

THIS ISSUE

We know that the arts can be a powerful tool to tell our stories. And yet, one needn't look further than the 2016 Oscars controversy to know that certain stories remain more frequently told and celebrated than others.

For example, only four percent of classical symphony musicians are African American. Just five percent of professional staff in art museums are people of color, with even fewer among senior management. In film and television, there are nearly five men for every woman working as a writer, director, or producer.

This issue of *NEA Arts* looks at artists who recognize these disparities, and are seeking to make changes within their fields to tell *all* our stories. Aaron Dworkin discusses his efforts to diversify the color of classical music, while Shirin Neshat's desire to redefine what Islam means in America today is shown through her visual arts. Arthur Mitchell talks about changing the snow-white complexion of classical ballet, and Lin-Manuel Miranda introduces Latino and hip-hop culture to musical theater. Sandra Cisneros was one of the first authors to showcase working-class Latina culture in a work of literature, and NEA National Heritage Fellow Yary Livan helped spare Cambodian culture from the Khmer Rouge by continuing to practice his native country's traditional ceramic arts. These artists all are paving the way for those who will follow.

At the National Endowment for the Arts, we strive to ensure all Americans have the opportunity for creative expression. Through diversity in our grants and diversity in the stories we share, we are acting on our belief that the arts are a public good, and that all individuals and communities deserve to have their voices heard, their stories told.



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CELEBRATING **50** YEARS

Aaron
DWORKIN

TELLING ALL THE STORIES

BY PAULETTE BEETE

Aaron Dworkin.

PHOTO BY DWIGHT CENDROWSKI

WHEN AARON DWORKIN—DEAN OF THE UNIVERSITY OF Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance—started violin lessons at five years old, he knew he wanted to grow up to be a concert soloist. What he didn't know was that as he progressed further in his music studies, he wouldn't see many, if any, faces among his peers that were brown like his. In fact, it wouldn't be until Dworkin was in college that he would learn about African-American composers or hear any mention of historic interpretations of the classical canon by black musicians. Though he was still a student, the self-described social entrepreneur refused to be content with the status quo. He decided instead to do what he could to create opportunities for people of color to thrive in the classical music field as he had.

Turns out that what he could do was quite a lot. Starting with a contribution from James Wolfensohn, then-president of the World Bank, and a partnership with the University of Michigan, Dworkin's alma mater, he founded the Sphinx Organization. Since then, Sphinx has become an internationally renowned incubator for talented classical musicians of color, boasting a range of programs in music education, performance, mentorship, and more. In his own words, here's Dworkin—a member of the NEA's National Council on the Arts—on his aha! moment, how Sphinx has been able to get more people of color in the room, and what more has to be done.

CLASSICAL MUSIC'S DIVERSITY PROBLEM

I went into a lesson one day with my teacher Steve Shipps at [the University of Michigan] and he said, "Do you want to play music by black composers?" I was actually a little surprised and a little put off because I was like, "I'm a real violinist, what do you mean? Jazz? What are you talking about?" He laughed and started pulling these volumes of works off his shelves of all of these composers I never knew existed: William Grant Still, Roque Cordero, Joseph Bologne de Saint-Georges (who was an Afro-French contemporary of Mozart). As a biracial violinist, how could I never have known that there were any black composers? How could there be major pieces that I played like the "Kreutzer Sonata" that I never knew was actually premiered with Beethoven by George Polgreen Bridgetower, a black violin virtuoso?

I also began thinking about why there was no one who looked like me onstage or in the audience at concerts I would go to. How could this art form not be inclusive given the role it played in my life? That led to this unfolding of an awareness of the richness that really existed in our field and [the thought]—is there something I could do about it? My personality is such that when I see things or view things where there could be change, I think, "What could do I to be part of that?"



THE EARLY VISION FOR SPHINX

[My initial thought] was what if there was a competition for young students of color like me, and we could play music by composers of color which would bring light to these incredible works? And [what if we] gave scholarships and resources so that we could develop professional careers? It was that simple. I thought if there was a competition like this, within a few short years it would completely diversify the field and classical music would never be the same. When I really began to delve into it, I realized it was a much more complex problem, one that involved every stage of a musician's career.

I never viewed Sphinx as an affirmative action mechanism in that it was not designed to be an organization that helped a particular underrepresented group. The goal was to build inclusion in the performing arts, specifically in classical music, [because] there was not a representation of all of the voices that make up who we are as a society. I believe classical music suffers or is hampered by the lack of voices. Chimamanda Adichie, a Nigerian author, talks about the danger of a single story. What she says is the danger of a single story is not that it is untrue, but that it is incomplete. I felt very strongly that the stories we were weaving with classical music were incomplete, because we were not telling all of the stories.

“I felt very strongly that the stories we were weaving with classical music were incomplete because we were not telling all of the stories.”

**FINDING THE TALENT OUT THERE**

First of all, 99 percent of people I talked to said that [my idea] was unrealistic and not attainable. In addition, there were many people who said, “That’s a nice idea but that talent does not exist within black and Latino communities. So even if you are successful in building a platform, the musicians you ultimately have will fall short and you could do more damage than good.” Then the first competition happened, and [violinist] Tai Murray was one of our winners along with Christina Castelli, who went on to win major international competitions. Tai Murray is currently based in Berlin and is a BBC musician and one of the great soloists of today. Immediately after that first competition, people could no longer say the talent is not out there because it was. In fact, one of the most compelling [comments] shared with me was actually by Isaac Stern, who came to the inaugural competition. After spending time with the majority of our semifinalists, hearing them individually as well as in their auditions, he said to me, “Thank you for inviting me. I did not know this talent was out there.” Every single year after that, until he passed, he welcomed the top laureates to his New York studio so that he could coach and work with them and advocate for them. After that first competition, I never heard any more “the talent isn’t out there.” It became, “How do we connect with that talent?”

▲ **A student from Bravo Youth Orchestra interacts with a Sphinx Virtuosi member at a rehearsal for a concert at Portland State University in Oregon.**

PHOTO BY KIMBERLY WARNER

◀ **Sterling Elliott, first-place junior division laureate, performs onstage at Orchestra Hall in Detroit, Michigan, during the 2014 Sphinx Competition.**

PHOTO BY GLENN TRIEST

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Prior to Sphinx, it was pretty much unheard of for a musician of color, especially a string player, to solo with an orchestra. That now happens over 20 times a year just from Sphinx's programs alone. There were no core training opportunities for young students of color in the summer, which is a huge time period that creates that achievement gap. Now there are two of those summer programs every year. It was unheard of for a chamber orchestra of color to perform, and now the Sphinx Virtuosi tours 15 cities every year, where audiences have the opportunity not only to hear that unique ensemble but to hear music by composers of color that they otherwise would never hear. [There's also] the full Sphinx Symphony as well. Sphinx alumni have gone on to every single top-ten music school. They've gone on and populated dozens of orchestras, including positions in seven of the major orchestras. Since Sphinx's inception, the number of African-American musicians in major orchestras has actually doubled. In all of those instances, either the orchestra was a partner of the Sphinx organization or the musician was a Sphinx alumnus. In addition, Sphinx has granted millions of dollars in support and scholarships to young students of color who have gone on to become professors of music and to build their own artistic enterprises and launch their own nonprofit organizations in the field.

TANGIBLE NEXT STEPS

I am not of the belief that there is active, if you will, professional racism in the classical music field. However, because there was a historical legacy [of racism], we do have the responsibility to be thoughtful so that we can provide a pathway for those who previously were barred

to have the opportunity, if they choose, to excel in this area. Unlike the various movements in higher education, business, law, unlike literally almost every other field that did this—of course with varying degrees of success, but certainly with success—we, as a field, have lacked the initiative or the will or the prioritization to implement such initiatives. So we can't be surprised when our trajectory on building diversity has been so slow and often not ideal. It's very rare that I come across someone who says, "I would not like to see more inclusion in classical music." Of course, everyone wants to. The area where it gets tough is how do we achieve that? A big priority of Sphinx is to be a catalyst to the field, to say this should be your priority. It is absolutely critical to your fundraising, to the health of you as an organization, your public responsibility to your community. But above all it's what's best for the evolution of our art form.

