

How Lin-Manuel Miranda and Friends Made an Old Bookstore New

The century-old Drama Book Shop in Manhattan struggled for years. Then “Hamilton” happened.



By Michael Paulson

June 6, 2021

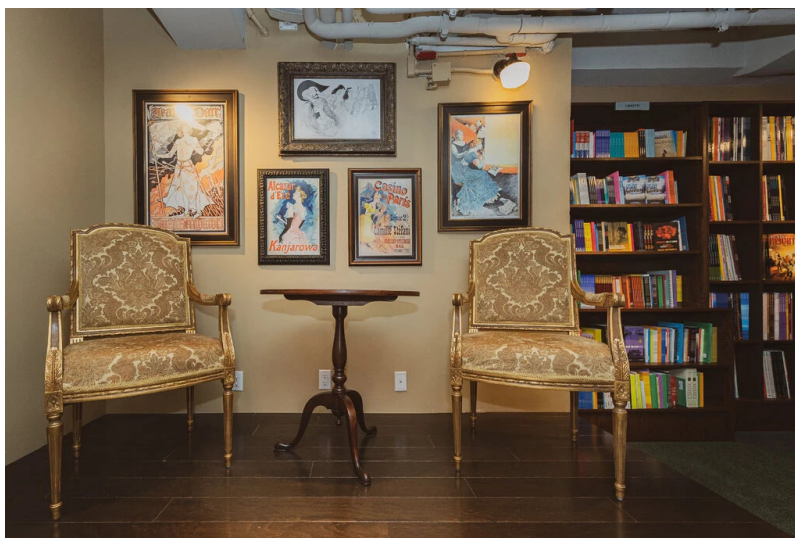
A sculptural representation of a bookworm — 140 feet of scripts and songbooks, twisted along a steel skeleton — corkscrews across the Drama Book Shop in Manhattan. It starts with ancient Greek texts and, 2,400 volumes later, spills into a pile that includes “Summer: The Donna Summer Musical.”

This 3,500-pound tribute to theatrical history is the centerpiece of the century-old bookstore’s new location, opening Thursday on West 39th Street.

The shop — like so many bookstores around the country — had brushes with death, caused not only by e-commerce but also by fire and flood, before encountering a rent hike it could not withstand, in 2018. The beloved institution, where students, artists, scholars and fans could browse memoirs and bone up for auditions, was in danger of closing.

Then came an unexpected rescue. Four men enriched by “Hamilton,” including the musical’s creator, Lin-Manuel Miranda; its director, Thomas Kail; its lead producer, Jeffrey Seller; and the theater owner, James L. Nederlander, bought the store from its longtime owners. Kail has a particularly close relationship with the shop — 20 years ago, just out of college, he formed a small theater company in its basement. After he teamed up with Miranda, the two worked on “In the Heights” there.

“I was not born in a trunk; I was born in the basement of the Drama Book Shop,” Kail said. “All of my early creative conversations and relationships were forged in that shop, and the thought of it not existing was painful. I couldn’t imagine New York City without it, and I didn’t want to imagine New York City without it.”



The store’s decorations include replicas of armchairs used in the musical “Hamilton.” Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

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For a year, the “Offstage” series has followed theater through a shutdown. Now we’re looking at its rebound. Join Times theater reporter Michael Paulson, as he explores signs of hope in a changed city with Lin-Manuel

Miranda, a performance from Shakespeare in the Park and more.

The bookstore is opening the same day that a film adaptation of “In the Heights” is scheduled to be released in theaters and on HBO Max, and Kail noted the thematic connections.

“‘Heights’ is about a different place in Manhattan where rents are going up and businesses are getting forced out,” he said. “There’s an obvious and clear line.”

The “Hamilton” team closed the store’s previous location on West 40th Street in January 2019 and put its contents in storage, anticipating reopening at a still-to-be-determined location later that year. But New York real estate being what it is, finding that location and renovating it took longer than anticipated. Then the pandemic arrived, closing theaters, disrupting the retail and tourism sectors, and quieting Midtown.

Now, the Drama Book Shop is back, just as Broadway gears up for a late summer return. “As all the theaters are starting to put dates out there, it feels like we’re part of that opening gesture,” Kail said.

Visitors can pick up books about theater (including Andrew Lloyd Webber’s presciently titled memoir, “Unmasked”) as well as “the play that just won a prize and the play that no one’s heard about,” Kail said. The store will also sell rare books, such as a first-edition of “Three Tall Women,” signed by Edward Albee, and a first-edition script of “West Side Story.”

Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

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The new location will offer new services, including food and drinks from a coffee bar. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Like many bookstores, the owners hope to augment their income with a coffee bar and food. But there's a personal flourish: Among the coffees sold will be a blend from Puerto Rico — part of Miranda's effort to support farmers on the island where his parents are from.

"My hope is that we can continue to be a hub for the theater community," Miranda said. "I don't expect we'll make a great fortune, but I hope with the coffee we'll break even."

The interior — 3,500 square feet on the main floor, plus a 3,000 square foot basement — is designed by David Korins, the "Hamilton" set designer. There's an octagonal banquette inspired by a piece of furniture in the 1940 film "The Shop Around the Corner" and, for "Hamilton" fans, a pair of armchairs that are replicas of the one George Washington sits in during the musical's cabinet battles.

The walls feature more than 125 theater-themed posters, 17 of which ("Kiss of the Spider Woman," "Crazy For You") were given to Kail by the literary agent Gilbert Parker, just before he died in 2019. There will also be a photograph of the dog Chester, a German spitz who often lounged by the door at the previous location; Chester is alive and well, a spokesman said, but not permitted by health regulations now that food is being sold.

A photo of Chester, the German spitz who often greeted visitors at the old location but isn't allowed at the new one, will be on display. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

The purveyors are anticipating a variety of events, like book signings and author talks. And the basement — which is not yet finished, but which houses a piano on which “Paciencia y Fe,” a song from “In the Heights,” was written — will be used for workshops and other programs.

Six people who worked at the store's former location are rejoining the staff, a spokesman said.

Because of continuing concern about the coronavirus, the store will have a capacity limit when it opens; the owners are recommending that people make free reservations online, but there will also be a line for those without reservations.

Asked what he hopes to see once the shop is open, Korins said, “Everyone would hope the next Lin-Manuel Miranda and Tommy Kail will be sitting there, conjuring up their next project.”