

THE HAMILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

[00:00:00] Hi. I'm stage and stage's Lin-Manuel Miranda and you're listening to The Hamilcast.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:00:18] Hello, everyone. Welcome back to The Hamilcast. My name is Gillian and today this is a big day for the pod. I am speaking to Charles Simmons. You are a cast member in the Germany company of Hamilton. You are George Washington.

Charles Simmons [00:00:32] That's absolutely right. Yes.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:00:34] Thank you so much for being here. I'm so excited to talk to you about all things Germany and all things you.

Charles Simmons [00:00:38] Well, thank you for having me. It's an honor to be here. And I'm very excited to talk to you and to your listeners about Hamilton Germany.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:00:45] Oh, yes. So before we continue, can you please tell everyone your pronouns?

Charles Simmons [00:00:49] He, him

Gillian Pensavalle [00:00:50] Okay. So you are, first of all, like an Instagram celebrity. Thank you so much for saying nice things about me and the show on.

Charles Simmons [00:00:57] Oh, my God. Okay. I didn't know I was an Instagram celebrity, but. Okay, I'll take it.

THE HAMILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

Gillian Pensavalle [00:01:00] I'll tell your insta lives are the stuff of legend these days because you have, like, chats with the listener, with the fans of Hamilton and like, you're really you're making the Germany production pretty accessible and that's like a really nice and big deal.

Charles Simmons [00:01:12] Well, I think it or thank you for that, first of all. And yeah, it's also my my passion project. I think with a show like Hamilton, I've always thought that, you know, me being an American living here, I'm an expatriate living here, I've been in Germany for my entire adult life. And and Hamilton is an extremely important show for me, not just as a performer, but also as an American citizen. And the opportunity to bring this story to a German audience is a big deal for me. And so I think it's extremely important to share as much as I can with the Hamilton fans, because there are a lot in of Hamilton fans in Germany. And so I just want them to be a part of this history because that's exactly what it is.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:01:58] It's true. So you're a musician. You were on The Voice in Germany. You're a professional entertainer. You're also a fitness and wellness coach.

Charles Simmons [00:02:07] Yes. Yes.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:02:08] And now you're in Hamilton, so. Charles, I need to know your entire life story. How did you get to Germany? How did you get into Hamilton? The fitness and wellness, the voice like this feels like such an amazingly beautiful rollercoaster. I want to hear everything. I want to hear all about it.

THE H★MILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

Charles Simmons [00:02:22] Well, to quote one of my favorite old school movies from from Steve Martin, he made a movie back in the seventies called The Jerk. And. Yes, and the opening of that movie is is the most legendary opening I've ever seen in my life. He started the movie and he says, and I quote, I grew up a poor black child and blah, blah, blah, and I love that. So I always start my my life story like that. I grew up a poor black child. No, I'm not. That's not that's not true. I was born in Kansas City, Missouri. My father was a soldier in the United States Army. He was stationed in Germany back in the first time back in 1979. So that was the first time I ever came to Germany. And we lived in central Germany. We lived there about three years, three or four years that we came back to the States. And I went to school in Tacoma, Washington. That's where I spent a lot of my my pre-teen years. And then when I was about 16, I came back to Germany. My father did his second tour in Stuttgart, where that's now my home base. When he was sent back to America, I basically stayed because I got my first record deal when I was 19, and so I was signed to a major label when I was 19. I graduated from high school in Germany. I studied in Germany and as I said, I spent my entire adult life here. And so I got my first record deal and stayed. And the deal didn't last very long. And instead of going back to America to continue my studies, I just decided I wanted to stay mainly because of a girl. I met a girl and.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:04:06] Fell in love. Yeah, it's always a love story.

Charles Simmons [00:04:08] It's always a love story somehow. And yeah, so I decided to stay and that's where I started my career. I got my second record deal when I was 21, did a type of music that's ironically 20 years later became really

THE H★MILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

popular, that Euro dance style floor for on the floor type deal. I did that in the nineties. You know, I got my first record deals when I was I was a rapper. And so that was pretty fun. And yes, so I made made a little bit of money and put it to the side. And so after my deal ran out, I just started doing live music. And I have been alive musician ever since and I've played with lots of people. If you read my bio, I mean there's a very long list of of like stars that I've played with over the years who were on tour in Germany, who just came through. And I either joined them on stage to play or I was a background singer for them. I was a keyboard player from Mary J. Blige for a hot minute. I did a TV show with Madonna and the Backstreet Boys. I produced a record that never got released. I was co-producer of a Backstreet Boys record back in the early. To thousands of record they were working on.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:05:21] So there's some like Secret Backstreet Boys album from the early 2000s that we don't know about. Is that what you're saying?

Charles Simmons [00:05:28] You didnt hear that from me

Gillian Pensavalle [00:05:30] All right. We got to get A.J.. I feel like A.J. would would tell me a little bit about it. A.J. seems like he's a chatty guy.

Charles Simmons [00:05:36] Yeah. I mean, I worked I did a lot of production work in the early 2000. I commuted back and forth between Germany and Florida, did lots of work with songwriters and producers. And among the producers that I worked with were guys who were working on the at the time Planned Backstreet Boys album. And then there were no more Backstreet Boys. And I worked with Shaggy. I did a

THE HAMILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

television show with Madonna. I've worked with a lot of different people and also a lot of very well known German artists. I was a background vocalist and producer and remixer. So to make a long story, a very long story, very short, I spent the majority of my career as a background singer. I did lots of played in different bands. I'm like the frontman of seven bands and did lots of corporate events and big concerts and opening acts in all different genres and styles of music. One of my favorite bands was a band that I started back in 2006, 2007, a band called IO, and it was a metal crossover band. I was the lead singer of a metal band and that was pretty fun.

Charles Simmons [00:07:17] In fact, when I later on in my career, I became a teacher and that was basically my job to teach rock singers how to scream without hurting their voices. Yeah. And yeah. And I became a vocal coach. And so after my stint as a metal singer, I tried out for The Voice, the very first season of the German version of The Voice, which was 2012. Uh, I got pretty far. In fact, they did all the promo for the show using my parts of my blind audition, so I was already famous in Germany a month before the show started. It was pretty awesome.