We need to affect the exposure and the accessibility of early music education in our schools, especially our school systems for our most underserved communities. But also our major orchestras, for example, need to commit the resources and the strategic priority to this issue; for the vast majority they have not. Our philanthropic communities and all of the key funders in the field, I believe, need to require these types of steps and support this type of work, because, obviously, a lot of the work that is done follows funder priorities and interest. If the philanthropic community makes this a priority, then the field will follow in many ways. We really need these tangible, concrete steps to be taken by the field to really build this trajectory. Because, despite Sphinx's success, no one organization can achieve this work alone. ▲

▶
The Sphinx Organization's Overture program provides free violins and lessons to elementary school students in Detroit and Flint, Michigan.
PHOTO BY AMY KUHL



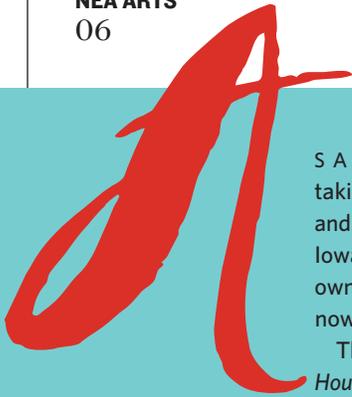
Sandra Cisneros.
PHOTO BY ALAN GOLDFARB



SANDRA
Cisneros

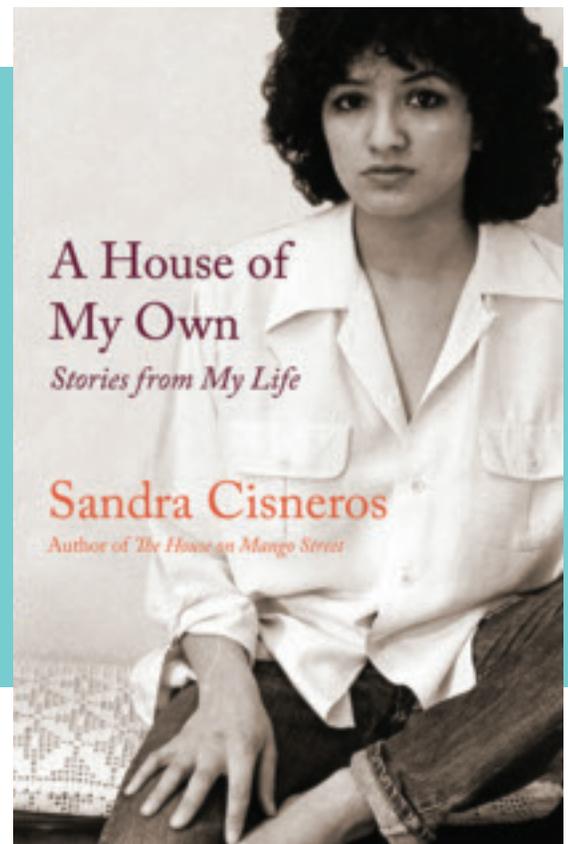
RECOGNIZING OURSELVES

BY REBECCA GROSS



AS A CHILD, SANDRA CISNEROS READ VORACIOUSLY, taking in “the language of books and writing and magic and mystery.” It was only much later, while attending the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, that Cisneros realized that her own language of working-class Mexican Americans was nowhere to be found within literature.

This changed in 1984 when Cisneros published *The House on Mango Street*. A coming-of-age story composed of some four-dozen vignettes, the book reveals both the poetry and hardship of Cisneros’s own upbringing. It has since become a perennial favorite for high school reading lists, expressing the voice of young Latinas while serving as many students’ first glimpse into an American story that might not be their own. The two-time recipient of NEA Literature Fellowships discusses her seminal work, and her own coming-of-age as a writer.



► **Cisneros’ most recent book, her memoir *A House of My Own: Stories from My Life*.**

PHOTO COURTESY OF ALFRED A. KNOFF

Opposite page: **Cisneros’ first book of fiction, *The House on Mango Street*.**

PHOTO COURTESY OF ALFRED A. KNOFF

HOUSES AND PAJAMAS

I think there’s a kind of lie that our education teaches us—boot straps and hard work, the American Dream. And you swallow it.

You could go around oblivious to it for a long time, 21 years in my case, until you go to Iowa and you realize what a privilege it is to be in that writing program. For me, it was a moment of houses, and reading about Nabokov’s house that he left behind in Russia, and Baroness Blixen’s house in Africa when she had a coffee plantation. All of these books were written from a perspective of people who owned their own houses and lived in houses that by my standards were roomy, comforting, and safe, and something one dreamt about with longing and loving memories. I didn’t have those kinds of images in my life.

The moment that I discovered my voice was also the moment I discovered class difference. I was in a seminar on memory and imagination. You know that dream you have that you go to school and you’re wearing your pajamas? It was that moment I suddenly realized, “Oh my God, I’m in my class here and I’m wearing my pajamas.” It was that horrible feeling of embarrassment that I realized I didn’t have a house. I felt naked. It had taken me 21 years to figure out I had been in my pajamas and no one—out of politeness or generosity or cruelty—had ever told me.

WRITING THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET

The first impulse when I realized I was wearing my pajamas was, “I don’t belong in this club.” My first reaction was to go home and lock myself in my bedroom for the weekend and consider coming home and quitting the program.

But Mexican women are very strong women, and the opposite side of sadness is rage. It took me only a weekend

to get to the opposite side of my sadness. Why had I never seen literature written about my community with love and honesty? Why have I never seen my house in newspapers or magazines or in ads or cinema? It’s never been portrayed. My community has never been portrayed with honesty. So I got angry. This is a wonderful thing you can do with rage if you know how to transform it: You can either light up Las Vegas, or you can create a Chernobyl. I had been wanting to create Chernobyl all weekend. Then I realized I’m going to stay here and write that book I haven’t seen. I wrote *The House on Mango Street* on the side for no credit, while I was in poetry workshop, to keep my spirit alive.

STORIES OF THE HELPLESS

When I wrote *Mango Street*, in the beginning it was as a memoir with the intent of writing something that was just mine, that no one could tell me was wrong. That’s how it began.

By the time I finished it, I was working in a school in a Latino community in Chicago—a very poor, alternative high school. I started writing stories of my students’ lives and weaving it into this neighborhood from my past.

During that period, when I had my face in the dust and didn’t know what to do in this 50-student school with no money and minimum wage—chalk I had to bring to class, girls and boys whose lives were so difficult, lives that no head of state could ever imagine—I was really frustrated as a high school teacher as to how to save their lives. The

“I see my work as work of the spirit. I cannot disconnect creative writing from spiritual work, just like someone being in a monastery or meditation sangha.”

