

How do Broadway musicals challenge and resist dominant cultural and political discourses surrounding race, gender identity, sexuality, and national identity?

A case study of *Hamilton*, *Rent*, and *Wicked*

By Abigail Meyers

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Simmons University

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Introduction:

“I never liked *Hamilton* very much,” President Donald Trump told reporters after seizing control of the Kennedy Center for the Arts in Washington, D.C., and naming himself Chairman of the Board (Gelt, 2025) in 2025. Later that year, he etched his name onto the building, paving the way for the “Trump-Kennedy Center” era. This came days after the producer of the Broadway sensation, Jeffrey Seller, canceled a 2026 run of the show (Limbong, 2025) at the Center after President Trump’s takeover. This came nearly a decade after President Trump’s first term, when his former Vice President, Mike Pence, paid a visit to the Broadway show November 18, 2016, shortly after the election.

“Immigrants, we get the job done,” rapped the cast to a roar of applause and standing ovation from the audience that same night, knowing that Pence was among the theatergoers. The Vice President-elect at the time had been known for defending President Trump’s aggressive approach to immigration policy - including a border wall between the United States and Mexico and increased funding for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers (Clarke, et. al, 2015.) The cast’s response included a statement written by creator Lin-Manuel Miranda and delivered by Brandon Victor Dixon, who portrayed Aaron Burr, voicing worries that rights would not be upheld for millions of families and children (Mele et al., 2016). The following morning, President Trump tweeted that the cast “harassed” Vice President Pence and demanded apologies (Trump, 2016).

Ten years later, how are Broadway musicals shaking up the political sphere?

While various musicals have shaken up the theatre industry by reframing what can be discussed theatrically, they have also influenced the political sphere of the United States over

many decades. Each of them offers hidden messages that tie to authoritarianism and the spread of misinformation, but also hopeful messages of community and diversity. Multiple political concepts could be directly applied to these musical successes. Joseph Nye coined the term “soft power” to describe cultural power on the world stage. The idea is that sources of influence such as values, are also resources of power in addition to military force and economic might (Nye, 2004). Nye’s idea was that nation-states act out of attraction as well as coercion. Stuart Hall believed that, in the domestic context, cultural power was more potent than coercive power (Hall, 1997).

Throughout my research, I aspire to explore how Broadway musicals attach emotion to ideology, along with the limitations within musical theatre when it comes to activism and challenging power. In doing so, I argue that musical theatre can challenge dominant discourses while still operating within the cultural and political boundaries that shape its impact. By examining *Hamilton*, *Rent*, and *Wicked* through the lenses of soft power, hegemony, and constructivism, this thesis shows how cultural texts go beyond reflecting political realities – they actively participate in constructing them. At the same time, these productions reveal the constraints of cultural resistance, demonstrating that even the most progressive narratives are shaped by the systems they seek to critique.

Before *Hamilton* reshaped talking about diversity in Broadway, *Rent* laid the framework, and was a show Lin-Manuel Miranda cited as a significant inspiration when writing *Hamilton* (Gioia, 2015). While the popular song “Seasons of Love” has become more widely performed at events like graduations and holiday events, *Rent*’s cultural impact and legacy went beyond that. Eric Grode of the New York Times even emphasized that the level of hype *Rent* received at the time was unparalleled, until the introduction of *Hamilton* nearly two decades later (Grode, 2021).

Rent is set in 1990s New York City, following a diverse group of artistic friends that embody queer identities; some openly struggle with being HIV+ or have developed AIDS.

The story of *Rent* highlights, according to one account, “incredibly diverse communities...[and] the message of love and acceptance, with the emphasis on the fact that family are those who we choose... (Lancaster, 2021).” *Rent* also serves as a reminder that HIV and AIDS are still ravaging the world; the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that at the end of 2024, an average of nearly 41 million people were living with HIV. The WHO also reported that HIV diagnoses, in addition to mortality rates of HIV and HIV-related causes, peaked in the late 1990s and early 2000s (World Health Organization, 2025). *Rent*’s 1996 premiere amidst an HIV/AIDS-stricken world, where “AIDS was considered a death sentence and being honest about a diagnosis or experience was a social suicide (Lancaster, 2021),” Playwright Jonathan Larson’s work highlighted diversity and the advocacy that worked towards anti-discrimination and destigmatizing HIV/AIDS.

Between smash hits *Rent* and *Hamilton* came *Wicked* onto the scene. Before it became a recent blockbuster sensation, it was a stage musical adapted from a 1995 book by Gregory Maguire, MA’78, that serves as a prequel to “The Wizard of Oz,” taking place before Dorothy Gale arrives in Oz. Maguire’s book took years to gain traction, Maguire himself saying it embodied what a sleeper hit meant, but Stephen Schwartz’s adaptation of it into a musical made the book explode in popularity (Wakeman, 2024). Playbill.com cites the musical as the fourth-longest-running Broadway show of all time, and the third-longest that is still running (Miller, 2025) as of September 2025.

Schwartz’s musical adaptation follows two girls: blonde, popular Glinda, and green-skinned outcast Elphaba. When they both matriculate at Shiz University to study magic, a

friendship between the two slowly emerges. When Elphaba is revealed to be a spell-casting, magical protege, she receives a highly coveted invite to meet the Wonderful Wizard of Oz. At their meeting, she discovers his fraudulent ways: wanting to turn the talking animals within Oz into muted, aggressive beasts. Elphaba's desire to fight against his ways gets her painted as wicked, and her friendship with Glinda is tested since the latter is torn between standing with her friend and following the rules in Oz.

This ties directly into Antonio Gramsci's idea of hegemony, where dominance is achieved through cultural, economic, and political power (Ungvarsky, 2024). The dominant group applies coercion to subordinates to force them to not only accept their own oppression but also to uphold the status quo (Schrader, et, al., 2016). Throughout my research, I aspire to explore how Broadway uses the political power of song to attach emotion to ideology, along with the limitations within musical theatre when it comes to activism and challenging power. In doing so, I argue that musical theatre can challenge dominant discourses while still operating within the cultural and political boundaries that shape its impact.