Charles Simmons [00:08:25] And ironically and I'll tell you about this later, the girl who won the first season of The Voice now plays Eliza in the German version of Hamilton. So we're working together again on. Yeah, yeah. So, so, so that's a fun story. Yeah. So I did The Voice and that was fun. And at the same time that I was doing The Voice, I was a teacher at a very well-known music performing arts academy here in Germany. It's very comparable to Berkeley. It's like Germany's version of Berklee Berklee School, Berklee College of Music. And so I was an instructor there for like 13

THE H★MILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

years, and I taught a lot of very now very famous German and international artists. I think my most famous, uh, student is a student who is also extremely popular in America, an artist named Alice Merton. She came out with a song in 2016, a song called No Roots, and it was like a top 20 Top ten hit, something like that. And she played like every festival known to man all over the world. And, you know, she's one of my students.

Charles Simmons [00:10:08] Yeah, so I did that. And at the same time, I got my fitness trainer certification because there was a there came a point in my life where I really wasn't satisfied with the whole music thing, because when you've done live music for such a long time, doing the same types of gigs all over but all over the place, every year I play like 150 gigs a year. Yeah. And so I just, I got a little tired of it and I wanted to do something else and. And then at some point and, you know, all of this was going on and I and I had a family. You know, I got married, the girl I fell in love with, we got married. We had two children. And so trying to balance that whole being, trying to become a rock star and being a father, that all became very difficult after a certain point in time. And and sadly, after 19 years of marriage, I, my wife and I and my former wife, we got divorced. And I was basically trying to figure out what was I going to do with my life. And so then I jumped onto the fitness bandwagon and, uh, Bibbidi boppity Boop. I became a fitness trainer, I got my certification in Germany and then six months later, I got my certification in the United States. And became a trainer and trained people for a living. And it was fun. And then I basically decided I, I got this crazy idea. Actually, after I did The Voice, I got this crazy idea. How could I kind of marry my two passions, you know, singing and fitness? Because after I did

THE H★MILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

The Voice, I was so emotionally drained that I lost my voice. And so I had to go to a speech therapist. And my speech therapist told me the worst thing that a singer could do is sports. And I'm like, Well, not really, seriously. And that just got something clicking in my brain. And so that inspired me to get my licenses. And and then a few years later, I created something that is still active to this day, a fitness program called Vox Body, which is the marriage of fitness and vocal coaching. It's basically, I figured out a really cool way to train your voice and your body at the same time. And so that was a company that I started back in 2017, and it's been going great since then. Online program. And I also have a trainer certification and that really helped me out in difficult times, for example, in the lockdown.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:12:53] Right. I have a question. Can I ask you something about the voice? Can you maybe explain what it's like to be on a show like that? Because I feel like it's so heavily curated and meant to look sparkly, but I can't imagine it's easy to do that.

Charles Simmons [00:13:10] Well, I have to say, the voice was a very interesting situation for me personally, simply because I spent a lot of my career behind the camera because I was a vocal coach for other talent shows. I think I my first talent show, I was I was a vocal coach on X-Factor because all of these vocal all of these talent competitions, we call them in Germany, casting shows, they all have coaches that support the coaches. And so. Yeah. Yeah. So, you know, when the coaches aren't on camera, they have or the coach, there's the coaches on camera in the case of The Voice and then they have the people behind the scenes who work with the singers, get them prepared for the shows and

THE H★MILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

so on and so forth. And that was my job at X Factor. And there was another show that I did that was called My Name Is and I worked as a coach. And so when I was approached to do the first season of The Voice, you know, that was something very new. And for those of your listeners who may not know, the Voice originally is a it's a Dutch format. Yeah. It came from Holland. Yeah. And then it licensed out into the entire world. So when the voice decided, when they came to Germany, they reached out to a lot of singers, myself included, and asked if we would be interested in being on this for a season. For me, as a professional singer, who knows how things work behind the scenes, it was pretty surreal because especially because initially they wanted me to be the vocal coach. But behind the scenes of The Voice, I'm like, No, I think I want to get in front of the camera. And it was an interesting experience creatively because they actually, at least in the German version, they actually do the coaches actually do take the time to work with the contestants.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:15:07] So you're saying like the celebrity coaches, you just.

Charles Simmons [00:15:09] Celebrity coaches are famous musicians. The celebrity coaches, they do take the time. They are invested in the the development of the talents of the of the participants. Having said that, it's a television show.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:15:27] Yeah.

Charles Simmons [00:15:28] Okay. Music is like the last thing that people are worried about. That's just the way it is. And I don't want to rag on anybody. It's just that's just the nature of these shows. It's all about the views.

THE H★MILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

It's all about getting as many people to watch as possible. So, you know, sponsors and commercials and ads and stuff like that. It's all politics. It's all politics. You know, keep in mind that, I mean, just I don't know how it is in the States anymore. I just know how it is in Germany that it's the very few winners of shows like that actually go on to have long lasting careers as recording artists.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:16:09] Just saying, Yeah, you know, there's a lot I just watched on Netflix. I don't know if you have this in Germany yet. It's the Woodstock 99.

Charles Simmons [00:16:17] They just brought it out. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:16:19] So there was one on HBO and there was a three parter on Netflix. And so my other podcast is recapping true crime documentaries. So okay, we're putting that Woodstock 99 thing on the list because that was a total trainwreck, appropriately named. But, you know, I was thinking about this a little bit earlier this morning when I was watching it. These like, you know, these angry, like white mediocre bro's or whatever, they're just so mad. And like a lot of the. I don't know what they're so fucking mad about. They seem to be doing just fine, but they're very upset. And what they were so mad at about Woodstock 99 was like the fact that bands like or groups like Backstreet Boys and NSYNC existed and then they look at bands like Limp Bizkit as this like antithesis. And I'm sitting here thinking they are both on major labels. They are just as they are equally as corporate, like major record labels are choreograph everything so they might not be choreographing dance moves like they are for the Backstreet Boys, but that's stupid red hat that Fred Durst wore. Like that was a

THE HAMILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

big conversation that whatever record company had. Yes. So you know what I mean? Like, absolutely. You're signed to a major label. There are big boardroom meetings about like what's best for your persona. So don't get it twisted. It's the same thing.