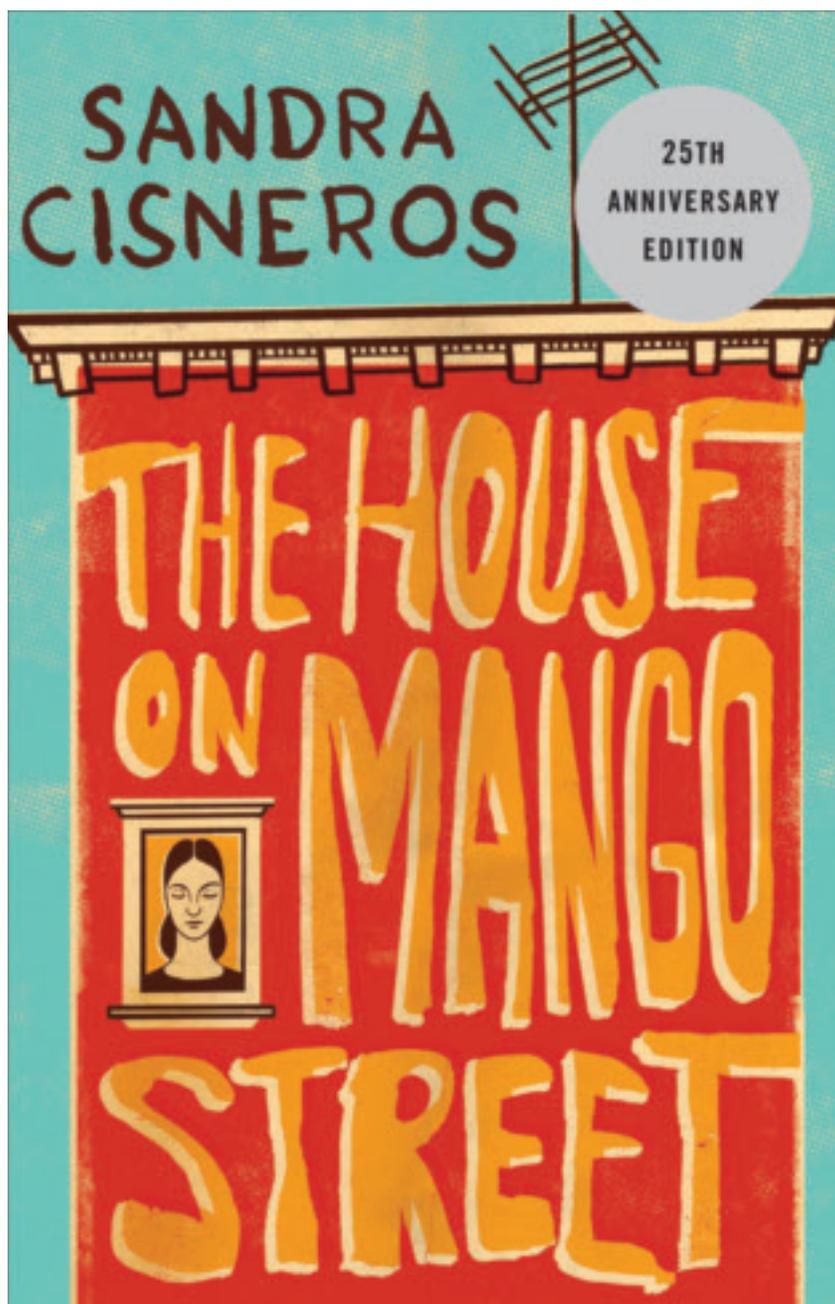
only thing I could do was to write about them and try to find some consolation before sleeping. These stories were written from that very helpless state. I think when we're most face-in-the-dust impotent, and we put ourselves at service to others, that's when we really are channeled to light. I think that's why the book is a success. I wasn't thinking of the reader, or that the book is going to be published. None of that. I think the less you can think about the reader, and the more you work on behalf of others, I really believe that it puts you in a state of grace.

WRITING FOR A HIGHER PURPOSE

My whole life is a mission. Every time I pick up the pen it's in service, and I do a meditation so that I can be of service. I'm very lucky in this way; I see my work as work of the spirit. I cannot disconnect creative writing from spiritual work, just like someone being in a monastery or meditation sangha. It's all the same to me.

We're living in such horrible times for people of color, immigrants, working-class people. There's such open vilification of things I never would have imagined I would hear in my lifetime. I feel as a writer that I have a gift of expressing things that people feel, and speaking for them, and also creating clarity and bridges between communities that misunderstand one another. You can't see clearly in times of fear. So I try to be of some use because when you witness or read intense hatred, it's your obligation to try to right the planet. Otherwise, you're part of the problem.

[In my work,] I hope that people see their story being written about, and it gives them new options and possibilities to imagine something outside of what television or what the school counselor could imagine for them. I get lots of letters from all kinds of people. There are some people most unlike me, maybe a white male, who's riding the subway and said he read my book and it made him look at people on the subway across from him in a different way, in a more human way. I really hope it will humanize [us] to be more compassionate, to recognize ourselves. If you can recognize yourself in the person most unlike you in literature, then the book will have done its work. ▲



Shirin Neshat

A MYSTICAL,
SPIRITUAL
QUALITY
BY REBECCA GROSS

Shirin Neshat.
PHOTO BY
RODOLFO MARTINEZ

THESE DAYS, MUCH OF THE VISUAL IMAGERY we have of Muslim culture comes from news publications. They are by turns tragic and heart-breaking, gruesome and bloody. These are images of death, destruction, and violence from a region of the world that most of us only know through its conflicts.

But that is not the world that Shirin Neshat knows. Born in Iran, Neshat emigrated to the United States in 1974 at the age of 17, and today has photographs, films, and videos in museum collections across the country. The Iran she knows is filled with poetry and mysticism; the Islam she practices is one that celebrates beauty. In her haunting photographs of women, their faces scrawled with Farsi calligraphy or who wear hijab while holding guns, or in films such as *Turbulent* (1999) where a woman ululates before an empty theater, we see an amalgam of the beauty she recognizes and the political realities of the day.

Through this balance, she has given voice to two traditionally silenced populations: the women of Iran, whose means of free expression are exceedingly limited (Neshat herself is barred from entering her native country), and the Muslim community in the United States, which has become increasingly maligned and misunderstood in the past several years. Below, the award-winning artist tells the story of her artwork and her culture.

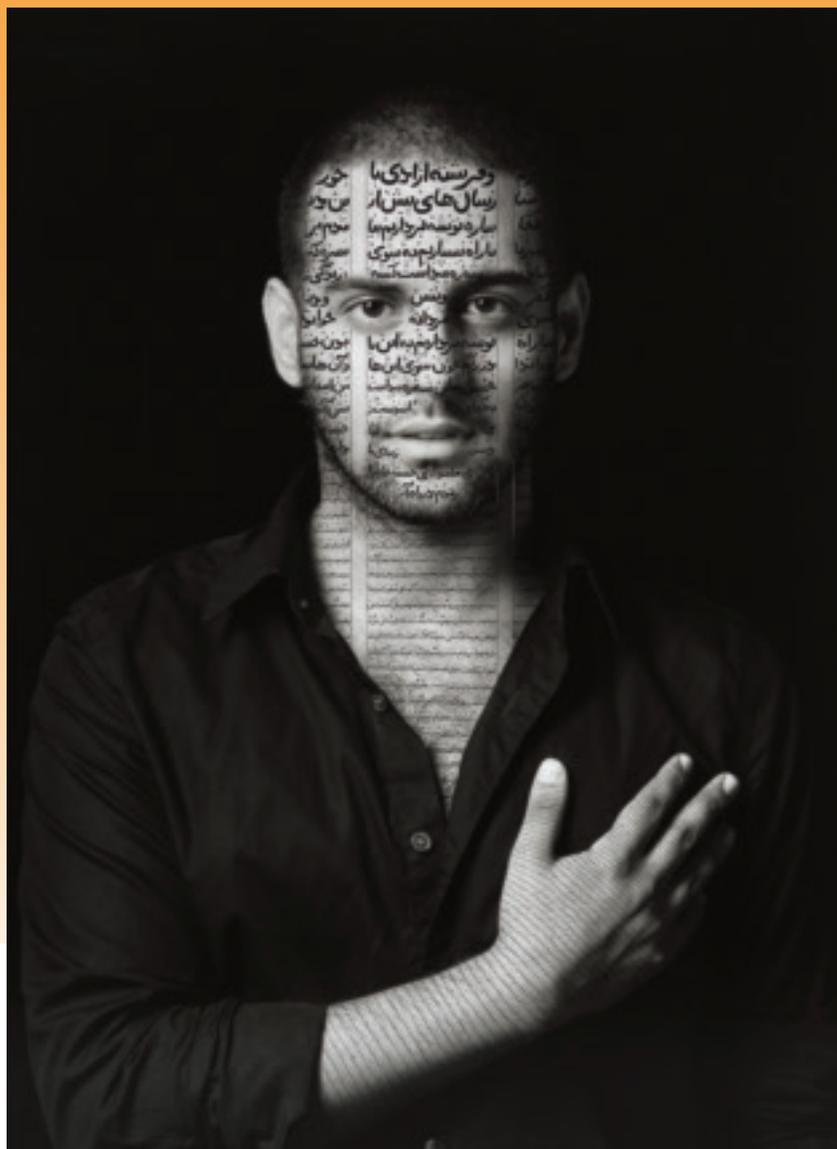
LAYERS OF MEANING

Even though on the surface, my work seems to be an investigation or a dialogue about the Muslim community, women, etc., it's evolved from a very personal angle. My work was developed based on my experience as a young Iranian coming to this country, and trying to identify my own way of expression.

Naturally, being Iranian, being Muslim, being a woman, I pursued certain things that were relevant to me. But my work has never been reactionary work that was trying to respond to something. Rather, I'm trying to pioneer a kind of work that both helped me in a visual language say some of my own issues while also being a forum or dialogue about a whole community. My work goes into bigger questions about the sociopolitical historical issues of my country, yet there's something very personal about it, very emotional.