Literature Review

The significant political concerns in the United States as of late, according to a study from Yale University's Program on Climate Communication, are government corruption, cost of living, and the economy (Verner et. al., 2025). However, we must acknowledge that public sentiment and opinion are not only shaped by fiscal and social policy, but also by the influences of culture and media. I will draw from the cultural studies theory of composition, incorporating media studies and pop culture, along with the concept of constructivism (states acting based on shared ideas) in international relations.

Musical theatre is, in addition to a cultural phenomenon that has been heralded for centuries, a valuable artistic and cultural tool for studying politics and policy. Bridget Vanderhoof of the McNair Scholars Journal reminds us that when the bourgeoisie emerged in the thirteenth century, there was a need for a basic public sphere. Theater had been written for centuries, but in the 18th century was still heavily regulated by the aristocracy with restrictions on what could be performed. It later became a forum for the bourgeoisie to discuss new ideas, eventually evolving into a tool for anyone to contribute to the public sphere (Vanderhoof, 2012). She adds that “theatre...gave people the reason and practice they needed to think critically and discuss political and social issues...[inspiring] people to find their voice against omnipotent rulers and seek government (Vanderhoof, 2012).” Eventually, the stage evolved to become a model for a socially mixed public to hold power (Bolton, 2001) – the audience became the public, and the public served as an audience. Similar to how the public influences the overall reception of a leader, the audience has control over the reception of a theatrical performance. Eventually, it taught people that theatre serves as a place where opinions can be put into practice (Vanderhoof, 2012); I will be exploring how the creators of *Hamilton*, *Rent*, and *Wicked* have done so.

We must also consider the history and emergence of soft power and hegemonies. Soft power was coined in 1990 as a way to challenge the decline of military and economic power resources after the Cold War (Nye, 1990) in the Soviet Union; the U.S. subsequently emerged as a superpower in a unipolar world. Despite people debating the opposite, Nye doubted that the Soviet Union would pass the U.S. in military power and Japan would pass the U.S. economically. When trying to coin a term for his thoughts, he considered the influence of people’s ideas and attractions to obtain what they want with less emphasis on the “carrots and sticks” aspect of it as

others would see them as legitimate (Nye, 2017). He noted that the term was seldom used by political leaders in the U.S., especially after 9/11, in a “climate of fear (Nye 2017).” In this thesis, soft power is not exercised by states alone, but through cultural productions like musical theatre, which shape public perception through emotional and narrative influence.

Nye later added more detail to his definition as the details of it began to get misconstrued. He acknowledged that soft power must not solely define power itself but is rather one component of it; he ended up coining smart power – combining military force and might with culture and influence, to create an effective strategy. The term was later used and popularized by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (Nye, 2011). With this in mind, he emphasized that the central definition, “the ability to affect others and obtain preferred outcomes by attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment (Nye, 2012),” was what remained constant. Nye aspired to use smart power to influence foreign policy, emphasizing that soft power emerges from civil society as opposed to government.

Perry Anderson delivers a succinct intellectual history of the concept of hegemony in *The H-Word: The Peripeteia of Hegemony* (2017). The term was popularized in the twentieth century Antonio Gramsci, meaning that dominance is achieved through cultural, economic, and political power (Ungvarsky, 2024). However, applications of the concept go all the way back to ancient Greece with military alliances like the Delian League, where Greek city-states allied against the Persians when they invaded Greece (2017), resulting in the Peloponnesian War. Another notable concept was 19th-century Germany; German legal scholar Heinrich Triepel interpreted hegemony as a happy medium between violent domination and informal influence. However, he rejected the idea of societal classes exercising hegemony within society (2017). Gramsci saw it differently, framing hegemony as a strong, stable form of power as opposed to domination.

Anderson argues that the Gramscian approach to hegemony, that the hegemonic foundations of liberal democracy are rooted in force that is disguised as consent (2017). Democratic legitimacy is undermined by the dominance and ideological control of the structural force, meaning that people are accepting the oppressive hard power as it is disguised as consent. For example, the 2003 invasion of Iraq by U.S. forces was framed governmentally and by the media as spreading democracy as opposed to a military conquest. In turn, war was legitimized as a democratic necessity. However, key arguments against the invasion take into account the false justifications of Saddam Hussein's government stockpiling weapons of mass destruction, along with potential links to the 9/11 attacks that were later unsubstantiated. It also considers the high human and financial costs and the regional destabilization that resulted in the rise of extremist groups such as ISIS (Heinrich, 2012).

This examination of Broadway musicals through the political frameworks of soft power, cultural hegemonies, and constructivist theories, this research aims to understand how the political meanings, themes, and undertones are performed on stage and ultimately reflected onto their audiences.

A study of *Hamilton*

Hamilton has been performed for over a decade for politicians across the political spectrum and appreciated by elected officials around the world. In 2009, creator Lin-Manuel Miranda performed what would become the musical's opening number at an Obama White House poetry jam (The Obama White House, 2016); once his musical transferred to Broadway, his cast hosted then-Vice President Pence, as aforementioned in the introduction. From early workshops to its vast stage popularity, *Hamilton* was positioned for elite-level visibility and legitimacy.

Hamilton is a cultural phenomenon that has grossed over \$1 billion worldwide and fundamentally redefined modern musical theater since its 2015 debut (Wheaton Hill, 2025). With 16 Tony nominations (11 wins), its massive popularity stems from its innovative hip-hop score, diverse casting, and its ability to make early American history feel urgent and modern. Its expansion onto streaming platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic made it accessible for those who couldn't see the production on stage, winning two of its 12 Emmy nominations (Morris, 2023). Its endorsement and consumption of policymakers and people in power gives *Hamilton* the potential to influence political narratives. When politicians are the audience, its influence over decision-makers means that cultural texts can shape political discourse – even at the highest levels. Its cross-partisan appeal, to both Obama and Pence, make its messaging digestible and position *Hamilton* as a source for influencing multiple political ideologies, shaping narratives surrounding national identity.

The musical is driven by the ambition of characters and their obsession with their lasting legacies, a central theme to how the production internalizes the known themes of political history and American identity. *Hamilton's* narrative in itself becomes a form of soft power when the characters' obsessions with their lasting legacies frame what influences national identity, history, and politics for a contemporary society. This goes beyond performing the show for political figures and world leaders – the casting choices and musical approaches allows the audience to take away the multicultural influence and diversity.