Charles Simmons [00:17:29] It's exactly the same thing. And that's that's one of the things that I also had to that's one of those conversations that always pops up with my vocal students when I teach in the university, when I teach privately, I get a lot of students who ask me. What can I do to get on the voice? What can I do to get on? Blah, blah, blah. Idol. What can I do to get on this show? And I'm like, Do you really want to do that? Because there's this fantasy. I'll just put it out there among people nowadays that television can help you further your career. And being on a show like that can help you further your career. And those days have been gone for a very long time. For a very long time. And so I I'm just honest with my students, and I'm like, look, if you want to make a career in the music business, first of all, don't sign a deal. Step your social media game up exponentially because that's how you're going to make a career and then get out and play. Because at the end of the day, either you can play or you can perform. I'll just say you can perform or not. And if the whether or not you can perform, you can get in front of a group of people and do the same thing that you can do on Tik-Tok. That's going to pretty much determine how long you last in this business, because the business has changed so much, so dramatically in the last five years, even, you know, and and I use the example of Alex all the time because Alex, when she first got started, no label wanted to sign her. Nobody. And she went to all of them. No roots. Her first big hit back in 2015-16. That was the song. That was her

THE HAMILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

graduation song. She that was her final exam in our university. Okay. And she took that song and a bunch of other brilliant songwriter. And she took those songs to major labels the classic way, and nobody wanted her. And she's like, You know what? Then I'll just do it my damn self. And so she just she started a label with a partner. She went and she, she said, bombed every radio station, every podcast, everybody. And she went to Spotify. And Spotify was like, You know what? This is awesome. Let us put this on one of our curated playlists and that's how it all got started. So she, you know, she's like she's like the best example of do it yourself that I know.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:20:05] Right?

Charles Simmons [00:20:06] The problem is nowadays, I mean, it's been that way for a long time, even when I was actively in the business because I had my own label for a long time.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:20:12] Musicians are treated terribly. They get no money. They get a I mean, they're treated.

Charles Simmons [00:20:16] Exactly. And especially since the 2000s you won't get signed unless you've already sold. Okay. So, you know, going to a record label hoping that they'll give you money to produce a record, those days, those days are long gone. You have to show that you can sell or that you can stream or that you have lots of YouTube followers, all of that just before they even talk to you. And I'm like, Well, if you're going to go through all that, then why do you need a record label? Right. Yeah. So I mean, because they're not going to do anything for you, but to give you money to keep doing what you're already doing. And plus you

THE H★MILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

have to give it up once they give it to you. So once you've gone through all those steps and built your following and had your whatever streams and sold your downloads and did whatever. Why do you need a label? You know, I would rather I put my my whole mentality back then was let you know, it's simple mathematics. I would rather sell. And using an old school metaphor, I would rather sell 10,000 CDs and keep all the money than sell a million CDs and keep 5% or less than five, actually.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:21:25] Right. Why do you want to add more people that you're paying out when I mean, the streaming services don't pay you enough right now anyway, so you want to actually absorb some of that. So.

Charles Simmons [00:21:33] Absolutely.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:21:34] You know.

Charles Simmons [00:21:35] Exactly. Exactly. So, you know, then so so to come back to your original question, I do I try my hardest to get my students or get people who ask me to not take part in these shows unless they really understand what they're getting into. Because it's not about the music, it's not about being creativity. It's extremely corporate. And if you want to play that game, you have to you have to know the rules. And if you're cool with that, then be my guest. But why go through all of that when you can do it yourself and keep more for yourself?

Gillian Pensavalle [00:22:10] Yeah, because it's your self that you're putting out there, right?

THE H★MILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

Charles Simmons [00:22:12] Exactly, exactly. Exactly. And at the end of the day, the most the best thing any artist can do, it doesn't matter if if you know, if you're new school, social media artist play live. That's that's the one piece of positive advice that I give everybody who asks me play live, because at the end of the day, that's where you're going to make your money. Live merch. Live merch, you know? Yeah. So, you know, you can play the game if you want to, but just be prepared to, you know, because it's it's it's a it's a it's shark infested waters out. You know?

Gillian Pensavalle [00:22:48] Yeah. Okay. So you're you're making your music. You're also you have your fitness and well, you're coaching where you're. I think it's fascinating and invaluable to perform.

Charles Simmons [00:22:58] Yes. And absolutely. And ironically, though, that was not my initial inspiration for creating this program. My initial inspiration for creating this program was actually my father because my father's he was a career soldier. He was 20 years in the United States Army. And every morning he got up at 5:00 in the morning and he went running with us with his unit. And what do you do when you run with your unit? You know, and they have to, you know, call a response. They have to they have to sing while they run. And so that was that was for me, the moment where I said, oh, shit, okay, let let me do this. Let's, let's see how this works. And so I put the exercises together, I created the music, I, I researched and did a lot of, you know, that was that was part of my training. I mean, I'm already a trained vocal coach and then added my fitness training on top of that. So it has all came together and, and yeah, it was just really exciting to see how people respond to that. And, and it, people responded so well to it

THE H★MILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

that it's actually now a course in the school that I used to teach it.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:24:05] That's huge. Yeah. Yeah, that's a big deal. Yeah.

Charles Simmons [00:24:08] Yeah, they were, they were my, my test subjects when I first created the program every Friday morning at 830 in the morning, I had, I had a huge group of people come into the auditorium and we did 30 minutes of my workout. And during the lockdown during the pandemic, we did it online. We did it on Zoom. I always had like every Friday morning, I had like 50 or 60 people in a call and we did and we did my program as a warm up.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:24:35] So. So your working out and singing at the same time, is that right?

Charles Simmons [00:24:39] Working out and singing at the same time? It's a combination of breathing exercises, stamina exercises, singing melodies, doing phrases and classic fitness routines, strength training exercises, yoga do a lot of Pilates. I have a lot of box training integrated in my program. And and it also helps them not only to get fit vocally and physically, but it's also good for mental because one of the ways that that musicians and musical theater performers learn their lines is in motion. You know, how many how many sport inspire, you know, sport enthusiasts, musical theater performers learn their lines when they go running.

