism growing up in Europe. “People only saw me as the Asian girl,” Jorolan said. And Redchild said he would often be asked if he was adopted. “People do not think you can be German,” he said.

Those experiences have informed the way they think about “Hamilton.” “I’m playing a white slave owner, and it feels weird because I know that parts of my family have been slaves,” Redchild said. And Emnes noted, “I think in the States and London, the discussion about seeing diversity onstage is much older, and developed. In Europe, it’s a very young discussion.”

But all said just being in the rehearsal room was striking. “It’s very exciting that we have the cast that we have, even though Germany is a very white country,” Simmons said. “The whole notion of people of color playing white people is pretty revolutionary.”

The path to Hamburg for American and British musicals is well-worn; it began in 1986, with a production of “Cats.” Stage Entertainment opened “The Lion King” here in 2001; Ambassador Theater Group, a British company that also operates two Broadway houses, is the most recent player, with a German-language production of “Harry Potter and the Cursed Child” (which is not a musical, but sells like one).

The commercial theater scene stands out in Germany, where much stage work is done by government-funded institutions that often present avant-garde plays. But Michael Otremba, the chief executive of Hamburg’s tourism agency, said musical theater serves an important audience. “This is not the mass of German people who have read Goethe and Schiller,” he said. “There is also this market for light entertainment. And ‘Hamilton’ helps this genre to prove they are more than Andrew Lloyd Webber and Disney.”

Hamburg is overshadowed by Berlin and Munich as a tourist destination, but visitorship here has been growing: In 2001 the city had 4.8 million overnight visitors, and by 2019 it was up to 15.4 million, Otremba said. And culture is an important part of the attraction. The city frequently notes its place in Beatles history (the band performed in clubs here); it has just opened a striking new concert hall, the Elbphilharmonie, that has been embraced by locals and tourists; and then there are the big shows here from the United States and Britain.

“The musicals are a pillar for the development of tourism,” Otremba said. “All the marketing for these productions is enormous, and every time they promote their shows, they mention Hamburg.”

Once the American team moves on, day-to-day oversight of “Hamilton” will fall to Denise Obedekah, a German performer whose father is from Liberia. Obedekah was a dancer in multiple German shows — most recently, “Tina” — but was ready for a change.

“The musical theater audience in Germany is a little conservative,” Obedekah said. “For a very long time, when musical theater was produced in Germany, it was done in a very safe way,” she added. “Producers need to be more brave, and educate our audience to new material. I know this is a risk, because we don’t know if the audience is going to react in the way that they did in the States or in England. But it’s definitely necessary. ”

Audio produced by Tally Abecassis.

Michael Paulson is the theater reporter. He previously covered religion, and was part of the Boston Globe team whose coverage of clergy sexual abuse in the Catholic Church won the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service. More about Michael Paulson

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