Once the idea for *Hamilton* was off the ground, the casting began. Lin-Manuel Miranda, alongside director Thomas Kail, took a color-conscious casting approach. In one interview, Miranda explained that using actors of color to tell the stories of white men makes their story more accessible to contemporary audiences and that going that direction instead of defaulting to

Caucasian actors draws people in and excites them (McAllister, 2017). The casting notice, which came out in March 2015, asked specifically for actors in “African American, Hispanic, Asian, South Asian, Native American, Middle Eastern, Southeast Asian/Pacific Islander, Ethnically Ambiguous/Mixed Race, [and] African Descent (McAllister, 2017)” communities to apply for the principal roles, except the portrayal of King George III. This move in casting reimagined history through the lens of contemporary diversity, opening doors for people of color in theatre to grow and thrive in roles they would otherwise be excluded from. How is this an exercise of soft power rather than just cultural influence within the theater/arts community?

Miranda also launched Ham4Vote, a civic engagement campaign promoting voter registration and participation in elections. He collaborated with his castmates and a Hispanic civic engagement initiative on three “get out the vote” PSAs (The Hispanic Federation, 2016), and themed social media campaigns. Miranda leveraged his platform to target marginalized groups, especially Latinx voters, attending events and capitalizing his social media following to advocate for issues that are represented in *Hamilton* such as voting, immigration, and education (Dubin, 2020). For National Voter Registration Day in 2020 before the historic Trump v. Biden election, Miranda reimagined *Hamilton*’s songs with new lyrics to promote voting and activism. “The Election of 1800” towards the end of the show represents a peaceful transfer of power between presidential candidates, one of the first in history (Gringlas, 2020). The defeated presidential candidate, but Vice President-elect Burr, congratulated President-elect Jefferson on his victory, and voiced hope for a partnership for their upcoming administration (Genius Lyrics, 2015).

He teamed up with former First Lady Michelle Obama, other celebrities, and the nonprofit group When We All Vote; they launched this collaborative effort before the 2018

midterm elections to boost voter turnout (Gringlas, 2020). The reimagined *Hamilton* discography voiced regret about the 2016 election, lack of voting in subsequent midterms, how to register to vote, the vote-by-mail process, and emphasis on what voting now can do for the future (Gringlas, 2020). At that time, the COVID-19 pandemic had halted in-person voting engagement initiatives and rallies, but Miranda tapped into the show's cultural impact, determined to make a difference the best way he knew how.

The impact of *Hamilton* lingers throughout the theater industry a decade later. To commemorate the show's tenth anniversary, the show's original cast reunited for an impactful mashup of its most popular songs at the 78th Annual Tony Awards on June 8, 2025. While most people were excited to see performers who had gained significant stardom since their run on the show return to their roots, many others interpreted the potential for political messages throughout the show.

The first obvious point of potential messaging was through costuming. Every main character and ensemble member wore black outfits – except for King George III (portrayed by Jonathan Groff), who wore a red suit. The red alluded to audiences of King George III's tyrannical reign over the Commonwealth's realms. Audiences interpreted all-black as mourning the “death” of American ideals of democracy, not just by the cast choosing their attire, but the belief that the historical figures they're portraying would be mourning it, too (Aziz, 2025). Daveed Diggs, who portrayed Marquis de Lafayette, also paid tribute to the Black Panther Party through wearing a black beret. The group was known for confronting power structures and also for nonconforming style choices; in addition to the beret, he also donned a single black glove. This decision is thought to have symbolized the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement,

another group known for challenging the police and protesting brutality against minorities (Aziz, 2025).

In addition to the costuming, factors including the lighting and lyric choices also reflect the cast's choice of bold political messaging. Diggs (who is portraying an immigrant) is repeatedly interrupted by Groff, who sings only in gibberish, not anything of substance. While the King was designed as a comedic relief role, it depicts a hierarchy between a global political figure and an immigrant. The audience viewed it as the performance's "blatant disappointment of American democracy (Aziz, 2025)."

During *Hamilton*, the King is on stage completely alone (in the Tony Awards performances, he had a small line of background dancers), which is a stark contrast to the introduction of Hercules Mulligan (portrayed by Okieriete Onaodowan), who was introduced within a huddle of people (Kaufman, 2025). Amidst the performance's emphasis of a collective stance against injustice, Onaodowan raps a line with revolutionary undertones: "I am running with the sons of liberty, and I am loving it."

The performance meshed together five minutes worth of multiple hit songs within the nearly three-hour musical, with George Washington (portrayed by Christopher Jackson) offering a call to action towards the end: "I know that we can win, I know that greatness lies in you. But remember from here on in, history has its eyes on you" (Miranda, 2015). The performance ends as the cast sings "Non-Stop," the number that concludes act one of *Hamilton*, as a company. This leaves the remainder of the performance to the audience – the value lies in what they take from it. As the cast finishes, the backdrop changes to what appears to be a mock-up of The White House. It concludes with a unified silhouette of the cast against the backdrop, portraying a collective resistance amidst compromises to American democracy.

Limited engagements of *Hamilton* in Puerto Rico in 2019 and 2023 brought the largest Congressional delegation yet to the island (Montoya-Galvez et al., 2019), raising awareness of the struggles Puerto Rico faced following catastrophic hurricanes. Miranda teamed up with his father, Luis, to stage the production, first investing one million dollars into the University of Puerto Rico's theater before moving it to a fine arts center in San Juan (Florida, 2019). The Miranda family also partnered with the Flamboyán Foundation to launch an arts fund, donating over \$15 million to restore arts and cultural programs in the aftermath of the hurricane. The production boosted tourism, with themed travel packages selling out and demonstrating the island's economic potential despite ongoing recovery efforts.

Miranda is proudly the son of Puerto Rican immigrants, launching *Hamilton*-based fundraisers to support Puerto Rico following Hurricane Maria, while also advocating for Puerto Rican statehood. Reprising the title role, the show's limited run brought over 30 Democratic members of Congress (the largest delegation of Members of Congress on the island yet) and other public figures to the island, demonstrating how cultural influence can mobilize action. During the first run, the Latino Victory Fund hosted its annual convention in Puerto Rico for the first time, bringing a large delegation of policymakers to discuss Hispanic representation in government and policy. This marked one of the largest coordinated visits of U.S. lawmakers to the island.