Speaker 2 [00:25:22] Oh, you know it. Fascinating. Yeah.

THE HAMILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

Gillian Pensavalle [00:25:24] Yeah, I'm sure you've seen this. But you mentioned Madonna. She a couple tours ago did something where she was jumping rope and singing at the same time. Yes. Yeah. And that's been incorporated like pink also is such an athlete and she's always like doing this aerial stuff while she's singing. And it's really it's incredibly, incredibly impressive. I love Pink so much. Yeah. Yeah. It's like it's it is possible. It seems impossible. What? She's upside down and doing the trapeze and all this stuff and singing. But you're sitting here and you're telling me that there's, like, a method to that madness, and it's told.

Charles Simmons [00:25:55] Absolutely, absolutely. It's not only possible, it's it's it's advised that people move, right. You know, I tell my students all the time, walk in a circle, you know, do some push ups, do whatever, move when you're saying because you're going to have to do it anyway. And so in you know, that kind of coordination needs to be learned and the best way to learn it is to do it. So.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:26:18] Yeah, I wonder why that person said that's the worst thing for a singer in sports. I wonder where that came from.

Charles Simmons [00:26:24] It came from the the very classical mentality. You know, I studied classical music and that's something that's very prevalent in the classical world, you know, standing still and relaxing and having a certain posture and opening your mouth a certain way. When you sing these particular notes, you know, classical and pop worlds are different in that respect. They're very similar, but the mentalities are different. And the particular method that she was trained in, it was a method that taught that the best way to sing is to be totally relaxed, to not let

THE HAMILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

your midsection be, you know, of course you need your music because that's where your breath that's where your power comes from. Right? Okay. Yeah. So, you know, it's just it's just the mentality that, well.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:27:08] You're here to change all that. I love it.

Charles Simmons [00:27:09] Absolutely. Yeah. And it helped me out later on. So when I got the Hamilton gig, you know, 2018, it was crazy. I was I was trying to figure out what I was going to do with my life. My program just got started, and I was sitting in front of my computer checking my emails, and I got an email from the producers of Hamilton in the UK asking me if I would be interested to come and audition for George Washington. Now keep in mind, I had never heard of Hamilton up until that point. I was a fan of Miranda, but for totally different reasons. The first time I ever saw Miranda was on an episode of How I'm. Your mother, I think, back in 2011 or something. But the famous Bedtime Stories episode where Marshall was on the bus and trying to get his son to go to sleep

Gillian Pensavalle [00:28:37] I am like the only person on earth who didn't watch how I met your mom, but I know that Lin was on it.

Charles Simmons [00:28:42] And that's okay and that's okay. I'm just saying that just as a point. That's that's like a famous first. It's a very famous episode. And I'm probably like one of only ten black people on the planet who watched How I Met Your Mother. So it's okay.

THE HAMILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

Gillian Pensavalle [00:28:54] But do you watch The Big Bang Theory? Because I've never met a single person who watches the Big Bang Theory.

Charles Simmons [00:28:59] Is that right? That's that's what I use the Big Bang Theory to go to sleep.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:29:02] But yeah, it's like every it's like on the top of every all the rate when it was on, it was like winning everything and it was like the most popular show. But I'm telling you, Charles, I had never met a single person in the flesh who'd watched that show.

Charles Simmons [00:29:13] I watched The Big Bang Theory.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:29:16] Now I'm going to get tons of emails saying, wait, wait, wait, no, I watch it. I love that.

Charles Simmons [00:29:19] Show. I watch The Big Bang Theory. I've seen it from you know, I actually binge watched the Big Bang Theory once because I could, and it was fun. But again, I understand why people don't watch it, but I loved it. I actually thought it was great.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:29:35] Love. Yeah. Kaley Cuoco. Right. Is that her? Yeah, she's. I watch. She's on flight attendant now and. Right. And the the animated version of Harley Quinn. She's excellent. She's really elegant. Yes. Yeah. So you were a fan of Lin because he was on how?

Charles Simmons [00:29:49] Because I saw him. Yeah, because I saw him on how I Met Your Mother. And I was just really impressed with the way that he rhymed and the way that he I

THE HAMILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

mean, just how intelligently, you know, because that's the way that he puts words together. That's old school hip hop, and I'm all about old school. I grew up with hip hop. I was I was I was hip hop when hip hop came out. You know, I'm an old guy. I'll admit it. And so so I that was my first and only. Yeah. Connection with Miranda. And so when I was asked to do Hamilton, of course, before the audition, I had to figure out what okay, what is this Hamilton thing that they're talking about? And so I went online.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:30:28] Yeah. Wait, let me slow down for a second. So you had never done any musical theater and out of the clear blue sky, you get an email from the producers of Hamilton and the West End asking you to audition for George Washington out of the clear blue sky.

Charles Simmons [00:30:41] That is 100% correct.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:30:44] How did this happen, Charles?

Charles Simmons [00:30:46] I wish I knew, but no, seriously. I found out later that that the casting director for the West End production saw a video of mine on YouTube, and that was at the time where they were. They were you know, Hamilton is very well known for casting people who aren't musical theater people. And in London, the West End was no different. And I don't know if they knew anything about me. Just this casting director came across a video of mine on YouTube and sent me an email and I thought it was spam. I was about to throw it away, but I was like, You know what? Let me check this out. So I wrote back and 10 minutes after I reply to the email, he said, Oh, no, we're very serious. We would like you to come to London and audition for George Washington. And I was like, Oh, snap. Okay, so let me get

THE H★MILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

ready. And so I did my research and I started learning about Hamilton. And the more I learned about it and learned my lines, I had four songs that I had to prepare and that's when I my Hamilton fandom started. Yeah. And I filmed a video and sent it to London. And fortunately I have lots of friends who live in London, so I didn't have to worry about having a place to stay. When I went there, I just jumped on a plane and and went there for a few days and called my parents and kept my mom in the loop and everything. And yeah. And did the audition and actually made it into the final round. But immediately I screwed up the audition because again I had just started learning about Hamilton and from what I could tell, it was a rap musical. I didn't really get into the whole history and the whole story. I just went into it as a rapper because, you know, I was a rapper when I you know, my first record deal was as a rapper, so I approached it as a rapper and it was good enough to make it into the final round. But it wasn't good enough to get the role. And so didn't matter to me. Of course, I was a little crushed because, you know, my ego as a, you know, as, you know, 20 years being a front guy of different bands, I, I wasn't used to rejection, so it was, it was a blow and I hate auditioning anyway. So I was very nervous and stuff. But it was a, it was the time in my life that really got me into this whole Hamilton thing. And so the more I researched, I read both of Ron Chernow books about Hamilton and Washington, and I just started soaking up all of this information, which was easy for me because my favorite subject in school was American History and and Politics. And so I and then I, when I started realizing how political this show was, it was it was my thing. So I just I just morphed into this Hamilton superfan and yeah.

