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Posted: Fri., May 1, 2009, 6:55pm PT

Ragtime

(Kennedy Center/Eisenhower Theater, Washington, D.C.; 1,110 seats; \$90 top) A Kennedy Center presentation of a musical in two acts with music by Stephen Flaherty, lyrics by Lynn Ahrens, book by Terrence McNally, based on the novel by E.L. Doctorow. Directed and choreographed by Marcia Milgrom Dodge. Musical direction, James Moore.

Father – Ron Bohmer
Mother – Christiane Noll
Little Goy – Christopher Cox
Brother – Bobby Steggert
Coalhouse Walker Jr. – Quentin Earl Darrington
Tateh – Manoel Felciano
Sarah – Jennlee Shallow
Little Girl – Sarah Rosenthal

By [PAUL HARRIS](#)

Given America's recently heightened respect for racial equality, what could be more appropriate than a revival of 1998 tuner "Ragtime" in the nation's capital? The Kennedy Center has shrewdly obliged with Marcia Milgrom Dodge's lavish and impeccably mounted production, which is simply stunning in every detail.

The Center under prez Michael Kaiser inserts at least one self-produced musical each season into its crowded schedule, invariably as polished as the touring productions that visit. A strong believer in maintaining high programming standards during difficult economic times, Kaiser has budgeted \$4.4 million for this three-week booking in the newly renovated Eisenhower Theater.

That cash has been spent wisely on an enormous cast that embodies professionalism over star power and a riveting multi-tiered scaffold set by Derek McLane. There are some savings, too, most notably Santo Loquasto's eye-popping costumes from the Broadway production (refitted for the cast by Jimm Halliday). William David Brohn's original orchestrations are also used by the Center's house orchestra.

The show resonates more than ever with its epic story of turn-of-the-century bigotry, its imaginative intermingling of real-life and fictional characters, and of course Stephen Flaherty's rousing Joplin-esque score. Credit director-choreographer Dodge for her methodical unveiling of this weighty story, particularly the fluid transitions from intimate scenes to crowded ensemble numbers, and perky moments of comic relief. The musical builds to a powerful conclusion, tugging at every emotion en route.

The principal roles are in capable hands, without exception supplying sensitive perfs and terrific voices. Christiane Noll as Mother sets the bar high early with her strong soprano and insightful depiction of a sympathetic character yearning for cultural change. Bobby Steggert as the crusading Brother is equally adroit in acting and vocal assignments, while Ron Bohmer's Father nicely personifies the tradition of prejudice under assault.

Minor roles of note include Leigh Ann Larkin's enjoyable turn as vaudeville entertainer Evelyn Nesbit and Donna Migliaccio as strident political activist Emma Goldman.

But the soul of "Ragtime" is its two intriguing stories of discrimination, both told here with deep compassion. Manoel Felciano captures the heartache and determination of Jewish Latvian immigrant Tateh, who overcomes every hardship in his pursuit of the American dream. Jennlee Shallow is beautifully on target as Sarah, the innocent victim of racial prejudice.

As the show's central character, Coalhouse Walker Jr., Quentin Earl Darrington offers a proud and understated performance. Together, Darrington and Shallow provide two of the evening's many musical highlights with the act one number, "The Wheels of a Dream," and act two's "Sarah Brown Eyes."

Collectively, the cast packs a delicious wallop with every ensemble number, especially the stirring act-one finale, "Till We Reach That Day." Indeed, as the U.S. enters a new era of racial tolerance, "Ragtime's" stark reminder of how far the country has traveled could not be more timely. And the Kennedy Center's production is also a tonic for the nation's economic blues. **With:** Mark Aldrich, Sumayya Ali, Melvin Bell III, Kevin Boseman, Corey Bradley, Shelby Braxton-Brooks, Benjamin Cook, Susan Derry, Elizabeth Loren Earley, Gavin Esham, Aaron Galligan-Stierle, David Garry, Jamie Goodson, Jonathan Hammond, LC Harden Jr., Carrie A. Johnson, Rashad J. Koker, Leigh Ann Larkin, Gregory Maheu, Dan Manning, Donna Migliaccio, Tracy Lynn Olivera, Bryonha Parham, Sasha Sloan, Elisa Van Duyne, Josh

Walden, Nellesa Walthour, Jim Weaver, Eric Jordan Young.

Sets, Derek McLane; costumes, Santo Loquasto; lighting, Donald Holder; sound, Donald Deans, Garth Helm. Opened, reviewed April 25, 2009. Runs through May 17. Running time: 2 HOURS, 45 MIN.

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