In 2016, the U.S. Congress passed PROMESA, the Puerto Rican Management, Economic, and Stability Act, designed to provide financial oversight and restructure Puerto Rico's debt (114th Congress, 2016). While initially supporting it, Luis Miranda later opposed the act, calling it "colonialism." His view of the legislation as colonialism highlighted an irony many critics could not overlook, given the musical's anti-colonial roots. His shifting stance revealed

tension between the ideals represented in *Hamilton* and the realities of U.S. policy toward Puerto Rico.

In this case, soft power is exercised by the creators and producers of *Hamilton*, particularly through their control over narrative, casting, and public engagement. The production indirectly influenced political perception by drawing policymakers to the island and shaping how they understood its conditions. While soft power is traditionally used to describe international relations, this case operates at the intersection of domestic and quasi-colonial politics, particularly in the context of Puerto Rico's political status. Although Joseph Nye conceptualized soft power within international relations, this framework can be extended to a domestic cultural context, where influence operates through narrative, representation, and audience engagement rather than state actors alone.

This influence also reflects the presence of hegemonic power. The ability to mobilize attention, shape narratives, and determine which stories are amplified demonstrates how cultural authority influences political understanding. *Hamilton* therefore functions not only as a representation of early American politics, but as an active participant in contemporary political discourse.

Hamilton Methodology

Miranda has taken criticism of this approach, though both he and Kail emphasized that the story of "America then" needed to be told by "America now" and to represent the country's demographics (Weinert-Kendt, 2015). However, Lyra Monteiro of *The Public Historian* brought up a discussion point of the approach resulting in the erasure of black pasts, lacking important discussions of race and slavery throughout the show. While the casting centers race throughout the production, factors such as the musical style of some leading characters, Monteiro alleges,

perpetuate stereotypes. For example, Philippa Soo, a Chinese-American actress who portrays Hamilton's wife, Monteiro believes "reads as white" (Monteiro, 2016). Soo sings traditional "white music" of Broadway, while Black performers such as Renée Elise Goldsberry, who portrays Hamilton's sister-in-law and Miranda herself being Hispanic, sing in genres traditionally performed by BIPOC performers such as rap and R&B. Thomas Jefferson was notably a slaveowner, but was portrayed on Broadway by African-American Daveed Diggs; he avoided answering questions about portraying a slaveowner and instead kept vaguer answers to the press (Monteiro, 2016).

Monteiro was critical of Miranda choosing BIPOC actors to play the founding fathers in a play that did not acknowledge the exclusion and oppression of their ancestors during those times, and after, when they were not awarded the same freedoms as white people for centuries to come (Monteiro, 2016). She added that every scene in the play could contain an opportunity to include an enslaved character: the tavern during "The Story of Tonight" in act one where the revolutionaries come together, and "A Winter's Ball" when Hamilton is introduced to his future wife. A perhaps notable absence is when Aaron Burr (portrayed by Leslie Odom Jr.) fleshes his anger over being excluded from a dinner with Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison, who made significant decisions that later became the Compromise of 1790 (Bowling, 1971).

In the jazzy ballad, "The Room Where it Happens," in the beginning of the second act, Burr laments that no one else was in that room. The lyricism erases the almost definite fact that enslaved people would have been serving the meals and waiting on the men (Monteiro, 2016). ` Miranda acknowledges the influence John Laurens had a significant impact on later abolition movements; he was introduced among other figures in Hamilton's life in "My Shot" in the first acting as a force for Black freedom, encouraging in his own solo to fight for their emancipation,

lamenting that enslaved people deserve the same rights as everyone else, and aspired to spearhead the first black battalion of the war (Genuis Lyrics, 2015). Laurens was one of the final casualties of the war (Hyde, 2025), and his efforts died with him when his all-Black military regiment that fought in the Revolutionary War was all subsequently returned to their masters.

A study of *Rent*

Before *Hamilton* was even a thought in Miranda's mind, Jonathan Larson penned *Rent*, following impoverished artists throughout their lives in New York City amidst the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s. The diverse cast and their themes of living for today, community, and the impact of the AIDS epidemic, along with touching on important, relevant issues such as addiction and poverty, have helped mark the show as a Broadway legend. Its success was even more poignant with the loss of its creator, Jonathan Larson, the day before the show's first preview in 1996.

Rent uses emotion, music, and community to generate soft power through empathy rather than nationalism. The red ribbon symbolized AIDS awareness in the early 1990s, and by 1994, it was the leading cause of death for Americans aged 25-44 (American Psychological Association, 2017). Larson's approach allowed influence and traction to build for *Rent* through emotional identification and community resonance, rather than an institutional approach. Humanizing fictional characters who lived with a very real, prevalent public health issue helped shape public attitudes.

By the late 1990s, extreme stigmas surrounding AIDS, such as forced quarantining for people with the disease, had been all but eradicated, but others increased (Herek et. al., 2002). According to a study published in the American Journal for Public Health, many people continued to misunderstand HIV transmission information and blamed individuals for their

illness. By the end of the decade, a substantial portion of Americans still reported discomfort and negative feelings toward people with HIV/AIDS. HIV/AIDS remained heavily stigmatized, highlighting the need for continued public education and stigma-reduction efforts (Herek et. al., 2002).

Intermission: a brief history of the HIV/AIDS epidemic

Rent is culturally symbolic and also serves as a contemporary example of politically relevant cultural intervention amidst a significant public health crisis. Throughout Jonathan Larson's experience authoring *Rent* in 1989 all the way up to its premiere in the theater sphere, HIV/AIDS was ignored in public health worlds (HIV.gov) until 1981, when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued warnings about rare, opportunistic diseases in gay men; a task force was created to investigate what would later become known as AIDS. Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia (PCP) was an aggressive lung infection that began primarily impacting gay men and was often succeeded by Kaposi Sarcoma (KS) – an intense form of cancer of the blood or lymph vessel lining (Follansbee et al., 1982). It was soon humiliatingly coined “gay man's cancer” pushing society further away from equality efforts.

