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A CurtainUp Review *Ragtime*

By [Susan Davidson](#)

And there was distant music, simple and somehow sublime, giving the nation a new syncopation. The people called it Ragtime!



(l-r) Quentin Earl Darrington as Coalhouse Walker Jr. and Jennilee Shallow as Sarah.
(Photo: Joan Marcus)

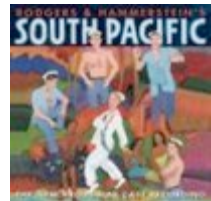
New York, in 1902, was a city in a country on the brink of change in population, technology, race relations, " . . . and there was music playing. . . a strange music, a sound of distant thunder." Ragtime, the pulsating beat that emanated from the ghetto known as Harlem, set the tempo of the time — upbeat, challenging, but not without its sad notes.

Readers of E. L. Doctorow's novel *Ragtime* on which the musical is based will remember its pace was as thrilling and as rhythmic as horses hooves on a hard surface. The current revival, at the Kennedy Center, delivers the same sense of vibrancy.

The three very different subsets of the population represented in *Ragtime* are upper middle-class WASPs, grubby and poor immigrants, most notably Jews from Eastern Europe, and African-Americans, then called "nigroes," who post-slavery settled in the northern reaches of Manhattan. Their backgrounds, their beliefs and prejudices are interwoven almost flawlessly by Terrence McNally. (Considerable suspension of disbelief is called for as Mrs. WASP, a character called Mother

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(Christiane Noll) takes in a poor unmarried African-American girl, Sarah, (Jennlee Shallow) and her new-born child.)

Added to this mix are bigoted Irish immigrants, and such non-fictional characters as banker J. P. Morgan whose Library remains today one of New York City's great landmarks, car maker Henry Ford and his then brand new Model T, illusionist Harry Houdini who makes a stunning entrance from above, upside down on a swing, African-American leader and scholar Booker T. Washington, human rights advocate and rabble-rouser Emma Goldman, Stanford White, the architect and rogue, and Evelyn Nesbit, (played with just the right amount of coquetry and humor by Leigh Ann Larkin) as the side of a love-triangle that ends with "the crime of the century." Ah, passion.

Harsh realities such as the grim fate of the poor, both "negro" and Jewish, and widely-held bigotry come through most vividly in scenes involving the Irish immigrants treatment of famous jazz man Coalhouse Walker, Jr., (Quentin Earl Darrington) Sarah's lover and father of Sarah's child, runs afoul of their gang as does Sarah. Ragtime's best moments are when Sarah and Coalhouse take center stage. Their voices are strong, their duets, particularly "The Wheels of a Dream", are filled with romance and hope, a nice message for tough times.

The show is not without humor. There's a terrific ode to baseball "What a Game!" in the second act, by Christopher Cox as the Little Boy. Few child actors have this kid's sense of irony and spot on timing.

What makes this revival of *Ragtime* so successful is Marcia Milgrom Dodge's choreography and direction. She and music director James Moore make the most of Stephen Flaherty's spicy score of rags and some shtetl-based Yiddish melodies, and Lynn Ahrens's clever lyrics, ("stroke those keys, every note says please.")

Derek McLane's set — five tiers of iron railings with an occasional Victorian flourish in the corners— is evocative of so many locales inherent in the piece: a nitty gritty New York train station, a sweatshop factory, suburban New Rochelle (although suburbs were still to come), and the railing of ships that carried Captain Perry to the North Pole and Jewish immigrants to America. It works extremely well, probably because Dodge uses the choreographer's side of her brain to move the very large cast from one imagined locale to another, taking the audience along every step of the way

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Leonard Maltin's 2008
Movie Guide



Ragtime at a small off-off-off Broadway venue

Ragtime, based on the novel of the same name by E.L. Doctorow
Book by Terrence McNally
Music by Stephen Flaherty
Lyrics by Lynn Ahrens
Directed and choreographed by Marcia Milgrom Dodge Music
Director James Moore

Cast: Christopher Cox (Little Boy), Ron Bohmer(Father), Christiane Noll (Mother), Bobby Steggert (Younger Brother), Dan Manning (Grandfather), Quentin Earl Darrington (Coalhouse Walker, Jr.), Jennlee Shallow (Sarah), Eric Jordan Young (Booker T. Washington), Jonathan Hammond (Tateh), Sarah Rosenthal (Little Girl), Josh Waldon (Harry Houdini), David Garry (J. P. Morgan), Aaron Galligan-Stierle(Henry Ford), Donna Migliaccio (Emma Goldman), Leigh Ann Larkin (Evelyn Nesbit), Aaron Galligan-Stierle (Admiral Peary), Jim Weaver (Matthew Henson), Dan Manning (Judge) Stanford White (Gavin Esham) Harry K. Thaw (Josh Waldon) Mark Aldrich, Aaron Galligan-Stierle, Gregory Maheu (Reporters), Susan Derry (Kathleen), Policeman (Josh Walden), Child Buyer (Mark Aldrich) Policeman (Gavin Esham), Bryonha Parha (Sarah's Friend), Sumayya Ali (Soprano Soloist), David Garry (Trolley Conductor), Mark Aldrich (Willie Conklin) Gavin Esham, Aaron Galligan-Stierle, Gregory Maheu, Josh Walden (Firemen), Tracy Lynn Olivera (Brigit), Aaron Galligan-Stierle (Train Conductor), Susan Derry, Elizabeth, Loren Earley, Tracy Lynn Olivera, Elisa Van Duyne (White Bureaucrats), Jim Weaver (Black Lawyer), Sasha Sloan, Nellesa Walthour (Newsboys), David Garry, Gregory Maheu (More Reporters), Susan Derry (Welfare Official), Bryonhya Parham (Baron's Assistant), Melvin Bell III, Kevin Boseman, Corey Bradley, Jim Weaver (Coalhouse Gang), Jim Weaver, Shelby Braxton-Brooks (Harlem Man and Harlem Woman), Kevin Boseman, Nellesa Walthour (Harlem Couple) (Pas de Deux), Aaron Galligan-Stierle (Charles S. Whitman, D.A.), Rashad J. Koker (Coalhouse Walker III).

Ensemble: Mark Aldrich, Sumayya Ali, Melvin Bell III, Kevin Boseman, Corey Bradley, Shelby Braxton-Brooks, Susan Derry, Elizabeth Loren Early, Gavin Esham, Aaron Galligan-Stierle, David Garry, Jonathan Hammond, Leigh Ann Larkin, Gregory Maheu, Dan Manning, Sean McKnight, Donna Miliaccio, Tracy Lynn Olivera, Bryonha Parham, Sasha Sloan, Elisa Van Duyne, Josh Walden, Nellesa Walthour, Jim Weaver, Eric Jordan Young.

Scenic Design by Derek McLane
Original Costume Design by Santo Loquasto
Lighting Design by Donald Holder
Sound Design by Jonathan Deans and Garth Helm
Additional Costume Design by Jimm Halliday
Wig and Hair Design by Bernie Ardia
Running time: 2 hours and 55 minutes, one 20-minute intermission.
Kennedy Center for Performing Arts, Washington, DC 202-467-4600;
800-444-1324
Performances: Tuesdays through Sundays at 7:30PM; Saturdays and Sundays matinees at 1.30PM.
From: 4/18/09; 5/25/09; closing 5/17/09
Reviewed by Susan Davidson May 13, 2009 .