

‘Hamilton’ Is Coming to the Small Screen. This Is How It Got There.

The film, a live capture of the hit Broadway show, will stream on Disney Plus beginning July 3. That wasn’t always the plan.

By [Michael Paulson](#)



In the spring of 2017, a production executive withdrew an encrypted hard drive from a Midtown Manhattan vault and boarded a flight to London.

A year before, a film crew had shot two of the [final “Hamilton” performances](#) featuring most of the original cast, and the plan was to lock the footage away for five or six years, until the time felt right to share it with the public.

But a cut was ready to show the person whose opinion mattered most: Lin-Manuel Miranda, the show’s laureled creator and star.

Miranda was in Britain, filming “Mary Poppins Returns.” (He played the lamplighter.) So the “Hamilton” movie’s brain trust flew over, renting a private screening room in a hotel basement that the star could readily access during a break from [Cherry Tree Lane](#).

The team didn’t have to wait long to find out what Miranda thought. As the screening got underway, he periodically interjected his approval, and when the final number began, he took off a shoe and threw it into the air.

“I thought, ‘OK, we did our job,’” said Jon Kamen, chairman and chief executive of RadicalMedia, which produced the film. “If he starts throwing his shoes around the theater, it’s pretty special.”

The public will now finally get a chance to see the film — neither a feature nor a documentary but a live-capture of the stage show — and won’t even have to wear shoes. Because of the coronavirus pandemic, Disney, which last year outbid competing studios for the rights to the film, announced that it would [forgo a planned theatrical release](#) and instead stream it [on Disney Plus starting July 3](#).

The movie, known to legions of obsessive fans by the hashtag [#Hamilfilm](#), will be the first opportunity for many to see a show that chronicles the Revolution-era life and death of Alexander Hamilton, who was the United States’s first Treasury secretary. The show won both the 2016 [Pulitzer Prize in drama](#) and [the Tony Award for best new musical](#); its pre-pandemic productions around North America and in London were routinely sold out, with the best seats on Broadway retailing for \$847, and its cast album has been on the Billboard 200 chart [for 246 weeks](#).



Broadway shows are often recorded [for archival purposes](#), but rarely for commercial runs. The “Hamilton” film was shot over just three days in June 2016, shortly after [the Tonys](#) and shortly before Miranda and several other performers [departed from the cast](#).

“Theater is like ‘[Brigadoon](#)’ — it’s this kind of magical thing, and if you weren’t there you missed it,” said the actress Renée Elise Goldsberry, who plays Hamilton’s sister-in-law, Angelica Schuyler. “So to be able to save how it felt to do that show, at that time, together with this group of people, was a gift.”

There were no rehearsals — that seemed unnecessary, given that most of the cast had already done the show several hundred times. “These are the most well-rehearsed actors in the history of movies,” Miranda said.

But there was no room for missteps. “We didn’t have the option to go back,” said Thomas Kail, who directed the stage production and the film.

Kail had strong ideas about the “Hamilton” capture. “I didn’t want to pretend we weren’t in the theater,” he said. “That’s why you hear the audience and see the audience a little bit. I wanted to create a document that could feel like what it was to be in the theater at that time.”

Declan Quinn, the director of photography, spent two months watching performances and reading the script, trying to suss out the best angles to capture key dramatic beats. He installed nine cameras around the Richard Rodgers Theater — one with a view toward the audience through a hole cut into the back of the stage set, one fixed on the balcony rail for a wide shot, and seven hidden behind black drapes so they would be less distracting to theatergoers — to shoot a Sunday matinee and a Tuesday evening show. Between those performances, the cast ran through 13 of the 46 numbers, but this time with onstage equipment — a Steadicam, a crane and a dolly-mounted camera — for close-ups and overheads.

Sound was recorded through more than 100 microphones. Quinn and Kail sat in a truck on the street, watching live feeds and radioing in adjustments to the camera operators.

“You have to find the sweet spots where all of the language comes together — lighting, choreography, costumes,” Quinn said.

The film’s editor, Jonah Moran, had been unable to score tickets to “Hamilton” until coming on board for the movie; he then saw it about five times in New York and once in San Francisco as he and Kail wrestled with when to show the full stage, with set and choreography, and when to go tight on an actor’s face or a costume detail. “We were playing with the scale and the spectacle of it,” Moran said. “How do you capture all these details?”



The 161-minute film is the full Broadway show — with all scenes, all songs, even an intermission. Careful listeners may, however, notice a pair of elisions: Miranda allowed two of three obscenities in the libretto to be rendered inaudible to secure a PG-13 rating from the Motion Picture Association of America.

The musical’s lead producers — Jeffrey Seller, Sander Jacobs and Jill Furman — financed the filming themselves. “We just had a funny feeling that, no matter what deal we made at that point, it wouldn’t be enough,” Seller said. “It turned out it was a good decision.”

The producers spent “less than \$10 million” shooting “Hamilton,” he said. They sold it to Disney for roughly \$75 million.

Disney in some ways seemed like an inevitable choice, not just because of its scale and power, but also because of its growing relationship with Miranda, who wrote songs for “Moana,” starred in “Mary Poppins Returns,” and is now co-writing a new animated musical, set in Colombia, for the studio.

But Team “Hamilton” made Disney sweat for the rights to the film. In 2018, the producers shopped it around Hollywood and then turned everyone down. “We weren’t sure what to do,” Seller said, “and sometimes when you’re not sure, slow down.”

