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# Tuneful 'Ragtime' delivers history lesson with drama and music

August 2, 2014

12:50 PM MST



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"Ragtime" opened Aug. 1 and runs for one more week,  
at Shawnee Mission's Theater in the Park.

*Bob Compton and courtesy of Theater in the Park*

## "Ragtime"

Rating: ★★★★★

Take a good story, put it in the competent hands of director Mark Swezey, and musical director Laura VanLeeuwen, and stand back for a knock-your-socks-off production. "Ragtime" delivers on story and music. The story alone is compelling

and then add the musical score and the combination is exquisite entertainment.



*Bob Compton and courtesy of The Theater in the Park*

“Ragtime,” a musical based on turn of the century America and based on a best-selling novel by E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime*, opened, Friday, Aug. 1 and runs Aug. 2, 3, 6, 7, 8 and 9 at Shawnee Mission Park at the park’s amphitheater. **The Theater in the Park.**

Doctorow’s novel evolved into a movie following its success and then resurfaced again as a Broadway vehicle written by award-winning composer/lyricist team of Stephen Flaherty and Lynn Ahrens, who also penned “Once on This Island,” “Seussical, the Musical,” and “Lucky Stiff.” On board for adapting the book and movie to the stage, they enlisted accomplished playwright, Terrence McNally, who found Broadway accolades with “Kiss of the Spider Woman” and “Master Class.”

*Ragtime* tells the story of three families coming to terms with American life in the Ragtime era. The story displays the trials of individuals and their families as they confront historic problems involving wealth and poverty, freedom and prejudice, hope and despair, and what it means to live in America. The story includes real historic characters of magician Harry Houdini, business entrepreneur Henry Ford, seductress and model, Evelyn Nesbitt—along with her husband and lover. Also, Emma Goldman, activist, Booker T. Washington, J.P. Morgan appear in the show to help further the believability of the story.

“Ragtime” claimed 1998 Tony Awards for Best Score, Book and Orchestrations, winner of the Drama Desk and Outer Critics Circle Awards for Best Musical, Best Score.

The main family in "Ragtime" centers around an extremely wealthy family in New Rochelle, a father, mother, mother's younger brother, and Edgar the couple's child. Story two within the piece centers on Harlem and its Negro population. The Harlem contingent zeros in on Coalhouse, a talented jazz musician who knocks out ragtime music to the delight of Harlem residents as he builds a career after some personal failures. Coalhouse's love interest, Sarah creates the bond with the rich central family. And then there is the immigrant Jew, Tateh and his daughter who come to America in search of their dream. While they expect America to open its arms to them, they only encounter a stern backhand and a difficult life, but continue to grasp their hopes of success.

The entire cast deserves praise but stand up and cheer for the leads, Justin McCoy, Linnaia

McKenzie and Kristi Mitchell. McCoy's voice and stage presence center the show on his shoulders. McCoy portrayed the same character, Coalhouse, a year ago when the Metropolitan Ensemble [Theater](#) mounted the production. McCoy's voice and stage presence are even stronger with direction by Swezey and a larger venue for his talents.

Coalhouse Walker, Jr. in the capable hands of Justin McCoy takes the audience on a roller-coaster ride as his character develops and changes from good to tormented. His duets with Sarah bring goose bumps to the audience. McCoy plays a lovable character who goes from likable to villain in the story, yet the audience roots for him throughout, understands his plight, and clings to the hope of his salvation. McCoy plays the Coalhouse character with dignity and determination. His vocals and performance stand out over all the rest. He's fantastic.

Also from the MET version, Linnaia McKenzie stepped into a bigger role at [Theater in the Park](#), by singing Sarah. Her voice is extremely powerful and her tones so soulful and emotional. McKenzie gave a wonderful characterization of Sarah.

Mitchell as the mother was strong and her soprano voice was clear and pitch perfect on her solos and duets. Her acting made her both strong and tenderly compassionate as needed for the part.

As Tateh, Darin Parker delivers on all cylinders. His character starts strong and optimistic and continues to develop as he encounters both failure and success. Parker possesses a beautiful

deep voice that helps give the character strength and a sense of comedy in the lighter numbers. He creates a believable character, and his performance is strong.

Now for “real” characters in Ragtime, the Musical.

Start with the comic relief so important to a musical piece. Kyra Winberger portrays Evelyn Nesbit, a personality of the turn of the century who married young, had an affair with a wealth suitor, and became known in America as “the girl in the red-velvet swing.” Her escapades led to her lover’s death and husband’s imprisonment as a result of her affair. Her noted scanty outfits, burlesque/Vaudeville act predated Sally Rand and Gypsy Rose Lee. Her fame led to movies and the trial of her husband was the “Trial of the Century” early in the 1900s.