GIVING THE VOICELESS A VOICE

I look at the question of oppression, and how those who are living in a repressive situation such as in Iran find subversive ways of being vocal, and I take off from that. For example, the music in my films is a voice; the calligraphy on the photographs is a voice. They show the emotional and intellectual capability of this woman. The images are very silent and very quiet on the surface, but



then these writings suggest that the people behind the images are in fact very defiant and vocal and have a lot to say. That's how I feel about Iranian women at large: that although they have lived for so many years under a repressive situation and governance, they have always found a way to break out of that parameter.

The Iranian people come from a very ancient country and history of mystics and poets and all kinds of incredibly creative imaginations. Yet in contemporary times, we are known to the world as some barbaric, fanatic country full of mullahs. It's in full contradiction with our ancient history. I think a lot of Iranian people feel conflicted between the past and the present. That mysticism, as we know it in relation to Islam or Persian history, it's about poetry, it's about a reinterpretation of Islam in a way that is not political. Actually, the idea of beauty is central to

▲ **Neshat's *Ibrahim (Patriots)*, from *The Book of Kings* series, 2012.**

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COURTESY OF GLADSTONE
GALLERY, NEW YORK AND
BRUSSELS

“I think works of art—any form of culture—have the capability to give people a certain hope and passion and belief and conviction that nothing else can.”



▲
Production still from
Passage, 2001.

© SHIRIN NESHAT,
COURTESY OF GLADSTONE
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spiritual Islam. So many Iranian people intentionally go out of their way to celebrate that tradition to keep it alive, to maintain that even if they live in Iran. My work is always trying to talk about this kind of contradiction, the people of poetry but the people of fanaticism. This is the biggest dilemma for Iranian people I think: their identity of Persian culture versus the Islamic Republic of Iran.

CHANGING AMERICAN PERCEPTIONS

The violence around the Middle East by extreme radical fanatics is reducing everybody else—who have absolutely nothing to do with that thinking—and putting us all in the same basket. It's extremely dangerous. After September 11th, we went through this and the American community became up-to-date somewhat—I felt like we really came a long way. But in the last several years, with the creation of ISIS and all the developing violence, I feel that negative imaging and racial marking has returned in the highest degree. I'm really frightened, because I think the majority of Americans don't understand that even Muslims are terrified and are against that kind of activity. I think this is really a dangerous time.

My work, while it reiterates the political problems and all the stereotypical things that we know about that part of the world, complicates things because it also shows dignity and beauty and a mystical, spiritual quality. So we understand the complexity of the society, and we're able to see through to the humanity of these people that goes above and beyond the government.

This is the balance that I try to keep while trying not to become a form of propaganda just defending Islam. I think the best way to describe it is that while the work is very political, it's also very mystical, and that is a very big part of the Islamic tradition that people overlook. My intervention manages to neutralize some of the negative things that we think about [Islam]. You can't go without being moved because the music is so powerful. Yet it's coming from that part of the world, and we identify with it. So it comes home, and we realize that we have a lot in common.

I think that the general public, in many ways, might benefit from any work of creative imagination that somehow gives another sight into this complex issue. But again, I think that any work of art that is biased or didactic is useless. So it's a very delicate balance for an artist to make

art that is informative and helps these complex issues we're facing without risking being didactic and obvious.

THE POWER OF ART

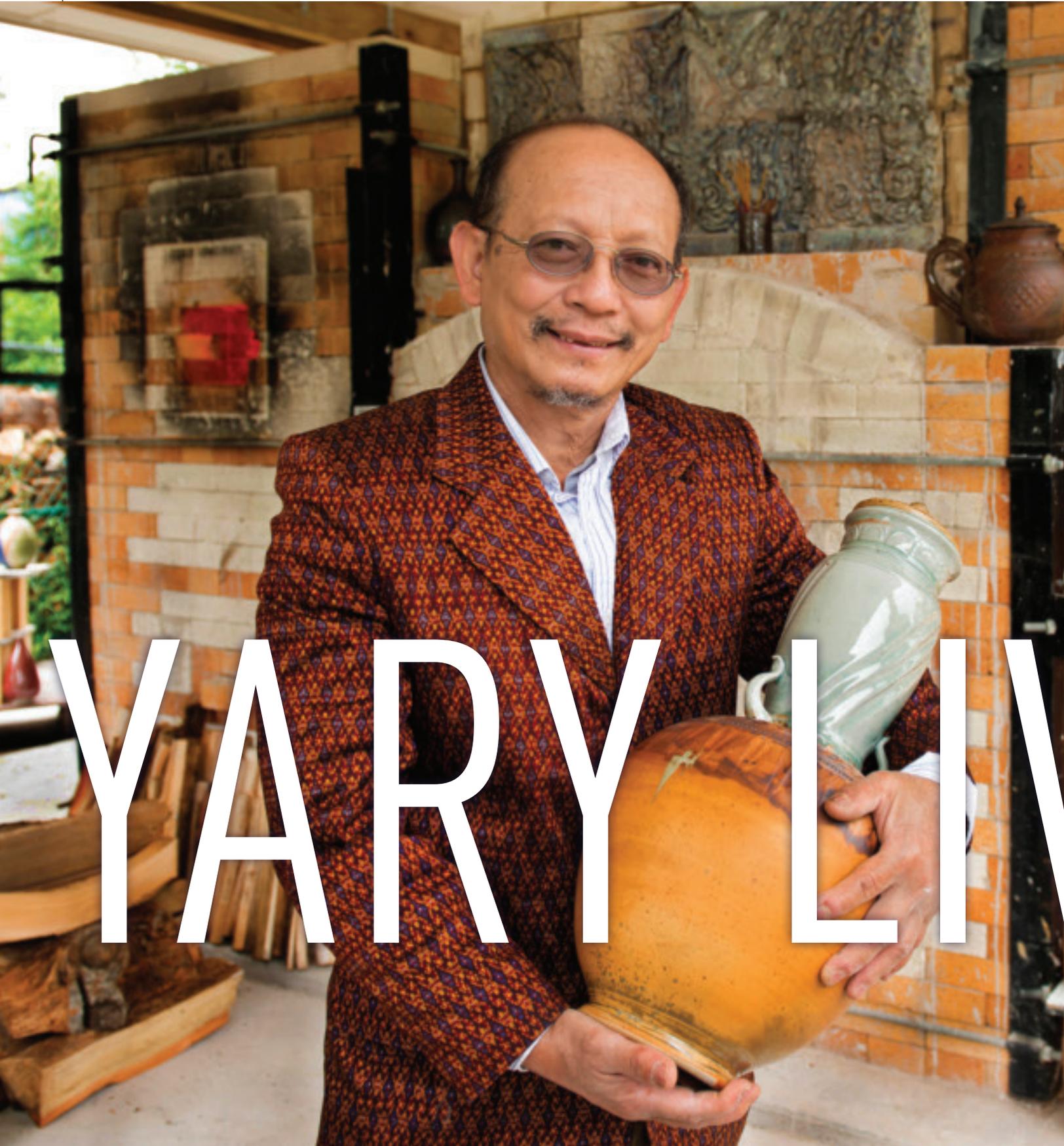
When I go look at a film or a work of art, what I look for is to be charged. I think works of art—any form of culture—have the capability to give people a certain hope and passion and belief and conviction that nothing else can. I think there is something about creativity and the imagination that is ultimately very primal, and it can be incredibly moving and provoke people in all the right directions. I'm so happy when I see a film that moves me. That's what I live for: something that is beyond everyday life, the mundane. It just gives me some form of faith that art can be a transformative experience like religion. That's the way I look at it. When I make art, I not only enjoy it, I feel like I'm contributing to the world even if in a quiet way. So I take art very seriously as a major way of contribution to the people.

