

'Hamilton' makes a successful transition to the big screen



CHENNAI: Cinema sometimes looks to go back to its roots. Some years ago, European auteurs like Lars Von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg and others introduced “Dogme 95” as a new form of moviemaking, which meant using no props, no artificial lighting and no makeup. It did not last long. However, Thomas Kail’s “Hamilton” — released to coincide with the Fourth of July and streaming on Disney Plus — is another experiment that reminded me of the very early days of motion pictures when some directors in India captured a stage play with a static camera and then screened it in remote regions, where it was not feasible to cart the entire cast.

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Kail used six cameras to shoot what was originally a theatrical production. Over two nights in 2016, he filmed the play with most of the actors, including Tony Award winners, who were in the stage version. Every attempt has been made to make it look

cinematic, with impeccable camerawork and editing. There is a bonus here. The movie enables you to be a front-bencher at Richard Rogers' stage production. This closeness that allows you to see clearly the expressions of the actors establishes an intimacy between the audience and the cast.

Inspired by Ron Chernow's 2004 biography of Alexander Hamilton, the 160-minute show makes a fabulous musical. The release of the film with its intentionally diverse cast comes at a critical time when race relations in the USA have hit the rock bottom. When Aaron Burr (Leslie Odom Jr) sings that he wants to be in "the room where it happens", the lyrics are sung by a black man.

Alexander Hamilton (played by Lin-Manuel Miranda, also the creator of the piece) is the least well known of the American founding fathers. An immigrant and orphan, he was George Washington's right-hand man. Credited as being responsible for setting up the country's banking system, Hamilton was killed in a duel by Burr.



The musical is inspired by Ron Chernow's 2004 biography of Alexander Hamilton. Courtesy of Disney

The story is narrated through hip-hop beats. Thomas Jefferson (Daveed Diggs) sings his speech to Congress, and the debates he has with Alexander Hamilton are verbalized through lyrics. Hamilton also has a lot to say about America's immigrant past. In one scene French aristocrat Marquis de Lafayette tells Alexander, "Immigrants, we get the job done!"

Performances are top notch. Miranda is superb, and evokes an immediate connection between the film and the viewer. King George III is brilliantly portrayed by Jonathan Groff, and Hamilton's wife, Eliza (Philippa Soo), is an endearing presence who has a calming effect on her often ruffled and troubled husband.

"Hamilton" is a great, if subjective, account of early American political history for those not familiar with that period. It must be said, however, the musical makes a long movie, which might be a trifle tiring for those not used to this format.
