

# Emanuel on 'Hamilton,' Rauner and need for national service

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Chris Jones

Mayor Rahm Emanuel sat down in his City Hall office July 20 for a wide-ranging conversation on the arts — his views on "Hamilton," his role in Chicago culture, his frustration over the aborted Lucas Museum of Narrative Arts and the future of performing arts in the city. And he talked about his idea for three months of compulsory national service for all Americans.

An edited transcript follows.

**Q: You were spotted at "Hamilton" on Broadway. Now it's coming to Chicago. What do you make of that whole phenomenon?**

A: It's great for the city. Where does "Hamilton" go after all its success in New York? The other great theater city. It will be great from a tourism perspective. It will help further establish what Chicago theater companies already do on their own. And as someone who read the Ron Chernow book years ago, I think the show is fabulous for the way it weaves both historical and artistic qualities together. I was enamored less about Hamilton when I saw the play, and more with the way they did Jefferson.

Obviously, that's an import. I saw a play at American Theater Company, "The Humans." I thought it was brilliant. Perfect title. Any family could relate to that. The generational issues. We exported that play. I went back and saw it. Then Amy went back with my parents. New York is New York. Chicago is where you experiment and take risks.

**Q: What else have you seen?**

A: I saw "Bethany" over at the Gift Theatre; really good. I saw "The House That Will Not Stand" at Victory Gardens. The Belarusian play. I thought "Satchmo" at the Court Theatre was staged brilliantly. I saw "Moby Dick" at Lookingglass. That was my inspiration when I said that the governor (Bruce Rauner) reminded me of what Captain Ahab looks like when he becomes obsessed. That play at Lookingglass jolted my memory about "Moby Dick."

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**Q: What do you see looking forward? What needs to happen? Goodman has a new education center. Steppenwolf still needs to finish its expansion ...**

A: I've done some fundraising for that. Here's what is interesting. If you look at Goodman, Steppenwolf, Jeanne (Gang)'s Writers' Theatre space, Chicago Shakespeare, new arts buildings like that, theater spaces are becoming community centers. This is what is really fascinating and most important for the city. People in Chicago no longer just want to go and see a play and then go to dinner. You're going to see a play and then stay and talk, not just about what did you see, but about what does it mean. You're going to participate in a discussion. A lot of people want to talk with others who have seen the play. People go to theaters now to help them interpret the world. It's like that play at Steppenwolf you recently wrote about ("Between Riverside and Crazy"). It was written before this time, but it is relevant to this time.

**Q: Speaking of this time, we have horrific gun violence at home. Acts of violence in the wider world to which we are becoming increasingly inured. Divisive rhetoric has emerged from the political convention season. Division appears to be in increasing.**

A: I am going to give you yes but no. The president has spoken to this. I've said it myself. We have differences; they're not divisions. It's when you add fuel to the fire they become divisions. Look, class, race, income, ethnicity,

geography, people think the elite, and that includes the media, has let them down. That is understandable.

I am working on a piece right now, with a former White House colleague (Bruce Reed). We wrote it in our book — because I still think people are yearning for that common foundation, common values. From a public policy standpoint, I think the most important thing we can do today as a country is universal national service when you graduate high school. Three months. Give something back to your country. One of the great things out of the World War II generation is that you had Italian and Jewish kids from Brooklyn meeting kids from Hope, Ark., all side by side in the same battalion. That commonality, and that foundation, is what served America in the after years. So, yes, there are forces pulling us apart. But people are yearning for something of equal value that pulls us together. The great majority want a common purpose and foundation.

**Q: And what is that?**

A: Little things. It's not an accident you see coffee shops becoming coffeehouses, or arts groups creating community spaces. I had a text just this morning from an alderman saying that there were 400 people watching Shakespeare in the Park last night. People yearn for that singular purpose. It would serve the country well to find a way to fulfill that purpose. Especially in the post-Iraq and Afghanistan world, where the true 1 percent served the other 99 percent.

We should give the generation of my children that three months between high school and college, a time when you do something for your country, you give back, because this a great country, and you find your place among your fellow citizens. Look at architecture, theater companies. They all speak to this yearning. You are not wrong about division, but, right in front of us, there are things that are grabbing people.

Take my favorite art form, dance. When you say, you crawl, you walk, you run, you are cutting it short. You actually crawl, walk, run, *dance*. Religious groups, cultural groups, all have dance as a unifying art form. That thing with Hubbard Street and Second City? You were there. Brilliant. They took two art forms on parallel tracks that don't communicate — one verbal, one using the body. I thought it was a brilliant fusion of two different art forms into one singular statement. Only in Chicago could you have brought dance and comedy together like that.

**Q: The Republican convention was not a typical convention ...**

A: All you guys have complained for years about them being too theatrical, too much like "Battleship Potemkin." Now you finally get the ugly reality. Now you don't like it. Now you want to go back to the makeup and lipstick. Now it's all, "nobody really liked the uncle, anyway." "Mom, do we have to have him over?" Too raw for you, huh? And by the way, if you can't handle who speaks when during the logistics of a convention, it's not like handling the West Wing will be easier. It's not like ISIS will be more co-operative. It gets harder, not easier.

[Dara Cameron sings "Somewhere That's Green"](#)

Caption Dara Cameron sings "Somewhere That's Green"

[A song from 'Thaddeus and Slocum: A Vaudeville Adventure'](#)

Caption A song from 'Thaddeus and Slocum: A Vaudeville Adventure'

**Q: The Lucas Museum situation. Horse bolted? Line drawn?**

A: I don't know. We've got a parking lot. I believed, and I still believe, that a parking lot in the middle of the museum campus should be a museum with open space. Look, it is what it is. In 15 years, it will still be a parking lot. We will have a presidential library. We fought hard to make sure it came home to Chicago. It will be in a park. With open space.

**Q: What's next in city arts policy? Where are you putting your political capital?**

A: Harold Washington wrote the cultural plan. The theater district came out of that. Downtown was a ghost town in the evenings. Now it's vibrant because of culture. We have phenomenal dance spaces we never had when I was growing up. When I asked (former commissioner of cultural affairs and special events) Michelle Boone to write a new plan, the idea was to get out into the neighborhoods. The biggest symbol of that is the "Night Out in the Parks" program — movies, plays, dances. There are now 1,200 events across the city. That is all part of bringing the arts into our community and, also, giving the arts in our community a platform they can't get any other way. The next big thing will be Theater on the Lake. That was one of my first earmarks. Now we're going to make that a year-round arts space with a cafe. I think the biggest thing I have done in the arts so far was help (Chicago) Shakespeare get a really phenomenal new space on Navy Pier, by changing the way we did the finances with the separation from McCormick Place. But, really, my biggest effort to date has been to make sure we're really pushing the arts into our communities. At "Night Out in the Parks," a lawn chair is the price of admission.

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