Being pulled into a part of the artistic practice that is beyond art galleries and museums and the commercial market, it's sort of liberating because you feel like what you're doing is truly meaningful and your voice is heard and it counts and it inspires people. There's a certain amount of responsibility in terms of how you articulate your message in a work of art or in public, how you speak about it. So I try not to do that too often by speaking publicly, but I have on the behalf of the Iranian people or artists. It's always a mixed blessing because a lot of people are not really familiar with art language. They look at your work in a way you may not want; it's more about the political message they think you have as opposed to the real quality of the work. But at the same time, you feel that you've elevated beyond just a studio artist. You feel like your voice counts, and that's a major thing that I appreciate about being an Iranian artist today. ▲

▼
Production still from
Tooba, 2002.

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GALLERY, NEW YORK AND
BRUSSELS





YARYLIN

THE NEA NATIONAL HERITAGE FELLOWSHIPS ARE the highest honor the U.S. government awards in the folk and traditional arts. They are awarded to those artists who work to preserve their traditions within the larger American culture, creating bold, new hybrids of artistic forms while maintaining the traditions that make the art form significant. One such artist is Yary Livan. Livan is one of perhaps only three Cambodian master ceramists to have survived the 1975 Khmer Rouge genocide. After escaping the Khmer Rouge, Livan spent many years in various refugee camps before finally making his way to the United States in 2001. He shares his artistic knowledge with the next generation through classes and apprenticeships, even building a traditional Cambodian wood-burning kiln using space provided by the Lowell National Historic Park in a partnership with Middlesex Community College. Josephine Reed talked with Livan in Washington, DC, before he received his 2015 NEA National Heritage Fellowship. Here are his thoughts on his art form.

LIVING UNDER THE KHMER ROUGE REGIME

When I was young, I never knew about ceramics. In my country there was no toy store, so if kids want to play, they dig in the clay near the border river or lake or something like that and make something to play with, like a small car or little toy. We didn't have ceramic skill—it was just play. I started to understand ceramics when I went to art school.

When the Khmer Rouge came, if I told them I am a student in the university, they would kill me. They tried to kill all the people who had higher education, because they are hard to control. We had to live in the fields or the jungle, not in the village.

My mother was a tailor, and the Khmer Rouge needed people to make the hats from palm tree leaves. She was really, really good at making a hat, a beautiful hat. She worked for them making a hat for the leader of the Khmer Rouge, and she cut the cloth for their black clothes.

The Khmer Rouge wanted to make a wood kiln for roof tiles, but they didn't know how to make it. My mother said, "My son, he knows how to build the kiln." So the Khmer



Yary Livan.

PHOTO BY TOM PICH



A storage pot by Livan.

PHOTO BY TOM PICH

LIVAN

PRESERVING
THE CULTURE

BY DON BALL AND JOSEPHINE REED





“I try to do the best I can. I hope in the future that the younger generation will continue. If I stop working, that they continue [the tradition].”

▲ A display of Livan's ceramics, including a couple of his elephant pots in front.

PHOTO BY ADRIEN BISSON

Rouge bring me back from the fields and let me teach them how to build the kiln and train them. At the time, I thought that once I trained them and they knew how to build it, they will kill me. But I'm lucky—the Vietnamese came through my country and fought the Khmer Rouge out. I ran away with my family.

PRESERVING THE CULTURE IN THE U.S.

I came to the United States, to Massachusetts, in July 2001. And soon after that, the ceramic program at Harvard called me because they found out that an artist in Cambodian ceramics had come to the United States. They offered me a scholarship, and I started my life back in clay.

The period from 1975 to 2001 [when Livan was in refugee camps and not working in ceramics] is a long time. If you do something, work with art, the main point is you have to practice, practice, practice every day. Even when not practicing, the mind still thinks about that tool. Everything was still in my head. Just a couple of pieces of clay and everything started coming back to me. I have to open my eyes when I work on my pieces, looking for ways to improve my skill more and more.

I started learning at school [in Cambodia] from the wood-burning kiln. Here, we work with the gas kiln. It

makes a beautiful color, but I make the same thing, the same color; it doesn't change a lot. If we fire in a wood-burning kiln, you glaze in blue, but it changes—some spots are blue, some spots are purple, some spots a little bit green. The effect from the smoke and ash and heat, they change the regular glaze to anything. It becomes a unique piece. I can't make another one.

Artists, they don't want to do something the same, the same, the same. That becomes too boring. Artists love to create something new.

I had an idea to make a small kiln [in the Lowell National Historic Park], easy to produce the pottery quickly. If you make it bigger, you spend like a month to produce a piece. It's small—six feet by five feet and six feet tall. Every semester we fire twice, including my piece and my students' and local artists', and everybody meets together at night time to talk and cook, because there is a cooking chamber, and everybody knows how to make pizza!

THE TRADITION OF CERAMICS IN CAMBODIAN CULTURE

We have two kinds of ceramics in Cambodia: one from the past, around the Angkor period from the sixth century to early 15th century, and one everybody can use every day, like a container for storing water. Some pieces are used for the king ceremony and by monks in the temple ceremony; they look like my elephant pot. And there are a lot of people that use the ceramic for roof tiles. They make beautiful roofs.

[I worked with] a young Cambodian architect [Samnang Khoeun, through a Massachusetts Cultural Council Traditional Arts Apprenticeship in 2010]. He didn't understand about the Khmer design too much, because some artists don't learn about the Cambodian culture [in school]. We have to tell them about traditional Cambodian design, because in Cambodia they love everything to look traditional. So I showed him about the artistic tradition of Cambodian ornaments, because [the styles] have some ups, some downs, and move in and move out of fashion.

TEACHING THE TRADITION TO A NEW GENERATION

In my country, we learned how to do something just through the teacher telling us how to do it. In this country I'm just demonstrating to them, telling them the technique, but they love to create by themselves. They change a little bit from my instructions. They work very well. I walk around and help them. I look for simple technique, easy so everybody can get it. It's so important.

I try to do the best I can. I hope in the future that the younger generation will continue. If I stop working, that they continue [the tradition]. But I can't stop—I have to continue and keep teaching. 🍕

ARTHUR MITCHELL

GIVING BACK TO THE COMMUNITY

BY VICTORIA HUTTER

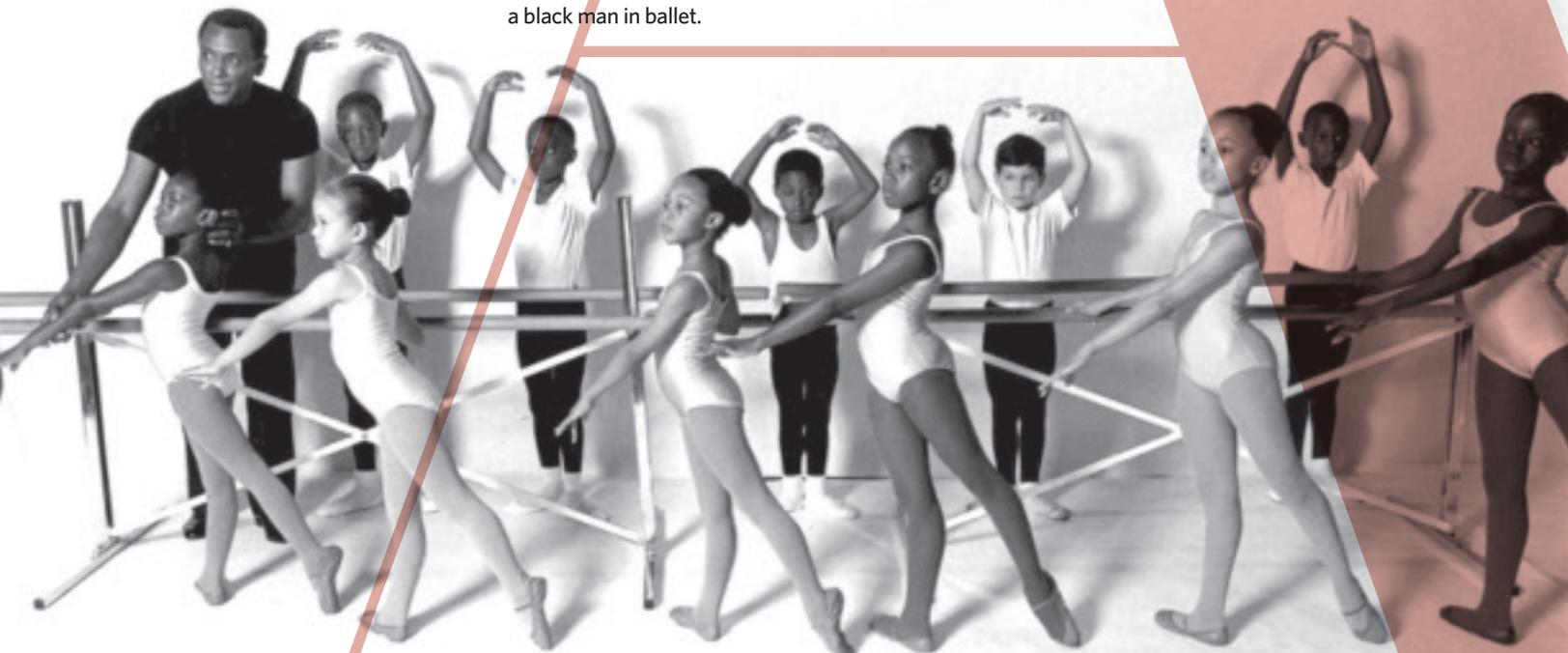
Arthur Mitchell teaching a class.