Then Kail unexpectedly joined the Disney family. He was directing the mini-series “Fosse/Verdon” for FX when Disney acquired 20th Century Fox. And last year, Kail reached out to Robert A. Iger, then Disney’s chief executive, to inform him that the film was still available.

Iger really wanted it. He had seen the musical on Broadway (but not the original cast) and in Los Angeles; he said his children were “big fans,” and that he had “a few grandchildren who know every word.”

“I thought that ‘Hamilton’ was one of the most culturally significant pieces of art I had seen,” he said. “And when I saw the film, I was extremely impressed. It’s not just the best seat in the house; it’s a seat that doesn’t exist in the house, because when you’re onstage it’s like you’re among those characters.”

So Iger boarded a plane to New York to make his case. “I pitched my heart out,” he said. “Being associated with it would not only be great for our company, but we would do it real justice.”

A deal was sealed. “Honestly, it seemed like the best way to get the movie to as many places as possible,” Miranda said. (Miranda, by the way, continues to own the rights to any future feature film adaptation of “Hamilton.” Will there ever be one? “I don’t know,” he said.)

Proceeds from the sale, Seller said, will be shared with the beneficiaries of the Broadway production, including the nonprofit Public Theater, where the Off Broadway production was staged, and members of the original cast, who in 2016 [won a hard-fought battle to share in the profits](#) of the stage production. “The actors are absolutely reaping the benefits of our financial rewards,” Seller said.

The cast welcomed the arrangement.

“The vessels that the story comes through are part of the creation of the piece of art, and I’m so grateful that this family understands that,” Goldsberry said. “That should always be the case for anybody that contributes to a film, just like it should be the case for anybody that’s in the theater.”

In February of this year, Disney announced it would release the live-capture film in theaters on Oct. 15, 2021. But at the same time, the coronavirus was quietly spreading around the world. Among the side effects: by mid-March, new film and television production had largely halted, leaving the company’s streaming service [hungry for material](#).



“After the pandemic hit, and everything shut down, I sent an email to Tommy and Lin, and I said, ‘The world needs this now more than ever,’” said Iger, who had just become [Disney’s executive chairman](#). “Would you consider not taking it to theaters, and bringing it right to Disney Plus?”

The response was immediate: “No.”

“I thought we should stay the course, but I confess that was early in the epidemic, when we thought we might go back to work in the summer,” said Seller, still reeling from having to shut down all six productions of “Hamilton.” “As the profundity of this pandemic set in, and I realized we’re not coming back this year, I thought we should reconsider.”

On May 12, the studio and the musical producers announced that the film [would stream on Disney Plus](#), starting the weekend of Independence Day, which commemorates part of the history depicted in the show.

“I’m getting messages every day from folks who had tickets to ‘Hamilton’ and can’t go because of the pandemic, so moving up the release so everyone could experience it this summer felt like the right move,” Miranda said.

Disney has no current plans to show it on the big screen, but the “Hamilton” team remains optimistic. “Absolutely,” Kail said. “I hope at some point, when people go back to movie theaters, there’s an opportunity for people to experience this in a group, sitting in the dark.”

The move to streaming has implications for Disney and “Hamilton.”

“It is a very different financial proposition than if we had put it in movie theaters,” Iger said. He declined to share a specific estimate for the movie’s box office potential, but said, “We felt it would get extremely well reviewed, and that people would love it, but it was also unclear how it would do globally, so our estimates were relatively conservative outside the U.S. and bullish inside the U.S.”

Now the company hopes to benefit via new Disney Plus subscriptions. In the run-up to the film’s release, the service has stopped offering free trials in the U.S., although it says that change is not tied to “Hamilton.” And Iger said the benefits to Disney are not entirely monetary. “We don’t really view it as a pure financial proposition for us at all actually,” he said. “We view it as something really great to be associated with.”

As for “Hamilton,” there is some financial downside. Iger said the initial deal has been “adjusted” to reflect the lack of a theatrical release. Seller declined to discuss details, but said he thinks that the film will further whet the appetite for the stage productions. “I’ve looked at the effects of audiovisual performances on live theater over the last 20 years, and they’ve all been positive,” he said. “It’s a calculated risk, but I believe it’s going to help.”

There’s been another unexpected development: Two weeks after Disney announced its streaming plan for “Hamilton,” [George Floyd](#) was [killed while in police custody](#) in Minneapolis, prompting weeks of protest and a national conversation about racial injustice. Will that conversation affect how “Hamilton,” with leading roles played almost entirely by actors of color, is seen?



[Leslie Odom Jr.](#), who stars as Aaron Burr, said the casting was important because of the significance of “who has the mic, who is allowed to tell the story, and what language the story is told in.”

“Raising a young black girl, I can’t tell you how difficult it is for me to find books and films and works of art that are not centered around white people and white beauty and white genius and white joy,” Odom said. “Ushering black and brown beauty into the world is still political, and it is still important because the examples are few and far between.”

And the show’s cast members said they hoped the questions it raises will feel newly relevant as the musical reaches a wider audience.

“Now more than ever we need to see representation onscreen, and to use ‘Hamilton’ as a way, once again, to hold up a mirror to ourselves and ask who we are as a society, and what we want to be,” said [Phillipa Soo](#), who stars as Hamilton’s wife, Eliza. “As much as we are grappling with the things that are very flawed in our country, I hope it gets people excited about what it means to be an American.”