The 1980s saw a survival rate of less than one year if someone was diagnosed with AIDS (Brockington, Scott, 1997), which changed when doctors began prescribing azidothymidine (AZT) to patients. It later became the first drug approved by the FDA to manage AIDS (Lancaster, 2021), and Larson references the medication several times throughout *Rent*. However, his audience also saw sick, poor, and queer characters experiencing the adverse side effects, such as anemia and frequent infections, humanizing the significant toll that various aspects of having AIDS take on people (Shaw, 2022). When *Rent* first came to life, HIV/AIDS was a devastating diagnosis attached to significant cultural, medical, and social stigma –

reinforced by government rhetoric, media framing, and widespread moral demoralization. Larson hoped to change that. He challenges the hegemonic framework of the HIV/AIDS crisis by offering a humanized point of view, reframing the illness through the lens of love and community.

Continued

Larson especially leaned on the music he wrote to efficiently convey a presence of soft power in *Rent*. The musical itself is based off the story “La Boheme,” about impoverished artists in 1830s Paris who fall in love amidst one of them being infected with tuberculosis, the disease that claims her life (Tully et. al., 2022). He adapts this opera into his own story, replacing tuberculosis (a socially tragic illness) with HIV/AIDS – a disease with heavy social stigmatizations. This choice elevates HIV/AIDS to less of a moral punishment, allowing *Rent* to sit at the intersection of soft power and hegemony by emotionally persuading audiences to reconsider dominant narratives about HIV/AIDS.

For years, HIV/AIDS was framed as a “gay disease.” With it prominently affecting gay men, it was initially coined “gay-related immune deficiency,” or GRID (Institut Pasteur, 2023). It was even nicknamed “gay syndrome” in various worldwide newspapers. In 1982, it was called 4H – designating the disease to homosexuals, heroin addicts, hemophiliacs (people whose blood does not clot), and Haitians. With later research, it became scientifically understood that earlier terms were stigmatizing and incorrect; renaming it AIDS, or acquired immune deficiency syndrome, occurred later that year (Institut Pasteur, 2023). Public misunderstanding of AIDS still fuels social exclusion, establishing the hegemon. The American Journal of Public Health noted that “inaccurate beliefs about the risks posed by casual social contact increased [throughout the 1990s when *Rent* premiered], as did the belief that people with AIDS (PWAs) deserve their

illness. In 1999, approximately one-third of respondents expressed discomfort and negative feelings toward PWAs (Herek et. al., 2002).”

Jonathan Larson’s work humanized people with AIDS, giving them a spotlight on a stage in a world that rendered them invisible. Many of the lead characters in the show struggled with HIV/AIDS:

- Roger, a former addict who is coming to terms with his own mortality while coping with the recent suicide of his girlfriend (who was also HIV-positive), shortly after her status is revealed.
- Mimi, a strip club employee who contracted HIV amidst her heroin addiction, portrays addiction and sexual promiscuity through an optimistic, carefree lens.
- Tom and Angel, a gay couple who know the relationship will be short-lived, as both of them are HIV-positive. However, they remain happily in love, giving a glimmer of hope to their community. Angel’s condition has progressed to AIDS, and it takes his life later in the show.¹
- There is also a “life support group,” a support group in the show for people with HIV/AIDS.
 - Larson intended for “the roles of all of the Life Support members...to take on the name that someone in the cast (or production) knows or has known to have succumbed to AIDS or other disease” (Davis Musical Theater Company, 2019).

These people are not symbols of their disease(s) – they are artists, friends, lovers, and a community. *Rent* is known and acclaimed for representing love and community, but incorporates real life with HIV/AIDS.

¹ Data retrieved from Davis Musical Theater Company, 2019.

Larson reveals gradually which characters in the show have HIV/AIDS. In the title track, Roger laments, “How can you connect in an age where strangers, landlords, lovers, your own blood cells betray?,” implying that he has the disease, and simultaneously critiquing societal inequities. Eventually, it is his roommate Mark who reveals Roger’s status. While filming his roommate, Mark orders Roger to take his AZT – Mimi later on in the show, having a repeated line of “AZT break.” Mark later tells the camera the suicide note Roger’s girlfriend had left – simply saying, “we’ve got AIDS.”

Roger’s mission throughout the show is to write one final, sensational song, before “the virus takes hold (Schrader, 2009).” He isolates himself, dedicating whatever time he has left to leave a meaningful legacy.

Angel, on the other hand, is dedicated to living life to the fullest. As a prominent member of the Life Support group, he coined the slogan “a group for people dealing with life.” This proves he is less focused on the disease and more about life beyond it. After meeting Tom, they comfortably disclose their diagnoses to one another, having an open and honest conversation about it. This is a stark contrast to Roger trying to push away and hide his status.

Later on in the production, the song “Another Day” portrays this contrast. Mimi and Roger have seemingly fallen in love, but neither of them has disclosed their status to one another. Following an argument, Roger contemplates telling her, but chooses to return to the isolating life he’s created. Mimi repeats the mantra that had been established by the Life Support Group: “The heart may freeze, or it can burn. The pain will ease if I can learn. There is no future. There is no past. I live this moment as my last. There’s only us. There’s only this. Forget regret, or life is yours to miss. No other road. No other way. No day but today” (Schrader, 2009). Roger has given up on any aspect of a normal life, whereas Mimi is committed to living her days to the

fullest. Later in the song, their melodies contrast one another: Mimi singing that she trusts her soul and to give in to love rather than succumb to fear; Roger just wants society to leave him be.

Larson reframed the narrative of HIV/AIDS by emphasizing love, community, and survival. By shifting the narrative from fear and blame to empathy and solidarity, *Rent* challenges hegemonic discourse that framed HIV/AIDS as a stigmatized and moralized illness associated with social exclusion. Angel sees his purpose in life as being able to love others and do things for those in his life; he wants to buy a coat for Tom, who says, “I do not deserve you, Angel. Give, give, all you do is give. Give me some way to show how you’ve touched me so (Shrader, 2009).” On the other hand, Roger is making pessimistic comments, seeming to have given up on life having any meaning for him anymore, and is waiting for his disease to take him.

In the song “La Vie Boheme,” they toast to celebrate the happiness various characters are feeling, whether it is career, romance, or support. At the end of it, Roger and Mimi have the simultaneous epiphanies of revealing their statuses to one another. They fell in love instantly, and Roger discovered his reason to live. The end of act one of *Rent* sees the characters toasting to “people living with, not dying from disease” (Larson, 1996).