THE H★MILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

Gillian Pensavalle [00:33:35] So you went to high school in Germany, you said, right?

Charles Simmons [00:33:37] Yes.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:33:38] Yes. And is that where you were studying American history?

Charles Simmons [00:33:40] Well, I've been I've been interested in American history since since my sophomore year of high school, which I which was in America.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:33:47] Okay. So you were sort of also doing your own research and education on.

Charles Simmons [00:33:52] Yeah, I mean, yeah, I mean, history. History was my thing, especially, you know, American history from an African-American perspective, because as you well know, how, how how white Americans perceive American history is far different from how nonwhite Americans perceived in history.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:34:09] That's the other word for it. It's just not accurate.

Charles Simmons [00:34:12] It's just not accurate. It's just not accurate. But but the thing that really fascinated me really was the the audacity of a black man playing George Washington. I thought that was awesome. So I'm like, okay, I can get into that. And so, yeah, that's that just something that and I'm a political junkie. I've been a political junkie my entire life. And so just the politics of a show like this, especially on Broadway and just just realizing

THE HAMILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

what Lin had done in the creation of Hamilton, that just really turned me into a Hamilton super freak. So.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:34:49] Yeah, I'm always so fascinated to hear about people growing up, what they knew, if anything, about Hamilton, because my experience with learning about American history growing up was pretty shitty. Like, I didn't know that George Washington stepped down. I mean, we it just wasn't a focus. I didn't know Hamilton was a footnote. It was just, you know, he the vice president shot him. And it wasn't really anything like it's pretty rare to hear to speak to someone in the show or not who knew a lot about Alexander Hamilton before Hamilton.

Charles Simmons [00:35:23] I knew that Alexander Hamilton was the Treasury secretary. I knew that he was killed by Aaron Burr. I knew that George Washington stepped down as president. I also knew that George Washington was not a fan of slavery but had slaves. Sure, you know the original American sin. So that was that was something that was was a lot more common than many Americans would like to admit. But it's a part of our history. And so those were things that I knew. But just those those details like where Hamilton came from and all the stuff that he had to go through and, you know, the relationship with Washington and Lafayette and all this stuff. I didn't know that. What I didn't know, however, which is what made Hamilton coming to Germany so interesting for me, was the German contribution to the American Revolution. And that I found very interesting because that's something that a lot of Hamilton fans don't know.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:36:24] Yeah, tell me about that.

THE HAMILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

Charles Simmons [00:36:25] Well, what you know, in Hamilton, everybody, you know, they know about Lafayette and they know about, you know, through guns and ships, how France contributed, uh, money and weapons and ships and stuff through the help of Lafayette and the American Revolution was the precursor to the French Revolution. That was the inspiration for the French Revolution. So France gave America a lot what France didn't do, what the Germans did. A German named Baron Fleet Fleet Response. Toibin He's the guy who taught Americans how to fight.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:36:59] I remember that name. Yes. Or now? Yeah, yeah. It's all coming back to me.

Charles Simmons [00:37:02] Yeah. Yeah. Baron Corbin is the guy who put the systems in. He's basically the creator of the modern America. What we know as the American military. He's the guy whose systems and and he's the one who taught the American revolutionaries how to fight the British. Wow. And that's a history that that neither Americans nor Germans are very aware of, which I always found very fascinating. Yeah.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:37:28] Why is.

Charles Simmons [00:37:29] That? There's a there's a bunch of reasons for that. And I think once I was getting into the research about about Hamilton just in becoming a Hamilton. Fan. It was one of those things. I mean, Punch Robin was mentioned in the Washington Book very heavily, actually. He was slightly mentioned in the Hamilton book. Now, the Washington book came out after the Hamilton book. So Chernow's recollection or his his description of Washington was slightly changed from how he described Washington in the

THE HAMILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

Hamilton book and in the in the Washington biography. He mentioned Von Straub and a lot because he also credited Bunch. He's the one who hired Funsho O'Byrne to teach the Revolutionary Army how to fight. So that just and it also kind of kind of freaked me out that that very important footnote was not added into the show. But I knew also that they cut a lot out of the show, the finished show, especially when it came to slavery and things like that. But that was just one of those curious things that I'm that I was kind of like. I wonder why they didn't put that. Yeah, yeah. Which is yeah. It's interesting. And it's also very much understandable why he didn't put the German contribution into Hamilton because that wouldn't have that wouldn't have worked in the context of the, of the entire story because, you know, this is a story, among other things, it's about friendship. You know, it's about how we spend our time. And it's also about the friends, the people that we have in our lives who who follow us on our journey and punch Jordan. As important as his contribution was, it wasn't about that. And as Lynn has said in many interviews, you know, Hamilton is about American history, but it's not a history lesson, right?

Gillian Pensavalle [00:39:17] I mean, Ben Franklin was all over the place in the story and he's not in the show at all.

Charles Simmons [00:39:20] Exactly. Exactly. And there are. Yeah. So so I understand it. I think I don't know if at the end of the day, if that would have made a difference in the German interest in the story. But but Germans are very history. They're they're history freaks. And I think that would have been one of those little tidbits that would have been like, oh, okay. Well, you know, because Germans. Yeah. We'll get into that in just a moment. But but yeah, it's

THE H★MILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

just one of those things where I was I was very just the history of the show really fascinated me. And then, you know, so by I kind of put that behind me, I got through my audition, it didn't work out. And so I kind of even though I was still interested in the show, I kind of put it on the back burner and focused more on my my fitness program. And then COVID came and we were on lockdown. And I actually got COVID in the very first wave.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:40:20] No way. Pre vaccine, pre.

