

Musical Phenomenon Becomes Course

Eight years ago, at the White House Evening of Poetry, Music, and the Spoken Word, actor-composer-playwright Lin-Manuel Miranda breathed new life into American history. He unfurled the story of the nation's first Treasury Secretary, Alexander Hamilton, in a raw, riveting rap song, which went on to become the opening number in his groundbreaking Broadway musical, *Hamilton*. A new course this fall, "*Hamilton: The Musical: History, Artistry, Impact*," asks students to do what Miranda did back in 2009—bring history to life onstage and make the old new again.

The course is a collaboration between John Larson, professor of history, and Amy Lynn Budd, visiting assistant professor of theatre. While Budd brings 20 years of performance experience to the table, Larson draws on his years as the research director of Conner Prairie, an interactive history park in central Indiana. A deep appreciation for storytelling courses through their veins. They use it to bounce ideas back and forth in class and ultimately convey how history and storytelling collide.

Larson's Wednesday lectures examine the era explored in *Hamilton* and put it into a larger historical context, while Budd's Friday lectures push students to ultimately interpret history onstage.

"The class works not just as a history lesson but as an examination of how creativity works," Larson says. "It explores the processes

of interpretation and presentation, which start with the fundamentals of research."

The class treats the students as performers, providing lectures and historical readings to help them prepare in the same way an actor conducts research before playing a part. "Anything an actor learns can feed their imagination," Budd says.

Budd discovered that most of the students are coming into the class without acting experience or any background in theater.

"They've been a bit shy at first, so I'm eager to see them jump onstage and act silly and just go for it," she says. "There's scarcely any stillness onstage in *Hamilton*, so I'm curious to see them reach for that level of stamina in their performances."

The final project asks students to imaginatively interpret a historical figure in the same way Miranda fleshed out the titular founding father in *Hamilton*. They must pick a figure from before 1950 and compose an "I Am" song (like the opening number of *Hamilton*) or an "I Want" song (like the soundtrack's third track) using any musical genre, design, and theatrical framework they like.

Budd and Larson never imagined that the story of Alexander Hamilton would turn into a smash hit hip-hop musical. Like the show itself, their class serves as a testament to how art can come from the most unlikely sources—and how it can stand tall alongside the history that inspired it.

By Sam Watermeier. Photo by Lorri Foster.

