The Guide
A theatergoer's resource

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Ragtime
Book by Terrence McNally
Lyrics by Lynn Ahrens
Music by Stephen Flaherty
Based on the novel Ragtime by E.L. Doctorow
Directed by Chris Coleman

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Edited by Milo Petruziello for the Education and Outreach department at Portland Center Stage
Ragtime follows the story of three families as their lives intertwine in Ragtime era New York City with historical figures helping to drive the narrative. Father, Mother, Younger Brother, Little Boy and Grandfather are a typical White Anglo Saxon Protestant family living in suburban New Rochelle. After finding an African American baby in the garden Mother invites the child's mother, Sarah, into the Family's home. Eventually Coalhouse Walker, the child's father and Ragtime musician, comes to call on Sarah. She initially refuses to see him but gradually warms to his advances and eventually agrees to be his wife. The two families enjoy a warm relationship despite Father's skepticism. Meanwhile Tateh and his daughter the Little Girl arrive in America on a boat from Eastern Europe. Despite Tateh's optimism they find life in America hard. They live in poverty while Tateh attempts to earn a living selling silhouettes on the street.

Harmony in New Rachelle is shattered when Coalhouse gets into an altercation with the fire department. Unable to accept a confident and proud Black man constantly visiting the town, fire chief Willie Conklin confronts Coalhouse and has his men vandalize the musician's new Ford Model T. Coalhouse exhausts all available legal avenues in a search for justice, in his anger he declares that there will be no wedding until his car is restored. Distraught over this development Sarah decides to appeal to the Vice-Presidential candidate for help. When she approaches him she is mistaken for an assassin and killed. Tateh and the Little Girl leave for Massachusetts to find work where Tateh becomes involved in mill strike that turns violent when the mill’s owners decide to crush it once and for all. In the commotion they are able to hop a train to Philadelphia. On the train an opportunity presents itself to Tateh when the conductor asks to purchase a flipbook he has made for his daughter. Act 1 closes as Sarah is laid to rest.
Act 2

When Act 2 opens Coalhouse has turned to violence. New Rochelle is gripped by terror when he blows up the firehouse and demands that his car be restored and the fire chief be turned over to his justice. The Family is soon surrounded by reporters eager to gather information about their relationship with Coalhouse. After a dramatic argument with Younger Brother, Father decides that they should escape to Atlantic City for a while. Mother meets Tateh on the beach, the once impoverished immigrant is now a successful film director thanks to his flip book.

He is going by the name Baron Ashkenazy. Little Boy and Little Girl become fast friends. When word comes from New York that Coalhouse and his gang have taken the J.P. Morgan Library hostage, Father goes back to the city to help with negotiations. When he arrives he is shocked to find Younger Brother among Coalhouse’s followers. Booker T. Washington also arrives to help resolve the situation. The entire city is watching as the stage is set for the final confrontation.
E. L. Doctorow is one of the most accomplished American novelists of the second half of the 20th Century, often considered in an elite company with Toni Morrison, Saul Bellow, John Updike, Philip Roth and only a few others. Named for Edgar Allen Poe, Doctorow was born in New York City and attended the Bronx High School of Science.

Doctorow graduated from Kenyon College with honors in 1952, then did some graduate work at Columbia University, but did not earn another degree. He joined the U.S. Army and was stationed in Germany for a time. In 1954, he married Helen Setzer, with whom he has three children. For three years, Doctorow worked for Columbia Pictures as a literary talent scout. His job was to read books and let Columbia know which could be turned into films. His time at Columbia may have inspired a young Doctorow to take up writing, convinced he could do better than the authors he reviewed.

Ragtime, his 1975 novel, may be his most admired and popular work. Set before World War I, it features historical figures of that time such as Sigmund Freud, Harry Houdini, Henry Ford, and U.S. President William Howard Taft, plus various fictional characters. It won the National Book Critics Circle award and sold 4.5 million copies. It became a film in 1981 and a Broadway musical in 1998.