Act two opens with “Seasons of Love,” which coins the main message of the musical: that lives shall be measured in love. Each character sings a different part, inspired by their own perspectives on their lives at this point in the show. Mimi and Roger, especially, emphasize wanting to live for love – a central life perspective for several *Rent* characters. This continues even when Angel’s death from AIDS devastates the group. At his memorial, they share stories about how Angel viewed life through the lens of wanting to help others.

Rent disrupted the hegemonic discourse of HIV/AIDS by showcasing characters beyond their diagnoses – as friends, artists, lovers, and a community. It emphasizes community, love, and

having “no day but today (Larson, 1996).” Larson challenges the discourse by shifting the stigmatized narrative of blame and fear towards community, love, support, and empathy. *Rent* might not have created legislation or lobbied the government for change. But, it powerfully created emotional attachment. Its audience empathetically connected with the characters, reducing the stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS.

Cultural shifts have also influenced the political climate surrounding HIV/AIDS over time – showing soft power in action. The rise of social media and the digital age has allowed for digitally fighting stigmas, sharing information, and building community support. Campaigns have surrounded sexual health, HIV prevention measures, risk factors, and testing resources (Ibrahim, et al., 2024). Today, key aspects of HIV/AIDS activism include intersectionality with disability justice, housing, and racial justice movements.

HIV/AIDS disproportionately affects vulnerable communities, notably BIPOC, Latinx, and transgender people, as well as unhoused individuals, people experiencing substance use disorders, and older adults. While significant advancements have been made in terms of treatment options, the CDC has reported that many people do not receive adequate care; only two-thirds of people affected by HIV received treatment, and less than half were receiving consistent care (Naik, et al., 2025). Larson invites audiences of *Rent* to humanize those marginalized through stigmas and reframe public discourse. However, as we have identified with *Hamilton*, soft power’s intersection with musical theater is not strictly limited to social empathy.

Rent Methodology

Cultural shifts have occurred since *Rent*’s premiere in the 1990s. The musical premiered in the West End five years after its Broadway premiere, along with stints around the world. It has been performed in 26 languages (Butterwick, 2024), along with a subsequent movie adaptation,

two filmed live productions, and a school edition by Musical Theatre International (MTI) that allows the show to appeal to a variety of audiences by cutting explicit content (Music Theatre International).

While the show has built a dedicated fanbase, it is not immune to its critics. Some scholars believe *Rent* “straight-washes” the HIV/AIDS epidemic to make it comprehensible for a white, middle-class audience (Schulman, 1998). Sara Schulman, a writer and historian, famously alleged in her 1998 book “Stagestruck: Theater, AIDS, and the Marketing of Gay America” that Jonathan Larson “heavily borrowed” excerpts of her 1990 book “People in Trouble,” a novel that Larson was familiar with before writing *Rent* (Schulman, 1998), for the musical, without credit. While Schulman initially considered legal action against the late Larson’s estate, she authored the book instead. The book became an exposé of stereotypes about marginalized identities in mainstream theater (Library Journal, 2018). She also lamented that the show diverts attention from radical activism, such as the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), which focuses on advocacy and advances, and even includes an action committee to address marginalized identities (FightBackNYC). Instead of embracing it, the narrative focuses on Mark – a straight, white protagonist.

“Footnotes: A Journal of History” examines *Rent* as a “prosthetic memory” of the AIDS crisis (Grossman, 2018), defined as “widespread sympathetic memories created by responses to media.” Before Grossman’s examination, the study of the topic had been exclusive to the film industry; she argues that it cannot be limited to film. It can be applied to *Rent* due to addressing the AIDS crisis amidst heavy stigmas or when the disease was seen as taboo. People saw themselves in characters, and the memory of listening to songs or hearing the performance would evoke reactions within the audience (Grossman, 2018, 164-65). However, the production is

criticized as simplifying the complexity of the epidemic, overlooking activist movements like ACT UP and prioritizing the character of Mark, who was not experiencing comorbid hardships such as homelessness or addiction, in contrast to other characters.

Other critics note that *Rent* fails to examine race and class hierarchies in favor of an “egalitarian” friend group (Perez-Field, 2023 20). It is a musical that sparks a discourse around the unhoused community and their impact on marginalized identities, and must be considered a blueprint towards a multicultural, unified future America (Perez-Field, 2023, 59). This creates a tension within the musical: while it challenges stigma and promotes solidarity, it also reveals important differences in lived experiences across race and class. This framing risks overlooking how race and class shape access to resources and survival, even within marginalized communities. As a result, the musical’s vision of unity is less a reflection of reality and more an aspirational model of what a more inclusive, empathetic society could look like.

A study of *Wicked*

Wicked extends this influence into the realm of challenging authority – inviting audiences to rethink how power defines heroism and truth, along with how stories and those who tell them shape beliefs surrounding power and legitimacy. The show exercises soft power by humanizing marginalized identities and destabilizing dominant narratives that audiences take for granted. It is not just about who suffers, but about who controls the narratives.

Elphaba Thropp always grew up as an outcast, starting when she was born. It was discovered that her skin was “unnaturally green” thanks to her mother’s ingestion of a green elixir during her affair with a traveling salesman. Her father, the Governor of “Munchkinland” within the Kingdom of Oz, immediately disowned her; on the flip side, treasuring her paraplegic sister, Nessarose. Children grew up terrified of Elphaba, not just for her skin color, but for her

magical powers. Years later, when preparing Nessarose to study at Shiz University (the Land of Oz's prestigious higher learning institution), her magical potential is detected by Headmistress Madame Morrible. Despite Elphaba not intending to matriculate at Shiz, Morrible assigns her to share a dorm with the popular Galinda Upland and additionally decides to tutor Thropp privately in sorcery. This enrages Galinda, who had intensely vied to study under Morrible. The two of them begin to loathe each other; when a new student arrives, they compete for his love, as well.

People at Shiz begin disclosing to Elphaba acts of the Wizard of Oz that could hurt the anthropomorphic animals within the kingdom. Elphaba instantly wants to help and scores a highly-coveted invitation to meet with the Wizard. Galinda, who has had a change of heart and is now Elphaba's close friend (and changed her name to "Glinda"), accompanies her. They learn that the Wizard is a fraud – his power and influence over the kingdom based on lies. After being tricked into turning his monkey servants into flying monkeys, Elphaba vows to do what is right and fight the Wizard. After acts of protest throughout Oz, Elphaba is dubbed "The Wicked Witch of the West," the entire Kingdom of Oz having turned on her and immediately believing the Wizard framing her as wicked rather than realizing the harm he is causing.