Charles Simmons [00:40:22] Pre vaccine, pre all of that stuff. And given that I also have asthma, I was I was this close. I was really close to checking out. Yeah. Yeah. So it was it was crazy. And I was I was not hospitalized, but I was very close to being hospitalized. And I had to have a very good doctor who who gave me some medication that that freed up my lungs and allowed me to get through those first few days of COVID. I was I was sick for two weeks. I couldn't sing for nine months.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:40:55] What?

Charles Simmons [00:40:56] That's how long my long COVID was. My wife my second wife got married again in 2019. That was awesome. And she also helped me. Yeah. Thank you. And she also helped me prepare for my my West End audition. She got COVID and gave to me. She had very mild symptoms, but her long COVID story was she couldn't smell or taste anything for 14 months.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:41:22] No, my god.

THE HAMILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

Charles Simmons [00:41:23] And so yeah. So we went through all of that. And then once everything kind of stabilized, I got word that Hamilton was coming to Germany after all, because there had been rumors about it, you know, maybe it would come maybe a wooden first it was coming 2019, then it wasn't coming anymore. And then they decided, okay, it was coming again. And so so when I found out that the they were holding auditions, I was talking to my wife. I'm like, Should I should I do this? I don't know what what should I do? And she was like, Well, what have you got to lose? You know, keep in mind, this was the lockdown, you know, in Germany. The lockdown was very long. And I had no jobs. You know, my savings was running out. I did still teach. We did online e-learning and stuff like that. So I was still I still had some income, but I had like a I lost 92% of my income. I had I had no money. And my but my wife has this really good job and she was no home office and things like that. So so we got through the pandemic, actually, the first lockdown pretty good. Yeah. So when I got the word that they were holding auditions in Hamburg. Keep in mind, I live in Stuttgart, in the south of Germany.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:42:41] How far away is that? I have no idea.

Charles Simmons [00:42:43] That's all from from from Stuttgart to Hamburg is like from. Let me say. I would say from Richmond to New York.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:42:52] Oh, so that's a flight.

Charles Simmons [00:42:53] It's a flight. It's a flight. Yeah, it's an hour flight from. From Stuttgart to Hamburg. And I had a friend who was in a similar situation as my my

THE HAMILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

best friend, a woman named Kim Sanders. She had just gotten into the musical theater world world herself. She her very first role was playing automated brown in the German version of Ghost. And she had this agent and she hooked me up with her agent.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:43:17] That was her first musical theater role ever

Charles Simmons [00:43:20] First, and we were like the same age and had the same experience. We were labelmates back in the early nineties, so we just went on this journey together.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:43:27] In the trenches together, right?

Charles Simmons [00:43:29] Yeah, pretty much. And she hooked me up with her agent and her agent contacted Stage Entertainment for the production company who did Hamilton and said that I have this guy who wants to audition for Hamilton. And they were like, Okay, well, here's the music. And you're like, No, no, no, no, no. He wants to audition for George Washington. That's the only role that he's interested in. And so in September of 2020, I went for my first audition and it was awesome because I wasn't nervous. I knew Hamilton and it just to set up the audition story. Disney Plus had just released Hamilton, the the film version. That was July of 2020. And so I finally got to watch the show that I had auditioned for and screwed up my audition, and I was blown away. And to this day, I've seen Hamilton on Disney. Plus at least no lie. At least 200 times.

THE HAMILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

Gillian Pensavalle [00:44:21] Yeah, at least.

Charles Simmons [00:44:22] Yeah, 200 times plus. And so and I use that basically to not only solidify my Hamilton fan ness, but I also used it to learn what what Lynn was trying to say in the show. And and and Chris Jackson's he is like the quintessential George Washington. And I've seen a few of them. I love Tamara Green as well. I met him recently and yeah, so I went into the audition and got called back and auditioned again and got called back and did the final audition. It was funny because it was still locked down so they couldn't come, so the creative team from America couldn't come to Hamburg. So we did it on a on a microsoft teams call. And so I got to meet Tommy Kail and and Alex Lacamoire and Kurt Crawley. I think you've done a couple of episodes with him.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:45:18] Yeah. With all those guys.

Charles Simmons [00:45:19] Yeah. He's like the international music supervisor of Hamilton.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:45:23] Yeah, he's.

Charles Simmons [00:45:23] Fantastic. Yeah, he's great. And Kurt, he actually learned German to help us work on the show. He speaks German.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:45:30] Of course, like. Yeah, I mean, yeah, of course. That is incredible. But I'm not surprised he learned German for this.

Charles Simmons [00:45:39] I'll tell you about that in just a moment, because it's such an interesting the whole

THE HAMILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

rehearsal process. But yeah, I met all I talked to all those guys, met him in the call, had a nice little conversation with Tommy about Trump. It was funny. Yeah. And then in January, I got the call that I got the role and and the rest, as they say, is history. Hamilton was my first musical theater piece on paper. My actual first musical performance came in September of 21. I got a call from stage and entertainment from my bosses asking me if I would be interested to to come in as a cover for Ike Turner in the German version of Tina. And I was doing a gig somewhere and I got an email. I was like, Would you be interested to come to Hamburg and jump in on Tina? I'm like, Really? Seriously? And I thought about it like 5 minutes and like, hell yeah. Because it was the perfect opportunity for me to learn how to do musical theater and to learn the theater because Tina and Hamilton are playing in the same theater.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:46:44] Oh, perfect. That's a no brainer.

Charles Simmons [00:46:46] Yeah. Yeah. So. So after I got that email and my agent worked it all out with with stage, two weeks later, I was on the train and now I live in Hamburg since September of 21.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:46:59] What was first of all, I love that it was easier for Kurt Crawley to learn German than to bring someone else in who can do what Kurt can do musically. If you really think about that, that is wild.

Charles Simmons [00:47:11] Yeah. And German is not an easy language. So for him to basically learn German well enough in three years to really to tell us how to sing the parts, I'm like, okay, what's happening here? You know, I did learn

THE H★MILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

German the first well, you know, we have a German musical director. Yeah, we have a German musical director, but who actually speaks fluent English. But but to have somebody of Kurt's caliber to come in from the. From the. Broadway show and to to teach us the music and to, you know, give us the insight that we need in order to put this show on in German. It's gold. It's gold.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:47:49] That is unbelievable.