The idea for Ragtime started when Doctorow was living in a house in New Rochelle, New York, that had been built in 1908. Tormented by writer’s block, he forced himself to write about the walls of his house, then started thinking about his neighborhood and what it had looked like in 1908 and the trolley tracks that connected New Rochelle to New York. “I was imagining what things were like in that time, with awnings on the windows and trolley cars going down the hill to the [Long Island] Sound and people in straw boaters and women with parasols,” he told Lisa W. Foderaro of the New York Times when he sold the house in 1999. “One image led to another, and I was off the wall and into the book.”

Some critics questioned the way Doctorow placed historic characters in fictional situations in Ragtime, such as when he portrayed famed psychologists Freud and Carl Jung taking a ride together on the Tunnel of Love at the New York City amusement park Coney Island. On the other hand, that mischievous boldness was a key element readers liked about the novel. “The feeling of Ragtime was a rebellious feeling,” Doctorow told Janet Maslin of the New York Times. In the mid-1970s, non-fiction was threatening to displace fiction as the center of literary ambition and attention, and Doctorow said he felt the need to take a stand for fiction. “My feeling was, ‘if they want facts, I’ll give ‘em facts like they’ve never had before,’” he told Maslin.


Doctorow’s attempts to define America through its great writers, its past, and its present politics, while common among the elite of American fiction writers, often contrast with the work of his students, whom he complains too often write cramped first novels of limited vision. Epic stories of the past, far from being escapist, reveal the roots of today’s culture and conflicts, he believes. “Any time you set a book in the past you’re inevitably writing about the present,” he told Bruce Weber of the New York Times.
Terrence McNally

Terrence McNally (born 3 November 1939) is an American playwright who has received four Tony Awards, two Guggenheim Fellowships, a Rockefeller Grant, the Lucille Lortel Award, the Hull-Warriner Award, and a citation from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Born in St. Petersburg, Florida and raised in Corpus Christi, Texas, McNally moved to New York City in 1956 to attend Columbia University, where he majored in English.

Graduating in 1960, the same year in which he gained membership into the Phi Beta Kappa Society. After graduation, McNally moved to Mexico to focus on his writing, completing a one-act play, which he submitted to the Actors Studio in New York for production. While the play was turned down, the Studio was impressed with the script and invited McNally to serve as the Studio’s stage manager.

McNally’s first credited Broadway musical was The Rink in 1984, he entered the project after composer John Kander and lyricist Fred Ebb had already completed the score. In 1990, McNally won an Emmy Award for Best Writing in a Miniseries or Special for Andre’s Mother, a drama about a woman trying to cope with her son’s death from AIDS.


Stephen Flaherty

Stephen Flaherty (born September 18, 1960) is an American composer of musical theatre who writes mostly in collaboration with the lyricist/bookwriter Lynn Ahrens. They are best known for writing the Broadway shows Once on This Island, which was nominated for eight Tony Awards, Seussical The Musical, which was nominated for the Grammy Award and Ragtime, which was nominated for twelve Tony Awards and won Best Original Score. Flaherty was also nominated for two Academy Awards and two Golden Globe Awards with Lynn Ahrens for his songs and song score for the animated film musical Anastasia.

Lynn Ahrens

Lynn Ahrens (born October 1, 1948) is an American musical theatre lyricist who frequently works with Stephen Flaherty. They are best known for the shows Once on This Island, which was nominated for eight Tony Awards, and Ragtime, which was nominated for twelve Tony Awards and won Best Original Score, in addition to the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Lyrics. They also collaborated on songs for the movie Anastasia. Ahrens also wrote music and lyrics for and performed on Schoolhouse Rock and Captain Kangaroo.

Ahrens is a graduate of Syracuse University. She and Flaherty met at the BMI Workshop in 1982 and started working together the following year.
The Progressive Era was an extremely important time for America’s women. During this time, women gained greater access to education and began to assert their equality in the home. At the end of the 19th Century, women were seen as the “moral guardians” and protectors of the home. Many activists used this ideology as a justification for women to take a more active role in the political arena. During the Progressive Era, women became more civically engaged than ever before and played a major role in the labor movement and the temperance movement. Settlement houses founded by women became important community centers in urban areas; they provided education, health services, arts activities, and helped immigrants adapt to American culture. Women’s rights advanced significantly during this time, as women worked on many issues related to sexuality, marriage, and childbirth; including divorce rights and birth control. Right here in Portland, famed anarchist Emma Goldman and her partner Ben Rietman were arrested in 1915 at the corner of SW 4th and SW Yamhill for distributing birth control information. Thanks to the hard work of prominent women activists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, the 19th amendment to the constitution was ratified in 1920, giving women the right to vote.