PHOTO COURTESY OF
DANCE THEATRE OF HARLEM

A PRODUCT OF THE IMPERIAL COURTS OF FRANCE AND RUSSIA, CLASSICAL BALLET IS steeped in aristocratic ideals. Key to its history was a patrician vision of purity, uniformity, and whiteness. The courtiers, swans, sylphs, or snowflakes that populated the stage had to look alike and be fair-skinned. It is, unfortunately, a vision that has been hard to shake.

Ballet's lack of diversity is beginning to change, as we've seen most recently with the promotion of Misty Copeland to principal dancer with American Ballet Theatre—the first African-American woman to hold the title. But her story begins with other artists who pushed at the barriers of race and color to realize their dreams of becoming classical ballet dancers. Perhaps most notable is Arthur Mitchell, who made his debut in 1955 as a member of the New York City Ballet.

Mitchell was born in Harlem, New York, on March 27, 1934. As a young teenager, a guidance counselor encouraged him to audition for the High School of Performing Arts, which led to a scholarship to the School of American Ballet, the official school of the New York City Ballet. Mitchell joined the company, making his way through the ranks to principal dancer. In 1969, along with Karel Shook, Mitchell established the Dance Theatre of Harlem, which has won numerous NEA grants through the years. He remained the artistic director until 2004, when the company temporarily closed. In his own words, the 1992 National Medal of Arts winner describes what it has meant to be a black man in ballet.





▲ Mitchell watching a rehearsal.

PHOTO BY MARBETH,
COURTESY OF DANCE
THEATRE OF HARLEM

STEPPIN' OUT

I went to the High School of Performing Arts and when I auditioned, I prepared a tap dance routine to Fred Astaire's "Steppin' Out with My Baby." But when I got to the audition, I saw all these trained dancers in modern dance and ballet. I thought, "I'll never get in." But they needed male dancers, as usual, and I got in. In addition to studying at the school, I danced with Donald McKayle's company. I worked at the Choreographers Workshop, and with the New Dance Group.

In your senior year at Performing Arts, you did auditions, and that's when I ran into racism, because I would see that I was the best dancer but I didn't get the job. I kept saying, "Well, what can I do? What can I acquire that would make me so good people would use me regardless of my skin color?" So that made me decide to take the scholarship that was offered to me to the School of American Ballet. I hadn't had ballet training before then.

When I got to the school, the only other people of color were Louis Johnson and Chita Rivera. I didn't think of blazing a trail. I was just trying to get technique to get a job.

After three years at the school, from age 18 until 21, I felt that nothing was going to happen for me professionally. I thought I would try Europe because I had seen Roland Petit's company, and there were a couple of black guys there. So when John Butler asked me if I wanted to go to Europe with his company, I said yes. I was in Europe touring when I got the wire from Lincoln Kirstein [New York City Ballet general director] asking me to join New

York City Ballet in the corps de ballet. I left the tour and came back and joined the company in November of 1955.

WORKING WITH BALANCHINE

When I was with the company, we performed at New York City Center, where they also used to do musicals all the time. I did *Carmen Jones* and I did *Kiss Me, Kate* because New York City Ballet didn't work that many weeks a year. So there was always a mixture of training that I had. Since I was starting very late, any opportunity I could get to perform I would take.

At New York City Ballet, everybody was on my side, whatever we did. There were a couple of instances where we would do a television program and the producers said, "Well you can't do that piece with the black guy." [New York City Ballet artistic director and choreographer George] Balanchine said, "If Mitchell doesn't dance, New York City Ballet doesn't dance." There were parents of some of the girls in the company who were upset about my dancing with their daughters, and Balanchine said, "Then take them out of the company." So I danced in every ballet, in *Swan Lake*, in *Nutcracker*—everything. There weren't roles that were consigned for black dancers. There were just roles for a dancer.

Balanchine's *Agon* is an amazing ballet and the pas de deux in it that he set on me and Diana Adams is brilliant. He took a black man and Diana, who was very patrician, long legs, ivory white skin, in a pas de deux that is very intricate that involved serious partnering. The whole secret of that pas de deux is the woman must let me do

everything to her. Balanchine used the masculine way I danced against her femininity. I do feel that skin color was part of the choreography. *Agon* doesn't look the same if you see two white people doing it or two black people doing it. You see, my skin tone against her skin tone made a big difference.

I think Balanchine was quite fascinated with me as a dancer. For him to do what he did with me was really unbelievable, because this was before the civil rights movement. I think a lot of it was due to the fact that Balanchine came to this country and he was a foreigner. He knew what it was to have to go through challenges to be successful. He had worked with Josephine Baker in the '20s and '30s, and then also with Katherine Dunham. He always felt that New York City Ballet should be an American company, not a European company.

RETURNING TO HARLEM

I wanted to go back to the community where I was born, which was Harlem, and give the opportunity to young minority kids there in dance and classical ballet. So we started a school and then a company—you can't do one without the other. It was called Dance Theatre of Harlem, not Ballet Theatre of Harlem, because it is theatrical dance grounded in classical ballet.

When I started the school I had two dancers and 30 children. In two months, I had 400 kids and in four months, I had 800 students, boys and girls. They wanted the structure and the discipline in their lives so badly, and I thought, I'll be the one to give it to them.

I brought my company to Russia in 1988. It was one thing for the Russian dance audience to have seen me [when I performed there with New York City Ballet], but then to come back and bring my dancers—it blew the audiences' minds because they had never seen anything like that. I'm not talking about Alvin Ailey or a modern dance company. I'm talking about a ballet company, and we had tremendous success.

In 1992, we went to South Africa. [Nelson] Mandela asked me to come, and that was when they were trying to banish apartheid. But I said, "You know Mr. Mandela, I don't know if I could do this." He said, "No, you will—everyone wants this to happen. I will get every faction in South Africa to sign something that nothing will happen to you." Every faction in the country signed it, "Yes, we want this man to come." He said, "Because Arthur, you've proven that any child, given the opportunity, will excel."

I'd never been in a country where the black people were the majority not the minority. It was unbelievable for me and the company, because we saw where our ancestors came from.

The thing that I am most proud of regarding the company is the fact that it existed. Our repertoire was one

of the best in the world because we had the best of Balanchine. Then when Mr. Shook passed away, we got Freddie Franklin [former principal dancer with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo] as an artistic consultant and we got the Diaghilev ballets, which had a great mystique. We did *Les Noces* [a ballet and musical composition by Igor Stravinsky]—can you imagine a black company doing that piece with the score sung in Russian? It was like a little United Nations of dance in a sense.