Charles Simmons [00:47:50] Yeah, it's really cool. And Kurt is just. He's just such a cool dude, and we have a really good rapport. Nice guy. And and. Yeah, and he speaks. He speaks pretty good German.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:48:00] And I'm sure for the translation, that was super valuable because he just knows the show in and out from the very, very, very beginning. He still has like on the tip of his tongue, right in his fingertips songs that they were thinking about adding in the workshop that they scrapped that he like he still no, he still knows because when he was over, he brought his keyboard and he was just like playing me things. And I didn't include it because it was a cut number and it was just, you know, something that I wasn't going to include. But he just, like, has it, like, it's just right there. So he knows the show. It's in the fiber of him. So that must must have been like for him to be helping with the translation. He just knows it so well.

Charles Simmons [00:48:39] Well, so imagine. So imagine, if you will, him having that kind of knowledge in a different language.

THE HAMILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

Gillian Pensavalle [00:48:44] I can't imagine.

Charles Simmons [00:48:45] He no he knows the show front words in backwards in German.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:48:50] I mean.

Charles Simmons [00:48:50] Okay. And you know, when we're sitting up at the music rehearsals, he's honest. He's on his little podium with his keyboard or behind the upright piano, and he's playing all these parts and he's just spitting out all these German words. And I'm like, Whoa. And we have our translator, we have our phonetics coach sitting right next to him in the in the rehearsal room. You know, we have the musical directors there. We have all the keyboard players, the guys who are, you know, the sub musical directors. And we have our phonetics coach, the guy who who teaches all of the non-native speakers how to speak German properly, because German is a very consummate heavy language, which actually makes it perfect for hip hop. Right. And and for but because musical theater in in Europe or especially in Germany, they use a lot of non-German speaking cast members. And so there's this process that we all have to go through in order to learn proper German. And so we have a phonetics coach, a guy who comes in once a week. I had to work with him. I've been working with him since January and he comes in and arvo. I speak fluent German, I speak southern German.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:49:56] Okay.

Charles Simmons [00:49:56] So he teaches me proper German how to say specific words properly, whatever that means. And so, so. And because when you speak that fast in that language, it has to be understandable. Otherwise the German

THE H★MILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

audience won't get it. But but we'll talk about that in just a minute. Yeah, but so so Kurt learn German. I talk like I said, I talk to Tommy Kail, I talk to the two Alex Lacamoire. And they gave me, you know, we gave me some insights in the show and then I did the show. And then in September of 21, I started doing Tina. So I moved to Hamburg and up until mid-July I was subbing Ike Turner in the musical. Tina.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:50:42] What was it like for you to learn what it was like to be in the musical theater space? Was that such a shock to your system or was it kind of like an easy transition for you? What was that like to be backstage at a musical and onstage?

Charles Simmons [00:50:53] Well, to be totally honest with you, musical theater for me is a vacation. It's it's such a it's such a relief to not have to hustle like I did as a freelance musician. Uh, I have my own company. I booked my own gigs. I've never had a manager. Wow. As a as a freelance musician. So I've, you know, my success. I built it all by myself, pretty much with with help from others, of course, because no one does anything alone when they're successful. You know, successes is always a team effort. Having said that, just the hustle of not, you know, chasing money, having to figure out where my next paycheck is going to come from, the tax situation, all of that stuff. I just I love being an employee. I love going into the theater knowing exactly what I have to do and how I have to do it and knowing that at the end of the month I'm going to get paid.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:51:47] Yeah.

THE HAMILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

Charles Simmons [00:51:48] Yeah. So that's a very that's that's that's a that's vacation for me. So it took a lot off. It's a lot of stuff to learn and there's, you know, a little bit of politics involved. But that's with anything in life. If, you know, if you're totally honest, it's something that I really enjoy. I enjoy musical theater. I enjoy being able to be myself through someone else. You know, I'm a I'm a very I don't want to say introverted person, but I'm very shy. I like to watch a lot. I like to observe. I don't open my mouth very much. I'm very quiet. And so when I got the chance to play this legendary character, Ike Turner, you know, just this very volatile out there, dude. And I got to explore parts of my person. Only that nobody gets to see. And people were freaked out. I was like, Wow, we didn't know you could get mad like that, right?

Gillian Pensavalle [00:52:44] Like.

Charles Simmons [00:52:44] Yeah, I didn't know that you could yell like that. I was like.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:52:47] Yeah.

Charles Simmons [00:52:47] Bro, that's, that's, yeah, that's, that's part of me, too. And just to be able to put that in in a space where I can leave it and then go home and, you know, it's that's that's beautiful for me. I enjoyed that very much. And like I said, that's the best. On the job training I could ever have gotten for Hamilton. You know, being in this musical team, it was just it was this, you know, fate, you know, it was it was crazy.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:53:13] And to also be in that same space, I, I would think would be. So you're not like walking

THE HAMILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

into so many things, figuratively and literally. You're walking into this gigantic show, a show you're a fan of, this brand new theater. What is the space you did? You got so much of that experience through Tina in those same walls.

Charles Simmons [00:53:29] Yes, exactly.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:53:30] I would think that was helpful.

Charles Simmons [00:53:32] Very much so. It was it was extremely helpful simply because I got to learn, you know, not only the space, but also the people who occupy that space, because a lot of these same people who were working on Tina are also going to be working on Hamilton. And I got to learn, you know, the guys who run the theater, the back office people and the dressers and the makeup people and the costumes guys. And a lot of my colleagues from Tina are also in Hamilton, so that's kind of cool too. Yeah. So yeah, like I said, it was the best on the job training I could have ever had.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:54:02] So let's talk about your Hamilton process, the rehearsal process. You get the gig, you're thrilled. You have these great conversations with everyone. And what what's your first day at work in Hamilton?