The Wizard's narrative control mirrors how hegemonic systems maintain legitimacy by defining reality itself. He does so through significant media manipulation. When Elphaba refuses to persecute talking animals, she flees. The Wizard broadcasts across the Land of Oz that the Wicked Witch is evil – not giving reasons or elaboration, but getting the general public terrified of her (Haynie, 2024). In the production's opening number, Elphaba is portrayed as an ugly, green monster by Ozians. The Wizard painted himself as an omnipotent, benevolent leader. The public agrees with this, worshipping the ground he walks on and easily believing every word he says.

With Elphaba's discovery of the Wizard being a powerless fraud, she is instantly painted as the scapegoat. She is no stranger to being "othered" – it started with her own family seeing her as an outcast due to her skin color. In the opening of *Wicked*, Glinda asks, "Are people born wicked, or do they have wickedness thrust upon them?" The question encourages audiences to explore how we are influenced by propaganda and fear-mongering. A later takeaway of *Wicked* is that people in power exploit people's perceptions of good and evil to achieve their objectives (Reneau, 2024); we must unlearn the biases we previously learned to understand common ground within one another.

In contemporary policy, it has been widely discussed that the Trump Administration often mirrors the tendencies of the Wizard. Donald Trump frames the United States under the leadership of his predecessors as declining, promising to his audiences that he will "make America great again." This became more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, towards the end of his first term. He scapegoated marginalized groups by using racist terminology when referring to various aspects of the virus, which originated in China (Porumbescu et. al., 2020). A study reported an increased of negative attitudes towards Asian Americans and "general xenophobia" during the peak of the virus; the governmental use of language such as "Chinese virus" led to an increase in the belief that Asian Americans were seen as "less American" than European Americans (Chou et. al., 2021).

Wicked methodology

Wicked has had a significant cultural impact for decades that will leave a lasting legacy. Since its Broadway debut, the stage production has been adapted internationally for millions of people. The two-part film adaptation in 2024 and 2025 had nearly 400 brand partnerships for marketing, from children's clothing lines to jewelry, wine glasses, and shoes (Laskowski, 2024).

Beyond that, the popularity amplifies its ideological influence of narrative skepticism, reinforcing that soft power works through storytelling rather than instruction. It has also challenged the narratives in which power maintains legitimacy; how authority shapes public perception of good and evil, and how hegemonic systems maintain control.

Through emotional storytelling, *Wicked* encourages audiences to consider societal constructs of legitimacy and moral value. Where *Hamilton* reinforces and reimagines national mythology, and *Rent* humanizes marginalized communities through emotional connection, *Wicked* focuses on the political power of storytelling itself. These productions prove that musical theater can function as a cultural text that influences public narratives, weaving political thought into storytelling.

Collective methodology

Since the beginning of writing this thesis, significant changes have occurred within the theater industry throughout President Donald Trump's second term. Following his takeover of the Kennedy Center, multiple prominent artists choosing to boycott the venue, and longtime partnerships ending, he closed the center for two years. Beginning July 4, 2026, the Center will close for two years to undergo significant renovations. "In honor of the 250th anniversary of our Country," wrote Trump on Truth Social, "The Trump Kennedy Center, if temporarily closed...can be, without question, the finest performing arts facility of its kind, anywhere in the world (Trump, 2025)." He lamented that compromises to the closure would delay the completion and the quality of the construction. He allocated over \$250 million to its renovation (Halpert, 2026). Since Trump's announcements, a "swirl of confusion and anxiety among performers and patrons about its future" has been voiced (Nagourney, Jacobs, 2026). Employees fear losing their

jobs; former Kennedy Center president Michael Kaiser said closing an arts institution comes with the major risk of losing patronage and staff.

He said people don't just "sit at home waiting for those two years to pass," and the General Manager of the Metropolitan Opera voiced that renovation work is best scheduled during periods with no performances. He added that a two-year closure will make audience maintenance difficult - and without an audience, performing arts companies cannot exist (Nagourney, Jacobs, 2026).

Lawmakers and legal scholars have condemned Trump's renaming of the Center, saying that it was subject to Congressional approval (Cornell Law School, 1958). Representative Joyce Beatty (D-OH) filed a lawsuit aiming to remove his name, alleging that the decision to add his name was not unanimous (Beatty, 2025), as Trump had been touting. Following his purge of the bipartisan Board of Trustees at the Kennedy Center, the Social Impact division of the center was discontinued. President Trump became the first sitting president to not only host the annual Kennedy Center Honors, but assist in directly selecting honorees. The 2025 broadcast saw a 26% decline in ratings and viewership, with viewers believing that his "America first" mentality that prioritizes national interests over international relations has now extended to the arts (Hertvik, 2025).

President Trump's proposed budgets consider a complete elimination of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), along with other federally funded arts programs including programming for low-income students and students with disabilities, along with creative arts therapies to military populations, and preserving historic archives (National Endowment for the Arts). Several of these programs are in conjunction with other federal agencies and funding

sources including Education, Veterans Affairs and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (National Art Education Association, 2025).

The performing arts community has condemned the Trump Administration, accusing them of sacrificing artistic independence for political control. The Trump Administration is known for targeting un-American, offensive content – that he proudly deems as “too woke” or “too liberal (Weinstein, 2025).” Time Magazine lamented that the United States is experiencing a complete rewiring of cultural life; during the 2025 government shutdown, cultural groups were left penniless, national museums were closed, and access to public media and programming was dismantled with the closure of the Center for Public Broadcasting. Nearly all of the members of the National Council on the Humanities were fired, and the White House began revising the information within the Smithsonian museums in order to deprive them of “ideologically driven language (Lee, 2025)” – which notably includes studies on race and injustice.

Analysis

Theater has been a known site to address social justice issues – as seen through the three aforementioned case studies. It has fostered a sense of community and belonging for people immersed in the theater industry (Hudson) – enhancing culture, education, and history. Musical theater is considered a quintessential form of American art – early works including Rodgers & Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!*, *Cinderella*, and *The Sound of Music* were ones penned during the 1940s and 1950s – deemed the “golden age” of musical theater (Steele, 1993). This also became a source of American “soft power” when cultural values were projected globally.

