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Ragtime

April 27, 2009 by [Alexander C. Kafka](#)

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Quentin Earl Darrington as Coalhouse Walker Jr. and Jennlee Shallow as Sarah. (Photo: Joan Marcus)

“We never know when our feelings will creep up on us and go boom and startle us,” says the character Mother to her friend Tateh in the musical *Ragtime*.

That spoke to the question I had coming into this fiercely ambitious musical I’d read so much about but missed in its first incarnation a decade ago: Would it connect emotionally? One critical rap on it then was that it was gorged with talent and with every theatrical wow money could buy, but somehow so garishly commercial in its creation and intention that it never connected with the heart.

As *The New York Times*’ Ben Brantley put it in January 1998: “*Ragtime* ... has the aura of something assembled by corporate committee, and when an actor playing Henry Ford shows up to extol the miracle of the assembly line, you may draw uncomfortable parallels. The skills and virtues of *Ragtime* ... are many and undeniable; but a distinctive human personality is not among them.”

I can’t speak to the differences between that production and this Kennedy Center revival, directed by Marcia Milgrom Dodge. I can say that despite its undeniable pageant-of-history aspects, the show crept up on my heart, went boom, and startled it many times, and that it moved me greatly and struck me as a genuine theatrical triumph.

Adapted from E.L. Doctorow’s 1975 novel, with a book by Terrence McNally, music by Stephen Flaherty, and lyrics by Lynn Ahrens, it weaves into the sweep of turn-of-20th-century New York the tales of a ragtime pianist, Coalhouse Walker Jr. (Quentin Earl Darrington); a European Jewish immigrant, Tateh (Manoel Felciano); and a WASPy New Rochelle family, particularly the Mother (Christiane Noll). Historical figures like Emma Goldman (Donna Migliaccio), Booker T. Washington (Eric Jordan Young), J.P. Morgan (David Garry), Evelyn Nesbit (Leigh Ann Larkin), Harry Houdini (Jonathan Hammond), Henry Ford (Aaron Galligan-Stierle), and others appear partly as peripheral characters, but partly, too, as representatives of their viewpoints, race, or class.

The plot moves furiously, wrapping in the New Rochelle Father’s expedition to the North Pole with Admiral Peary, crimes of racism and revenge, a rescued newborn, rags-to-riches transformations, labor strikes, and more. And the script surely does flirt with the danger of an epic reach overwhelming the human dimension.

My sense, though, is that it *has* to flirt with that danger because the creators’ goal is to explore how the impersonal cogs of socioeconomic change can both invigorate and grind away that human spirit. And the powerful performances of each principal in this cast have a moment-by-moment, but, more, a cumulative impact that’s very personal indeed.

The score has a number of bold and deeply lyrical moments, but it, too, has a force that’s primarily cumulative. Flaherty’s jazzy ragtime and neo-Gershwin nods to an era (“New Music,” for instance) are overlaid with more modern Sondheim-type Broadway hubbub (“The Night That Goldman Spoke at Union Square”) and ballad (“What Kind of Woman”). I feared the genre blend wouldn’t go down so well, but decided, in short order, that it’s extraordinarily clever, because the fiendishly challenging and rarely pausing score — played here with great verve, nuance, and sensitivity to tempo by an orchestra under the direction of James Moore — both reflects (in its jazziness) and theatrically frames (in its contemporary Broadway idioms) the part of history it’s rendering.

Echoing the notion of an era as simultaneous life molder and quickly aging artifact is Derek McLane's splendid set: archly industrial multiple levels backstage and sides, standing in for train station, grand suburban home, Harlem jazz club, and gangster hideaway, among other places. Its architecturally skeletal quality, like Coalhouse's transparent upright piano, and like the silhouettes that are Tateh's livelihood and lighting designer Donald Holder's consistent (and gorgeous) trope, visually symbolize how immediate, and how transitory, lives and history are. The massive industrial girders of today are the creaking, rusting, fading infrastructure of tomorrow. Today's "crime of the century" is tomorrow's footnote. Given that the show's audiences are, in that sense, of ragtime's "tomorrow," the package leaves us with an overall time-warped feeling that is almost existential.

Elegantly costumed by Santo Loquasto, the large cast, to a woman and a man, was extraordinary. Darrington's powerful, resonant baritone gives golden voice to Coalhouse when he's wooing his love, Sarah, and grave voice to Coalhouse when injustices begin to befall and define him. (I will note that Mr. Nitpick, as I call the annoying naysaying scrivener within me, was truly distracted by Darrington's odd pronunciation of the word "You," which came out as an extended Ewe, with a lot of ee and yy before it got to oo. All right, now shut up, Nitpick.) Jennlee Shallow, as Sarah, Coalhouse's love, brought under our skin the indignation of a lover tossed aside and a mother burdened with a primal guilt.

Noll endows Mother's personal and feminist awakening with tenderness and toughness. "I did not expect you to come home a different man," she tells Father (a finely flinty Ron Bohmer) upon his cold return from the northern reaches, "but I hoped to find you a kinder one."

And Felciano's Tateh is very sympathetic. We follow his arc from hope to disappointment to desperation and back as though he were family. And his duet with Noll, "Our Children," was especially heartfelt and delicate.

Other standouts included Bobby Steggert as Mother's Younger Brother, who gives his ephemeral, burgeoning, upper-crusty radicalism a sort of Christopher Walken-like understated eeriness; Eric Jordan Young as a supremely dignified and resolute Booker T. Washington; Migliaccio as a fiery, inspiring, but also nicely ironic Goldman; and the young Christopher Cox as Mother and Father's preternaturally candid and spookily soothsaying son. (Cox, Bohmer, and friends gave us great, comedic respite in the show's earthy homage to baseball etiquette, "What a Game!")

Inequality. Gross and great reversals of fortune. Prevalent fear of immigrants. Capitalism and its opposites locked in ideological death holds. Governments righteous in their aspirations and sometimes hideously inept and brutish in trying to achieve those aspirations.

That was ragtime. And that's our time. In addition to its many other feats, *Ragtime* is a reminder that bewilderment, excitement, fear, and disorientation are the tumultuous tastes of new beginnings, but also a time-honored American tradition.

Ragtime

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directed and choreographed by Marcia Milgrom Dodge
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