Charles Simmons [00:54:14] My first day at work at Hamilton actually began in January. As I said, I started working with my phonetics coach. We meet once a week here in Hamburg at at state offices, and we work for an hour on the scenes. I mean, I learned my lines very quickly because I was so enthused to get this translation. And the translation is

THE HAMILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

just so it is so awesome for many different reasons, but it's just one of those things where, you know, when I get really enthused about something, I'm all in from the very beginning. And so when I got this translation and I got the score for Hamilton -500 pages of music and and I learned it all in about a week.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:54:59] You were ready?

Charles Simmons [00:55:00] I was ready. And so when I went into it, so when I went into phonetics coaching, it was really just to fine tune because I always I speak fluent German, so it was just the fine tuning of it all. And, you know, we we also did it to music. And because I'm a producer, I have my little method of how I can practice my songs because I basically I took the instrumental versions and spliced and together with, with the original soundtrack and just cut out the Washington parts.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:55:27] That's what I do when I edit. Yeah. Sometimes like to do the transitions I'll use that. Yeah. So funny. Yeah. Yeah. Use the original just for you know, whatever.

Charles Simmons [00:55:35] Exactly. Yeah. So, so I, so I laid them over the top of each other and then I just cut out the Washington parts so that I could practice my lines in German. And so I was. So when it came time to do the, the first principal rehearsals, which was in yeah, the 19th of July, is when we started principal rehearsals. I was already ready. I knew all of my lines. I was already off book for a very long time. And just to meet my colleagues, you know, people that I have known about or heard about in a long time, that the Hamilton cast is a is a mixture of of musical

THE HAMILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

theater veterans and people who are like me, who have never done musical theater before. And it's such an awesome it's a very, very harmonious group of people. You know, we all come from different backgrounds, Kurt said. And this is true. The Hamilton Germany cast is without question, the most international cast of Hamilton right now. I mean, we literally have people from from eight different countries in the show. You know, there are five Americans in the show, and myself included, there are lots of Brits in the show. Which is ironic because, you know, it's about the war between America and Britain. So that's kind of cool. Of course, quite a few Germans in the show, not only Germans who are, you know, German immigrants or people who immigrated into Germany, but also people who were born here, you know, multiracial, a very multiracial cast, you know, our Eliza, Ivy Queen, or the girl who won the voice in the season that I was in. She she's African, but she was born in Berlin. And we have lots of Brazilians like Benny Monteiro. He plays Alexander Hamilton. He's from Brazil. And the last gig he did was he played Kristoff in the German version of Frozen. So this is a totally new thing for him as well because he has to rap in German and it's amazing. Yeah, just how quickly he picked it up because like I said, German is, is not an easy language to learn and especially to rap in. But he worked it out. And we have a guy from we have a guy from Denmark. We have a bunch of people from the Netherlands. We have people from Italy. So it's a it's a very mixed up group of people. And it's beautiful because the irony of all of these countries that have some way, directly or indirectly, something to do with America in American history, and that's the makeup of the cast. And that that just is what makes it so special and also reinforces the point that that Lyn also has said in many interviews that even though it's an American story or the

THE H★MILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

story takes place in America, it's not necessarily an American story. And that's kind of what they did with this German version. Yeah, America's just the place that the story happens. But the story itself is the focus, and just the makeup of the cast really reinforces that.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:58:32] I love that America is just where it where some of it takes place, not.

Charles Simmons [00:58:35] Even where some of it you.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:58:36] Know, some of it takes place. I know you can't speak for everyone, but I'm curious, are there people who, if they are not German speakers, did they learn German or are they just learning the translation for the performance? But does or does everyone speak German?

Charles Simmons [00:58:49] No, not everyone speaks German. Not everyone speaks German. And that's that's also what makes it very interesting from from from the perspective of a person who speaks fluent German, you know, because I'm a I'm an immigrant, but I've lived here for for a very long time. And so I'm very knowledgeable of the German language. And to see these Brits come in and learn this German and it's hard. I mean, it's very difficult to speak this language for this show and just the way that they do it. And I have to, you know, give props, too, to our phonetics, coach Jens, because the way that he drilled these guys, you could not tell that they've never spoken German before. And it's crazy. It really is. And especially when you hear them in the group and you hear that despite the speed at which everything is being sung and rap, you can still understand what's going on if you speak German. It's amazing. It really is. And especially when you consider that the German version

THE HAMILCAST

EPISODE 339 CHARLES SIMMONS 1 TRANSCRIPT

of Hamilton uses more words than the original English version, but still keeps the same structure, the same flow, and the same intention of the original lyrics. And that's what that's what makes the translation in my mind brilliant, because it was able to do all of those things despite using more words.

Gillian Pensavalle [01:00:10] Okay, more. I'm shocked. My jaw is on the floor right now.

Gillian Pensavalle [01:00:22] Yeah. I don't know about you, but my mind is blown. So next week, I'll be back with Charles to talk more about Hamilton Germany. We're getting into the process of some of the changes made for the German production. So Charles will tell you as much as he can what you can expect to see and hear in Hamburg, that's different from every other production of the show. Plus, he's taking questions from the Patreon Peeps. So, you know, we're going into some deep dives. You don't want to miss a single second. So until then, stay safe. Stay healthy. I love you. Thank you so much for listening. I'm G. Pen.

[01:01:18]

Gillian Pensavalle: The Hamilcast is brought to you by my love of the thing, TM, and my complete lack of chill. Please join me in raising all the glasses to Sir Alex Lacamoire for generously making my intro music and this custom Yorktown arrangement that I will never, ever get over. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. A big thank you to Jenson Parker Neal, my dear friend and right hand man who helps me make the thing about the thing. To become a Patreon Peep and join the best, kindest and most welcoming corner of the internet. Go to patreon.com/TheHamilcast. You can submit questions to guests, join Zoom Hangouts, get behind the scenes access and

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of course, my endless gratitude. On social media at the pod is @TheHamilcast and I'm @gillianwithag G-I-L-L-I-A-N-W-I-T-H-A-G. Visit THEHAMILCAST.COM for episodes, transcripts and more. You can see what's going on with Mike, you know Mike, at MichaelPaulSmith.Net True Crime Obsessed is my true crime comedy podcast with my podcast soulmate, Patrick Hinds, and we were the first podcast to ever play Broadway. Ever. Thank you so much for listening. It means the world to me. To the revolution!