Strong and convincing from start to finish, Sarah Jeter portrays activist Emma Goldman. Jeter speaks loud and forceful when on stage and provides a harsh look at activists in the early years of the 20th Century. Taylor’s part is small, but her delivery and character are not.

Presto, it’s Harry Houdini. Houdini, an immigrant himself found the American dream with is wizardry and magic act. Houdini, fell into the capable hands of Matthew Messing.

The ensemble swings through many costume changes and character changes, all worthy of more time and words. Many characters do not have names but the presence of the ensemble is important to move this piece.

Choreography for the **Theater in the Park’s** “Ragtime” moved the production numbers

moved the piece along at a steady pace. All production numbers worked well and fit the theme of the show. The opening number, the baseball number, and all the Harlem numbers especially stand out. They possess appropriate movement and relate to “Ragtime’s” theme. Beth Benedict did a beautiful job of choreography.

Next, the orchestra deserves a resounding standing ovation. The music of “Ragtime” equals the story. A person could just sit in the lobby and listen to the orchestra and be blessed with an overwhelming performance.

Costumes reflect both the skill and historic knowledge of Verna McMullin. Every costume, every piece of each costume fits the story. The hats, shoes, gloves, coats, dresses, and suits were magnificent.

Hats off to the various crews of stage, props, set design/construction, lighting, sound. They worked well as the behind the scenes worker-bees that crafted and produced this astounding piece. They deserve ample recognition.

The creative team: Director, Mark Swezey; Vocal Director/Conductor, Laura Van Leeuwen; Choreographer, Beth Benedict; Stage Manager, Catherine Lewis; Assistant Stage Manager, Skip Gordon; Assistant Stage Manager, Remy Lierz; Assistant Stage Manager, Molly White; Accompanist, Jan O'Rourke; Costume Coordinator, Leslie Spindler, Verna McMullin; Props Coordinator, Cheryl Singer; Scenic Designer, Michaela Stein.

Cast: Coalhouse Walker Jr., Justin McCoy; Sarah, Linnaia McKenzie; Mother, Kristi Mitchell; Father,

Jeff Martin; Younger Brother, Derick White; Little Boy, David Pokorny; Tateh, Darin Parker; Young Girl, Isabella Welty; Emma Goldman, Sarah Jeter; Harry Houdini, Matthew Messing; Evelyn Nesbit, Kyra Weinberger; Sarah's Friend, Tasia Jewell; Grandfather, Bill Bergman; Booker T.

Washington, Gavin King; Willie Conklin, Bob Kohler; Henry Ford, Aaron Redburn; JP Morgan, Thomas Heathcote; Adminarl Peary, Tom O'Rourke; Doctor, Andy McCarl; Conductor, Ken Kasten; Brigit, Julie Ewing; Mrs. Whitson, Erica Baruth.

Ensemble: Don Leonard, Matthew Messing, Marshall McCarl, Shannon Lowe, Stephanie Hopkins, Fran Opheim, Rendi Doran, Felisha Caldeira, Jenni Wilson, Hailey Crane, Shelby Keller, Debbie Huffman, Carolyn Braverman, Alyssa Winters, Leah Heathcote, Tracey Van Unen Shortess, Jason Kennedy, Aaron Redburn, Thomas Heathcote, Tom O'Rourke, Andy McCarl, Ken Kasten, Julie Ewing, Erica Baruth; People of Harlem Ensemble: Gavin King, Zach Lofland, Valiante Waltz, DaShawn Young, Derrick Lindsay, Bryana Barry, Ashley Jones, Tamara Graham, Elise Dorsey, Kaleigh Buehler, Desire' Brown, Tarzae Songony Akilah Bryan, Alex Arnold.

Orchestra: Laura VanLeeuwen, Katee Dietrich, Anne Sneller, Debbie Allen, Will Peak, Jan O'Rourke, Greg Neteler, Ben Shelhaas, Erik Hulse, Stan Hinshaw, Lee Finch, Chris Colvin, Jerry Old, Jessica Cox, Laura McGill, Katy Byrd, Marshall Hylton, Julia Davis, Xivi Matos.

The show deserves the highest recommendation. The subject matter is probably too difficult for young audiences, but the language is not especially strong and should not

be a deterrent. Students who have had an American history class would gain from seeing this depiction of the early 1900s to help them understand their past.

Tickets for “Ragtime” remain available through the [Theater in the Park](#) website.

## SUGGESTED LINKS

- [Quality Hill Playhouse revisits 'Great Duets of Musical Theatre'](#)
- [Classic comedy farce engulfs audience at The Barn's 'Noises Off'](#)
- ['Bad Auditions' wins extension from 2014 Kansas City Fringe Festival](#)
- ['Big River' splashed down for weekend run in Kansas City's Kauffman Center](#)
- [Hot temps can't quell success of 'The Sound of Music' at K.C. Starlight](#)



**Bob Evans**

Kansas City Performing Arts Examiner