America saw tremendous industrial growth during the late 19th century and early 20th century, resulting in corporations of unprecedented size like Standard Oil and U.S. Steel Corp. Big business leaders, often called “robber barons,” enjoyed unprecedented power by taking advantage of minimal government regulation and exploitative labor practices. Worker strikes were common and often violent affairs. Activist journalists called “Muckrakers” published numerous exposés of big business, including Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle about unsanitary and unfair practices in the Chicago meat packing industry and Jacob Riis’s How the Other Half Lives exposing the conditions of tenement slums. President Teddy Roosevelt broke with many of his Republican colleagues when he supported stronger government regulation of business and took the side of labor in the settlement of the Anthracite Coal Strike of 1902. As a result of these efforts, the Progressive Era saw significant reforms in the regulation of working conditions and numerous antitrust suits.

New Rochelle is a suburb of New York City located in Westchester County, New York. The town was settled by refugee Huguenots (French Protestants) in 1688 who were fleeing Catholic pogroms in France. In 1900, its population was 14,720. During the Progressive Era, New Rochelle became the site of one of the first planned communities in the United States. Rochelle Park, completed in 1904, was the precursor to today’s ubiquitous suburban subdivisions.

From 1891 to 1900, 4 million immigrants entered the United States, from 1901 to 1910 that number increased to 8.8 million. In 1910, three-fourths of New York City’s population was either immigrants or first-generation Americans. Unlike earlier immigrants, the immigrant populations of the progressive era came primarily from non-English speaking European countries. Large numbers came from Italy, Russia, and Poland and often had a difficult time adjusting to American life. Many faced extreme poverty and discrimination. Most settled in urban centers where jobs were available and ended up taking work that other Americans would not. They became a cheap source of labor for the country’s wealthy robber barons and played a key role in the labor movement. Settlement Houses founded by a new generation of educated women played a key role in the labor movement. Settlement Houses became important education and community centers for many poor urban immigrants.

Despite the advances in Women’s rights and labor, the rights of African Americans actually regressed after the progress made during Reconstruction. Post emancipation
The World of Ragtime

the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments, as well as the Civil Rights Act of 1875, provided many new freedoms. However, rights began to whittle away after Reconstruction ended in 1877. The end of the 19th century saw the rise of Jim Crow laws in the South, where 90% of African Americans lived at the time. Supreme Court Rulings like Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896, which upheld a Louisiana law segregating train cars, paved the way for legal discrimination throughout the South. Lynching was a common practice and “progressive” reforms made it easier to deny African American’s voting rights. It was not until 1815 with Guinn v. United States when the Supreme Court began to strike down some of the laws, although Plessy v. Ferguson would have to wait until 1954’s Brown v. Board of Education to be overturned. Still, the era was not without its victories, the Niagara Movement lead by W.E.B. DuBois and William Monroe Trotter resulted in the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. Booker T. Washington, one of Ragtime’s characters, became a prominent and influential African American leader and founded the Tuskegee institute in 1881 to educate blacks. The onset of World War II saw the beginning of the Great Migration, as many southern Blacks headed north to find industrial jobs and escape the violent racial oppression in the South.

Ragtime music was an important element of the Progressive Era soundtrack. The African American piano style originated in the Midwest and South sometime in the late 1880’s or early 1890’s. One of its defining characteristics is heavily syncopated or “ragged” rhythms. The style grew out of the Cakewalk, a popular African American dance competition of the time named for the prize commonly given to the winner. Composer Scott Joplin popularized Ragtime in 1899 with the release of his classic “Maple Leaf Rag.”