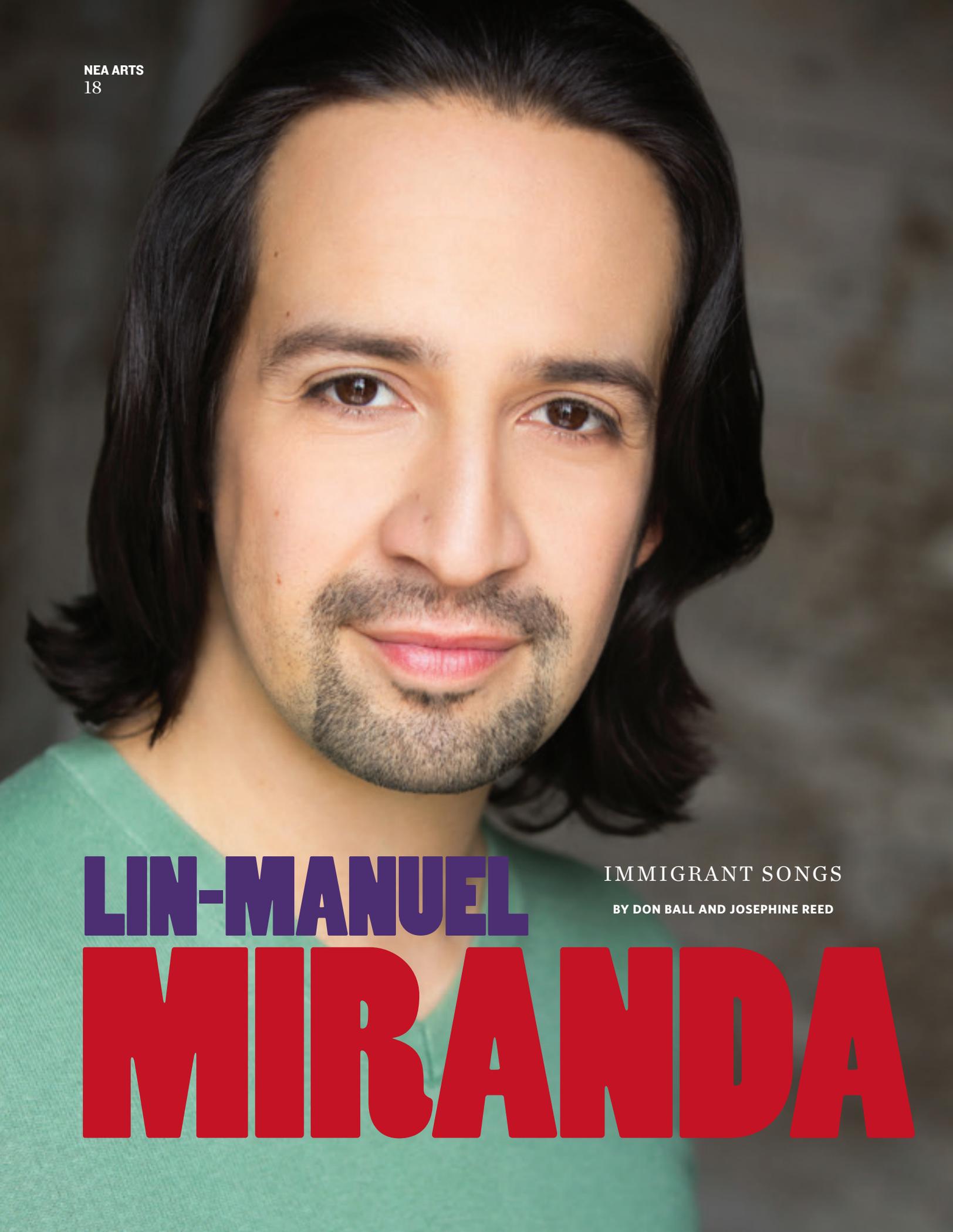
CREATING THE MELTING POT

You see, this is America, and to say, "Who's an American?"—it's black, white, Asian, Hispanic. It is a melting pot of people, and when people go to the theater, they want to see that on the stage. You've got to get new bodies to fill those seats. So the more interracial the audience is, the better off it's going to be for that company, and that means you're going to get better support.

One of the strengths of Dance Theatre of Harlem is that we must have done a thousand lecture demonstrations, going into communities that had not seen ballet or didn't even know anything about it. They said Dance Theatre of Harlem is like a traveling university. Now you find basketball players, football players—they all are studying ballet. It's the strongest technical base to make you better. Consequently, all those things add together to make for greater awareness of the art form. 🏆

▲ The early years of the Dance Theatre of Harlem company; Mitchell is center on the floor.

PHOTO COURTESY OF
DANCE THEATRE OF
HARLEM

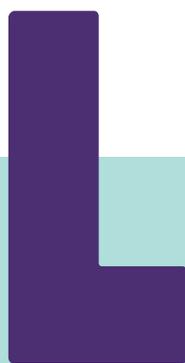


LIN-MANUEL

IMMIGRANT SONGS

BY DON BALL AND JOSEPHINE REED

MIRANDA



IN-MANUEL MIRANDA IS ON A ROLL. ALREADY A GRAMMY, EMMY, AND TONY AWARD winner (among other awards), Miranda received a MacArthur Foundation Award in 2015, the same year his current musical, *Hamilton*, opened on Broadway to sold-out crowds. His soundtrack to the musical—a hip-hop riff on Alexander Hamilton’s life—took home a Grammy in 2016, and the play continues to draw huge audiences in New York. His first musical, *In the Heights*, also a Grammy Award winner, took home four Tony Awards in 2008. Miranda co-wrote the music and lyrics for *Bring It On: The Musical* with Tom Kitt and Amanda Green, which opened in 2011. Additionally, Miranda is a co-founder and member of Freestyle Love Supreme, a popular hip-hop improv group that performs regularly in New York City.

Josephine Reed talked with Miranda in New York City in February 2016 during the run of *Hamilton*. His thoughts on his two award-winning works, and the state of theater today, are below. The full podcast interview can be heard in May 2016 at arts.gov.

WRITING ABOUT THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Rent came out when I was 17—I saw it on my 17th birthday, 1997. Suddenly, here I was seeing a musical that took place not in a far-off land, or in a far-off country, but in the West Village with people struggling whether to stay in the arts or sell out. People struggling with disease, struggling with poverty. It was the New York struggle in musical form, and it took place now. I think that tacitly gave me permission to write about what I knew. I knew I loved the musical form, but [*Rent*] told me, “You can write musicals. That’s not something that only a few people have access to. You can write about it, too.” Because Jonathan Larson [author of *Rent*] was writing about his friends. And that is valid. That is a valid evening in the theater.

That connects to *In the Heights* very directly, because my first attempt at a full-length musical was *In the Heights*. It was everything I’d always wanted to see in a musical. It was Latino characters. I was also empowered by the fact that I was living in a house with other Latino students at the time.

I spoke Spanish at home and English at school. *In the Heights* was really the first time I’d brought my culture from home to school in a very real way, to write about the neighborhood I grew up in, or at least adjacent to. I grew up north of Washington Heights. I wanted it to sound like my neighborhood. So I’m dabbling in the Latin forms that I grew up with around the house, but also playing with hip-hop and playing with musical theater, and just trying to bring all of myself to it.

When *In the Heights* went pro is when I met [director] Tommy Kail, who by all accounts is smarter than me and had 50 ideas of how to make the musical better. Then we found the people who could help us really bring it to life, and that was Alex Lacamoire, our music director, and crucially, Quiara Hudes, our book writer, who had the same upbringing and schism growing up in northern Philly that I did in northern Manhattan. We really doubled down on, “Okay, let’s make this about our community, and a love letter to the communities we grew up in.” Not about

the drug dealer on the corner—that guy is on the corner, as he is in every neighborhood in America—but the hard-working local businessmen, who came from another country, who works at the store inside the corner, who makes Washington Heights unique and stand out.

THE EFFECT OF IN THE HEIGHTS

I saw what [*In the Heights*] did to Latinos who finally saw themselves represented on the stage in a way that wasn’t holding a knife. Over the years, the show has gone to stock and amateur, and people have done high school and college productions of the show. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve spoken at a college and I get kids—male and female—come up to me and say, “Nina Rosario is about me!” That’s been unbelievably heartening and validating.

Nina is the one who went to Stanford, lost her scholarship, and has pretty much given up at the top of the show, and leaves with a resolve to go back. I don’t think we tell that story a lot. You don’t see, “My parents really worked hard for me to do something, and I’m going to honor that. I’m going to honor their sacrifice.” As a kid of parents who both were born in Puerto Rico and came here, I was so aware of the sacrifices they were making. It’s not a story that gets told a lot—at least not in mainstream culture, not in movies and plays. You see it in the news, but you don’t see it in a show.

