

TRENDING: Shildt rails at naysayers, says Cards are playing exciting, fundamental baseball

TRAVEL

'Hamilton: The Exhibition' is a treat for history, theater and museum lovers



By Judith Newmark Special to the Post-Dispatch 20 hrs ago



With "thirty-two thousand troops in New York harbor," the mighty British armada seems poised to overwhelm General Washington's forces. The exhibit depicts the siege with a host of miniature warships that cover the Union Jack. Photo by Daniel Wirt

The mightiest navy on Earth surrounds the island you call home.

You're terrified.

And so are all your neighbors.

In his award-laden musical “Hamilton,” Lin-Manuel Miranda evokes just that feeling when the actors, their voices hushed with fear, report that there are “Thirty-two thousand troops in New York harbor.”

What a resonant aural image! But could you convey it visually?

Here’s how it comes to life in “Hamilton: The Exhibition”: A big Union Jack hangs on the wall, its famous red, white and blue design the background for a three-dimensional armada of 18th-century warships.

The unmistakable point is just as terrifying — even though each ship looks small enough to fit into your hand.

That’s only one of the imaginative displays in the immersive, multimedia show, an offshoot of the musical, now on display in Chicago.



A model of the statue of King George that Patriots took down. They melted it to make bullets. "Hamilton: The Exhibit" in Chicago. Photo by Daniel Wirt.

Even if you've never seen "Hamilton," the exhibition could still tickle a taste for history. And if you have seen the show — if you are among the devoted fans who moved heaven and earth to get tickets, if you love listening to the music, if you can't wait to see it when it returns to the Fox Theatre in May 2020 — then a trip to Chicago is definitely in order.

The musical is set to run at Chicago's CIBC Theatre through Jan. 5, and the exhibition, which opened its national tour in Chicago in the spring, is currently scheduled to remain there through Sept. 6.

In other words, the complete fan still has time to see the performance and the exhibition in a couple of history-drenched days.

Too much? Not really. The exhibition enhances the complicated story of Founding Father Alexander Hamilton the way that the right frame enhances a masterful painting: It adds context and detail.

"Hamilton: The Exhibition" echoes the musical in many respects. It has the same rough-hewn brown design, the same chronological organization, and, in the headphones that guide you from room to room, the same voices you've heard on your recording. They belong to narrators Miranda — the theatrical genius who dreamed up, wrote, composed and originally played the title role in the show — with his original costars Phillipa Soo (Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton) and Christopher Jackson (George Washington), plus Yale history professor Joanne B. Freeman.

David Korins, who designed the set for the musical, designed the exhibition, too, a collaborative effort that also included Miranda

and the other members of the show's creative team. Their intimate knowledge of the theatrical material helps them establish the same familiar mood for tourists.

They lead us through it on a walk from room to imaginative room. It's supposed to take about 90 minutes to go through all of them, but our group was happy to linger a whole lot longer than that. (And that's not counting the little cafe and gift shop. My granddaughter now looks extra adorable in a onesie that announces that she's just like her country, "young, scrappy and hungry.")

Consider a few examples:



A pole with many objects attached spins in an exhibit room, depicting the hurricane that destroyed Hamilton's island home in "Hamilton: The Exhibit" in Chicago. Photo by Daniel Wirt

- A swirl of furnishings, bedding and books depicts the hurricane that destroyed St. Croix, where teenage Hamilton worked in the sugar and rum trade.

- A party at the home of Philip and Catherine Schuyler, Hamilton's in-laws. No, it's not the engagement party, brilliantly depicted onstage by choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler. These guests, frozen in their patina-green skins, aren't dancing. But it's exactly the kind of party the prominent, powerful Schuylers could have hosted. You can learn more about each guest on your headphones — which even deliver more information about an anonymous serving maid, lost to time and to her birthplace in Africa.



A doll-sized exhibit of 18th-century Manhattan, the city that Hamilton made his home at "Hamilton: The Exhibition" in Chicago. Photo by Daniel Wirt.

- A model shows lower Manhattan in 1776. This is the city where Hamilton, an orphaned immigrant, first made his mark and joined the Patriots' cause. Dollhouse lovers be warned: It is very, very hard to pull yourself away from this one.

- The Battle of Yorktown, where the rebels’ “ragtag army” defeated the Imperial forces of the British crown. In that room, visitors surround a table so large, it probably outdoes the ones in their dining room. But instead of flatware, this table is covered with a map, edged with toy soldiers and small boats.

Which all begin to move.

As the military figures and their ships glide around the map, we realize that we are with Gen. Washington in his tent, planning the strategy that will bring victory.

Our invisible hosts, Washington and his right-hand man, Hamilton, can’t know that yet. But we do — and oddly enough, that doesn’t really diminish our pleasure in seeing the battle play out before our eyes.

The exhibition is housed on Chicago’s Northerly Island, near the city’s famed Museum Campus, home to the Adler Planetarium, the Shedd Aquarium and the Field Museum of Natural History.

For Hamilton lovers, the exhibition alone is more than a cultural whimsey. It’s a trip back in time to the days when our country was just starting to figure itself out. It remains a work in progress.

"Hamilton: The Exhibition"

How much • \$39.50 (ages 15 and up); \$25 for kids

Where • Chicago’s Northerly Island

Getting there • You can take a train to the campus or drive and park on its lot. Then take a short bus ride to the exhibition hall. You still have a nice little walk that ends in a good flight of stairs. Golf carts, however, give a lift to anyone who needs it. Inside the exhibit, wheelchairs are available as well as assistive devices for visitors with visual and hearing impairments.

More info • hamiltonexhibition.com