Vaudeville was a popular theatrical genre of variety entertainment in the United States and Canada from the early 1880’s to the early 1930’s. Acts were diverse and unrelated; they included everything from classical and popular musicians to one-act plays, trained animals, magicians and acrobats. By the late 1890s Vaudeville had large circuits, houses (small and large) in almost every sizable location, standardized booking, broad pools of skilled acts, and a loyal national following. New York City’s Palace Theatre was the most prestigious of the Vaudeville venues. Evelyn Nesbit became a Vaudeville performer after her husband Harry K. Thaw murdered her lover Stanford White.
Henry Ford
July 30, 1863 – April 7, 1947
The American founder of the Ford Motor Company and father of modern assembly lines used in mass production. His introduction of the Model T automobile revolutionized transportation and American industry. He was a prolific inventor and was awarded 161 U.S. patents.

Matthew Henson
August 6, 1866 – March 9, 1955
An African American explorer and associate of Robert Peary during various expeditions, the most famous being a 1909 expedition which claimed to be the first to reach the Geographic North Pole.

Harry Houdini
March 24, 1874 – October 31, 1926,
born Ehrich Weiss
A Jewish-Hungarian-American magician and escapologist, stunt performer, actor and film producer, as well as a skeptic and investigator of spiritualists.
J.P. Morgan  
April 17, 1837 – March 31, 1913

An American financier, banker and art collector who dominated corporate finance and industrial consolidation during his time. He is widely credited with having saved or rescued the U.S. national economy in general—and the federal government in particular—on two separate occasions. He bequeathed much of his large art collection to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and to the Wadsworth Atheneum of Hartford, Connecticut.

Evelyn Nesbit  
December 25, 1884 – January 17, 1967

An American artists’ model and chorus girl, noted for her entanglement in the murder of her ex-lover, architect Stanford White, by her first husband, Harry Kendall Thaw.

Harry K. Thaw  
(February 12, 1871 - February 22, 1947)

A son of Pittsburgh coal and railroad baron William Thaw, brother of South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club member Benjamin Thaw. He is best known for the murder of architect Stanford White at Madison Square Garden in 1906 over their mutual relationship with Evelyn Nesbit, and the sensational trial that followed. Thaw was a violent and paranoid man who was known as a womanizer.

Charles S. Whitman  
Served as Republican Governor of New York from January 1915 to December 1918. Prior to his election as governor, he served as a New York City municipal judge and as Manhattan District Attorney. As District Attorney, he gained national fame in prosecuting New York City Police Lt. Charles Becker for the July 16, 1912 murder of Times Square gambling house operator Herman Rosenthal.

Stanford White  
November 9, 1853 – June 25, 1906

An American architect and partner in the architectural firm of McKim, Mead, and White, the frontrunner among Beaux-Arts firms. He designed a long series of houses for the rich and the very rich, and various public, institutional, and religious buildings, some of which can be found to this day in places like Sea Gate, Brooklyn. His design principles embodied the “American Renaissance”. In 1906 White was murdered by millionaire Harry Kendall Thaw over their mutual relationship with Evelyn Nesbit, leading to a widely-reported trial.
Discussion Questions and Exploration Activities
Compiled by Maggie Ruble

1. Relate the events of the play “Ragtime” to events in the media today, then, compare and contrast. Make an argument for or against the idea of societal progression since the 1900s in the area of racial discrimination.

2. America in the 1900s was a difficult landscape for both African Americans and immigrants- compare and contrast the experiences of these two groups. Was the mutual struggle the only reason for the friendship between the families in the play? Or was this a deeper level of human understanding?

3. The bonds of family and friendship were tested and ultimately broken multiple times in this play- analyze the qualities that kept the friendships and families that were able to survive, together. Are there universal characteristics of strong friendships, or is it all dependant on the circumstances of the peoples lives?

4. The characters in this play risked a lot on friendship and lost in the end- describe a time you took a risk in forming a friendship, whether it ended for good or bad. Was this risk worth it in the end? What made it worth the risk or pain, or conversely what made it not worth it?

Original Sources and Links to Further Research

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