

## ***Ragtime* at the Kennedy Center: Remembrance of Swings Past**

By Trey Graham  
May. 7 – 13, 2009 (Vol. 29, #19)

### **Ragtime**

**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**

### **Kennedy Center to May 17**

"You can never go back to before," proclaims one of *Ragtime's* characteristically big ballads. True, that.

I bring this up because until now, I've been something of a *Ragtime* partisan, a defender of the show's full-throated songs and the confident way they come at the audience, one tumbling after another until catharsis isn't an option—until, strong-armed by soaring melody and stirring crescendo and poignant story, the crowd falls swooning at the show's feet. And because of that particular song's argument—that once your eyes and ears are opened to something you didn't know, you can't pretend you haven't seen and heard, even if you'd like to.

For me, "before" was the opulent original production of this quintessentially aspirational musical, derived from E.L. Doctorow's mid-'70s novel about cultural collisions and the march of progress at the dawn of the 20th century. It had those impossibly charismatic stars: Brian Stokes Mitchell as the ragtime pianist-turned-revolutionary Coalhouse Walker; Audra McDonald as his naïve, doomed lover; Marin Mazzie as the suburban New York matron who learns, to her benefit and ours, how narrow her horizons were until these people, and a couple of immigrant Others, came into her life.

It had conjurer's tricks and fireworks and the magic that happens when an expert storyteller introduces his fictional characters to real-world notables. Escape artist Harry Houdini, fire-breathing anarchist Emma Goldman, industrial titans J.P. Morgan and Henry Ford all figure, to one degree or another, in *Ragtime's* plot. And to the delight of its audience, it had a working Model T that came gliding, gleaming, onto the stage to cap a rousing first-act hymn to the American dream.

I was there for *Ragtime's* Broadway opening, in that handsomely renovated Times Square

theater (supplied by a flashy Canadian impresario who'd shortly be indicted for cooking the company books), and I have to confess I wish I could recapture the feelings that premiere stirred in me—the lump-in-the-throat happy that came from encountering those voices, that confidence, these anthems for the first time, in a production as expensively upholstered as any I'm ever likely to see. But I've done some growing up in the 11 years since, and these days I like my musicals a little more open to interpretation.

*Ragtime* still gleams, to be sure: The music is as lush as ever, and the \$4.4 million production commissioned for the Kennedy Center season has many a pleasing visual to recommend it. (Santo Loquasto's lavish original costumes, or the vast majority of them anyway, have been taken out of the vault to be paraded for our admiration, and Derek McLane's sets—a nod to the Gilded Age palaces of architect Stanford White, also an incidental player in *Ragtime*—have a lofty, airy appeal.)

The cast is just fine, and sometimes more. I'll never get the original voices out of my head, but I wasn't especially put off by any of the performances on stage at the Eisenhower Theater; I was rather fond (to choose just one example) of the fire Bobby Steggert brings to his angrily at-loose-ends character, a privileged WASP who finds his place mostly in opposition to his roots.

And when it's trafficking in the signature hobble-step rhythms of the idiom that gives the show its title, Stephen Flaherty's score is still something of a wonder: Marcia Milgrom Dodge's staging is never better, to my mind, than when the full 37-member cast starts tiny and builds big on bold ragtime edifices like the dazzling opening "Prologue"—an old-school Broadway overture reinvented, deftly introducing time, place, characters, and most every musical theme you'll hear all night—and the glorious, gripping "New Music." That secular hymn caps a tale of loss and of change, of discovery and awakening and distance so wrenchingly, rapturously sung that I can feel my throat closing up as I write this.

But after a time—and there's plenty of time when a show's first act features no fewer than 21 musical numbers—one urgent anthem begins to feel like another. The heart-tugging gimmicks, to the observant ear, become apparent; the choral suspensions and the arching melodies and the open chords lose their luster, and the listener begins to feel a bit bullied.

That's when other infelicities make themselves known. Time and again, a directorial tendency toward over-illustration crops up in gestures large (the loom-threading in a workhouse chorus, the tire-passing bit in Henry Ford's musical assembly line) and small (the fussy, fluttery hands-touching business in a falling-in-forbidden-love scene).

That towering scaffold of a set, impressively scaled though it is, ends up limiting the range and mobility of the characters who keep traveling up and down, back and forth across its U-shaped tiers. The spareness of the furnishings, initially suggestive, begins to seem merely economical. (You remember Houdini's lockbox-escape trick, conspicuously absent from this staging; the original required a body double, and I expect he got paid Equity minimum for his nightly 10 minutes of work.)

And so the best of what's at *Ragtime*'s heart—its broad-minded sense of a world spinning forward, of change coming to comfort the people whose anguish the show chronicles—gets obscured, at least a bit.

Not enough to make the Kennedy Center's revival a regrettable experience, even for one

who'd been willing, even eager, to renew a long-simmering love. Just enough to dim the glow of the perfect thing that lives in my memory—and to make me ponder the new satisfactions my evolving tastes have brought me, in exchange for the uncomplicated joys that moved me, back in that singular before.