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Great Escape

The Kennedy Center's '*Ragtime*' is a knockout on every level, while '*Bread of Winter*' fails to live up to its honors

by Tom Avila
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Ragtime is one of those musicals.

It's big. It's opulent. It's filled with infectious songs that will remain firmly in your head for days after you've left the theater.

The story of the intertwining lives of three families from three very different walks of life in the America of the early 20th century, *Ragtime* was based on the book of the same name by E.L. Doctorow. What's striking is that a sense of the show's literary roots remains in the musical interpretation. One could credit the book by Terrence McNally for this sense of lineage, or the eccentric musical work

of Stephen Flaherty and lyricist Lynn Ahrens. For The Kennedy Center production one could assign it to a fantastic cast, the simple but graceful scenic design of Derek McLane or the simple fact that there is something very exciting about having Harry Houdini suspended in midair above the stage of the Eisenhower Theater.

Yes, Harry Houdini (Jonathan Hammond), who is occasionally joined by Booker T. Washington (Eric Jordan Young), J.P. Morgan (David Garry), Emma Goldman (Donna Migliaccio) and vaudeville "It" girl Evelyn Nesbit (Leigh Ann Larkin).

That's the magic of this musical, the thing that fills *Ragtime* with such riches. Set into a moving family drama are these iconic and evocative historical figures who bring this immense fairy tale into our own world without surrendering one bit of its wonder. Left to manage her husband's affairs while he is off on an expedition with Admiral Peary, Mother (Christiane Noll) finds a still-living newborn baby buried in her garden. The discovery of an abandoned child is complicated enough, but the situation is all the more tangled as the baby is black, Mother is white and the baby's mother -- when she is found -- is unmarried and refuses to speak. What unfolds is a wonderfully unbelievable series of accidental intersections, connections and loyalties that thinks deeply about questions that continue to plague us in our 21st century America. What is it to be a family? A minority? An immigrant?

What is it to be an American? Because this is one of those big, broad musicals, the stage quickly fills to capacity with a delightfully talented cast. While proper applause can only be given in the theater when dealing with such a significant crowd, nods should be given to Noll in her role as Mother. A lovely presence with a surprisingly large voice, Noll's performance of "Back to Before" hits all the marks.

Also impressive is Quentin Earl Darrington as Coalhouse Walker Jr. Darrington and The Tempo Club ensemble make it hard to sit still when they strike up the "Gettin' Ready Rag."

"HYSTERICALLY FUNNY!"
- NY POST

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'Ragtime' at The Kennedy Center
(Photo by Joan Marcus)

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moments.

With *Ragtime*, the Kennedy Center has brought something wonderful to the banks of the Potomac. Even Houdini would struggle to escape its lively grip.

In one of those odd theater quirks, *The Bread of Winter* makes its world premiere at Theater Alliance already boasting a collection of honors. According to a *New York Times* article -- quoted in the Alliance's program -- *Bread of Winter* was accepted to the O'Neill Playwrights Conference, given a staged reading at the Bay Area Playwrights Festival and received a Princess Grace Award.

The play's creator, playwright Victor Lodato, is one of those rare artists able to include the title "Guggenheim Fellow" on his résumé.

Which only leaves the question: Does the play live up to its impressive pedigree?

The answer is a yes that is not as much qualified as it is timid. Not for want of writing or strength of cast, but because as a piece of art, *Bread of Winter* seems underfed.

Where some plays could brush off such want, *Bread of Winter* is as much about failing atmosphere as failing humanity. In its incarnation at the Theater Alliance, it is living in a somewhat uncomfortable middle ground where too familiar elements of set and staging are actually working at odds with the poetry of story.

Bread of Winter is not set in a post-apocalyptic world but rather one in which the apocalypse appears to be a work-in-progress. The sun has vanished behind a thick wall of dark clouds, dead birds are falling from the sky and mothers are leaving their children to fend for themselves.

It's in the midst of this bleak landscape that Libby (Amy McWilliams) loses her job cleaning house for Gregory (William Beech) and Richard's (Ben Kingsland) mother. It's a seemingly minor and, in our current circumstances, common occurrence. But the firing becomes another in a spreading stain of lost connections -- connections to family, to community, to the sun.



McWilliams is outstanding in her role. In a play where language often moves in small and insular circles, McWilliams gives her audience something precious and fragile to consider. She has a nervousness that travels out like a pulse of electricity and a vulnerability that makes the heart go weak.

Beech is also accomplishing something quite remarkable in his role. It's an extraordinarily mature performance that allows one to appreciate the power of restraint and the talent of this young actor.

Also worthy of note is Rosemary Regan as Libby's mother. Regan and McWilliams share a lovely symmetry with their portrayals. There is a notable rhythm and echo in their scenes together.

In the end, though, there is a desire for something more in this production. The cast and the work are dampened by *The Bread of Winter's* environment. There needs to be some kind of extreme reached -- either exacting, concrete portrayal or utter absence -- a physical anchor that has a strength and creative eloquence equal to this provocative work by a gifted playwright.

And mention must be made of the perfect casting of Migliaccio as Emma Goldman. "The Night Emma Goldman Spoke At Union Square" is one of this show's most arresting visual

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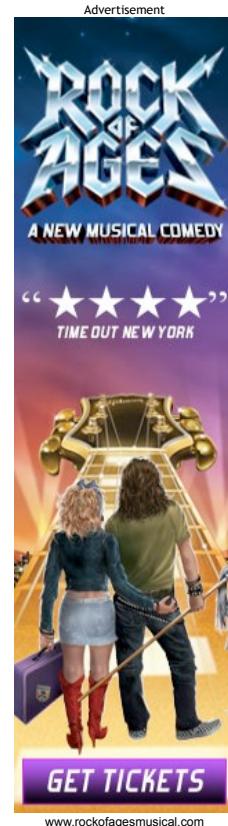
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