However, it started earlier than one might think. During the American Revolution, plays like *The Fall of the British Tyranny* rallied Americans early on to the cause of liberty. With little plot and action, it aspired to express political ideas and patriotism (Duling, 2007). It also began

exploring national identities and diverse themes; in 1908, *The Melting Pot* premiered.

Highlighting the experience of a Russian-Jewish immigrant family in the United States after surviving a pogrom (an organized attack on a minority group by a majority group), the main characters aspire to focus on what is ahead through composing an “American Symphony:” hopefully, a society free of hatred and division (Zangwill, 2007) .

Today, musical theater has a cemented legacy within American art and culture. In addition to spearheading a diverse entertainment community, it has influenced American social justice and politics. It has done so through using the stage as a forum to address national issues, bringing previously lesser-known issues into mainstream discussion. Throughout history, theater has been accessible to all – during the Great Depression, the Federal Theatre Project ensured thousands of jobs for artists and ensured generally accessible theater (Simon, 2018).

Despite soaring prices that have rendered Broadway a luxury experience today, a consistent presence of regional and community theater ensures affordable, local exposure to the arts (La Sala, 2025) – with tickets as low as \$20 and discounts for students, senior citizens, and other groups; this is a stark contrast to Broadway prices, especially during periods of “stunt casting.” Celebrities are often brought in for a limited engagement in a certain role during productions, and this approach is often used to boost ticket sales. For example, a 2025 production of *Othello* starring Jake Gyllenhaal and Denzel Washington had resale ticket prices as high as \$1,400 (La Sala, 2025). The modern American theater industry must balance its rich history with its commercialized contemporary reality, while maintaining its core of showcasing productions that highlight an evolving social and political identity.

Implications

Hamilton, *Rent*, and *Wicked* have transcended beyond the stage to influence advocacy, policy, and public sentiment. While these musicals have not sparked any specific legislation, they are cultural catalysts that have influenced the political landscape.

Before *Hamilton*'s premiere in 2015, then-Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew announced plans to replace Alexander Hamilton on the \$10 with a female historical figure. Once the musical exploded in popularity, Lin-Manuel Miranda assisted in spearheading a public outcry against this decision – and it worked. The Treasury decided to keep Hamilton on the \$10 bill (Calmes, 2016), instead replacing Andrew Jackson with Harriet Tubman on the \$20 bill, which is expected to begin circulating in 2030 (Mikhail, 2021). While this is not a law passed by Congress, it was a significant policy change whose main driver was a smash-hit musical.

The Hamilton Education Program has even integrated the musical into school curricula. Launched in 2015, it allows Title I-eligible schools (schools with a high percentage of students from low-income families) to explore the history behind the musical through studying source documents throughout the era. It piloted at 1,300 schools in New York City, where students were even able to attend performances. It later expanded to an online medium to broaden access beyond ones who could attend physical performances – allowing students from diverse background and locations to have access to educational resources (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, 2024).

When *Rent* brought the HIV/AIDS epidemic to mainstream audiences, it inspired discussion on the crisis before widespread access to testing and treatment options. The sustained cultural momentum expanded the Ryan White CARE Act, the largest federal program that provides resources and services for people affected by HIV/AIDS (Health Resources & Services Administration, 2015).

In 2016, North Carolina passed House Bill 2 (HB2), the Public Facilities Privacy and Security Act or the “bathroom bill.” This targeted LGBTQIA+ individuals when it mandated that people must use bathrooms corresponding to the biological sex on their birth certificate, in addition to prohibiting local anti-discrimination protection for LGBTQIA+ individuals (McCraw, 2016). In outrage, *Wicked* composer Stephen Schwartz banned all professional production of his work in the state, using his musical work as a legislative weapon (Dolsten, 2016). This was effective when his boycott, including ones by corporations and other artists, ignited pressure that inspired a partial repeal of the law in 2017.

The productions proved that theater does not need to author a bill in order to influence social change. Their legacies lie in their ability to represent the stage as a tool for advocacy, conveying complex issues into the language of song. They provide a blueprint for future policy to be built on.

Conclusion

Musical theater has been a cultural medium that shapes public narrative about identity and social justice. It has transcended being a form of entertainment, and serves as a prevalent piece of American culture that has influenced public discourse through emotional storytelling. Political ideas spread rapidly through culture – where soft power, hegemonies, and constructivism take center stage. Soft power allows culture and influence to shape beliefs and attitudes, and hegemonies are dominant narratives that shape what people think is “normal.” Constructivists believe people build their understanding of the world around them through social interaction and experiences as opposed to absorbing information. Audiences can internalize messages by resonating with the messaging of certain characters – people with HIV/AIDS can feel seen in the *Rent* friend group, or with the morals and messaging of the founding fathers on

the *Hamilton* stage. Performances become a place for cultural meaning-making, setting the stage to negotiate political meaning and shape people's beliefs.

Hamilton reshapes how American history is told through a diverse, modern approach that appeals to a wide range of audiences. In turn, it influenced how audiences interpret national identity. *Rent* uses emotional storytelling of a diverse friend group to humanize marginalized identities that challenge stigmas against poverty and HIV/AIDS during a time when a range of information was running rampant and influencing public opinion. *Wicked* exposes the construction of villains within the political system, who manipulate public perception in order to maintain power. They use different mechanisms of soft power – *Hamilton*, national mythology; *Rent*, emotional empathy and humanization; and *Wicked*, a narrative critique. However, together, they show how musicals influence politics in multiple ways. Even with financial, commercial, and cultural limits to access, musicals are still shaping public conversation. Despite Broadway audiences being tailored for wealthier people, and various external pressure influence radical, advocacy-rooted messaging, the theater industry is working to continue having a voice in public conversation.

Musical theatre embeds political ideas within emotionally powerful storytelling, allowing audiences to reconsider historical narratives, social stigmas, and systems of power. Ultimately, the enduring influence of musicals such as *Hamilton*, *Rent*, and *Wicked* reveal that musical theatre functions as more than entertainment: through emotionally resonant storytelling, it shapes how audiences interpret history, empathize with marginalized communities, and question the narratives through which power and political meaning are constructed.

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