ON WRITING HAMILTON

[Alexander Hamilton] writes his way out of poverty. He writes his way into the war through just a war of ideas. He writes his way into [George] Washington’s good graces. He also writes his way into trouble—at every step of the way, when cooler heads are not around him to prevail. I immediately made the leap to a hip-hop artist writing about his circumstances and transcending them. There’s also that self-destructive [nature]. You see rappers who have billions of dollars getting into wars of words with other rappers. It’s a part of that verbal one-upmanship. Hamilton is no different than that.



Lin-Manuel Miranda.

PHOTO BY
MATTHEW MURPHY



▲ **Miranda as Usnavi**
in his musical *In the Heights*.

PHOTO BY JOAN MARCUS

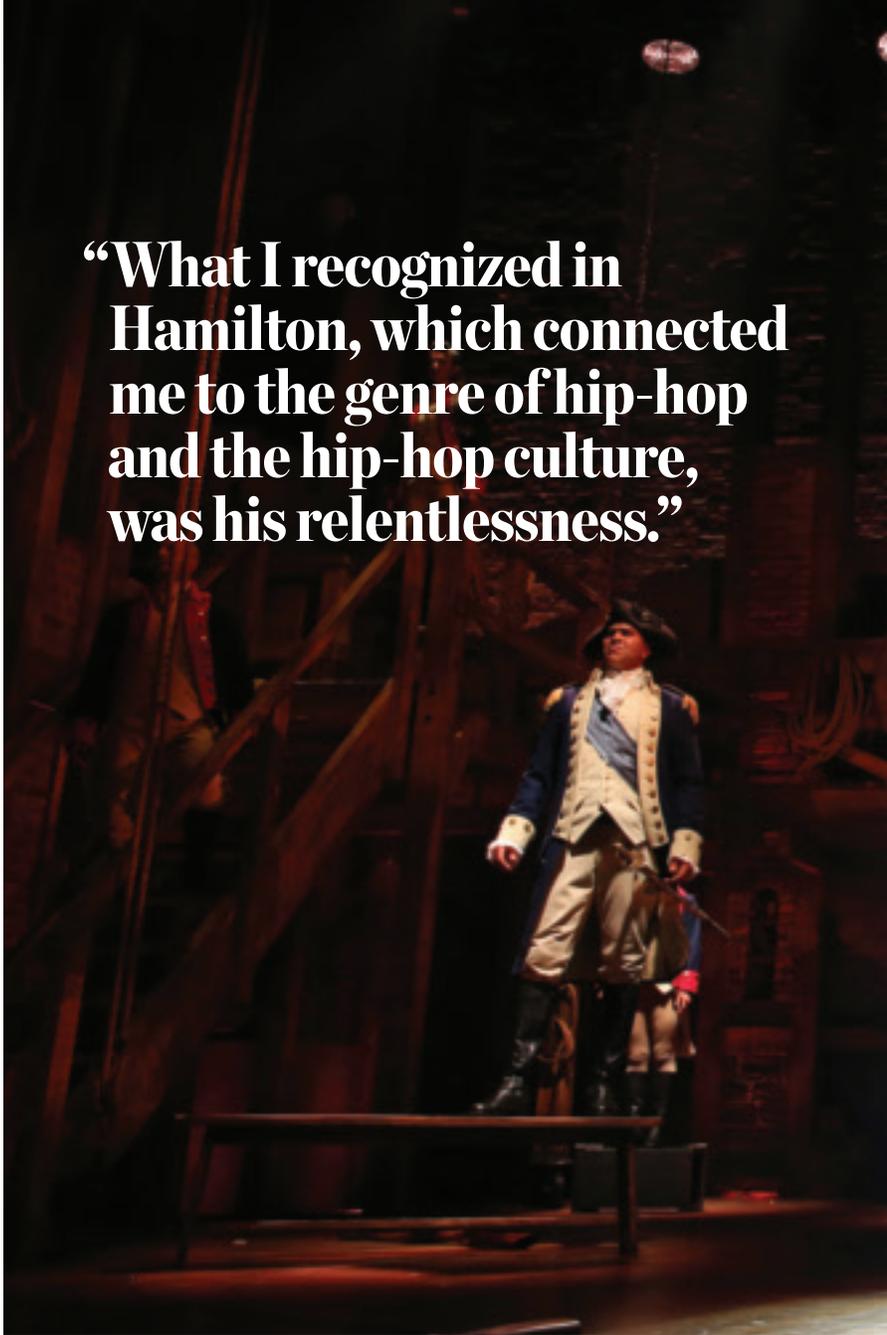
I chased the lyrical density of my favorite hip-hop albums, which you don't always get in a musical theater album, because you're worried about everyone getting everything the first time. You're telling a story first and foremost, but what I love about my favorite hip-hop albums is that I'll catch a double entendre I didn't catch the first time or some alliteration or some word play. Years later I'm still catching it, because that's the art form.

What I recognized in *Hamilton*, which connected me to the genre of hip-hop and the hip-hop culture, was his relentlessness. I recognize that relentlessness in people I know. Not only in my father who came here at the age of 18 to get his education and never went back home, just like *Hamilton*, but also so many immigrant stories I know, and friends I know who come here from another country. They know they have to work twice as hard to get half as far. That's just the deal—that's the price of admission to our country.

CASTING THE SHOW

The impulse of the piece was that you can draw a direct line between *Hamilton's* life and the life of the hip-hop artists I grew up revering. So to that end, why wouldn't our show look like hip-hop culture? In that initial read of

“What I recognized in *Hamilton*, which connected me to the genre of hip-hop and the hip-hop culture, was his relentlessness.”



the book, I was never picturing Founding Fathers. I was picturing what artist could play George Washington, what artist could play Hercules Mulligan—the guy never drafted a piece of legislation, but it's the best rapper name I've ever heard. So that was always a part of the initial inspiration.

The genre of music lends itself to this type of casting, and it's also the added sense of, “These people are like you and me.” It's only amplified by the fact that we have every color represented on that stage. It eliminates distance between us and the story of our founders. It helps them feel more human to us, because it's what our country looks like now. We never threw around the terms “colorblind” or “color-conscious.” That's how it shook out—it was always with an eye towards, “Let's get the best actors for these characters and these songs,” and that's what we got.

WHY HAMILTON IS SUCCESSFUL

I had to make [the Founding Fathers] human for myself,



and I think what is touching a nerve is other people are finding the humanity within them as well. They leave with an understanding, or at least a partial understanding, of what they were like as people in some weird way. You don't get that when you look at a statue of someone or you look at their picture on currency. Regardless of your political stripe, to be connected to your country in any meaningful way, or its country's founders—even if you leave [thinking], “Oh, Jefferson was a jerk,” or “Hamilton was cheating on his wife,”—you can't dismiss them. You have to reckon with them, because we live in their country.

The other thing about the show is that the fights they have in the show—the ideological fights, anyway—are the fights we're still having. How often do we get involved in the affairs of other countries? When are we states and when are we one nation? What is the role of government in our lives? Is it big or is it small? It's not an accident that almost every character in our show dies as a result of gun

violence. There are things in the foundation of our country with which we will always be grappling.

THE NEW DIVERSITY

We are, by incredible good luck, in one of the most diverse seasons in the history of Broadway. It's *Allegiance*, it's *On Your Feet!*, it's *The Color Purple*. I do hope that the financial success of *On Your Feet!*, the financial success of *Hamilton*, empowers producers to say, “Hey, this is actually good business. It's good business to have diverse casts. It's good business to have diverse stories,” because that brings in a newer audience and engages us in a different way. That's the only thing that really works—it's got to be good business. Broadway is expensive. It's expensive to mount a show. So the fact that not only are the shows here but [are] doing well is really what gives me hope, because it means there's going to be more. Tomorrow there'll be more of us. 🍷

▲ Miranda (center) and the cast of *Hamilton*.

PHOTO BY JOAN MARCUS



ONLINE

As part of our online content for this issue, which you can find by going to arts.gov, we visit with Tim Robbins to discuss the Actor's Gang, which provides theater programming in California prison facilities, and talk to Maysoon Zayid about having a career as an Arab-American actress and comedian with cerebral palsy and her advocacy for those with disabilities.

Don't forget to check out our *Art Works Blog* (arts.gov/art-works) for daily stories on the arts around the country.

(Above) An Actors' Gang theater workshop at the California Rehabilitation Center in Norco.

PHOTO BY PETER MERTS

