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'Ragtime' has superb singing, emotional storytelling

Kennedy Center's \$4.4 million staging is astounding

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The 8-ton steel set that fills the stage for the Kennedy Center's new production of *Ragtime*, with its four levels of scaffolding adorned with lacy, Gothic arches, becomes a visual metaphor for the relentless forward thrust of history.

Each level is crowded with actors portraying the different social groups and celebrity figures in the U.S. in 1906 — a Jewish immigrant and his daughter; an upper-middle-class Victorian family; an African-American jazz pianist, his sweetheart and their child. Actors embody such real-life figures as labor leader Emma Goldman, inventor Henry Ford, and educator and orator Booker T. Washington. Each of the four walkways is filled with gesticulating people striving to get their hearts' desires.

And the people on each catwalk are completely unaware of those standing above and below them. They can't see how they all interrelate, the large and complex structure in which they all play a part.

But we can, and it astounds us.

This restaging of the musical based on E.L. Doctorow's 1975 novel is exquisitely sung, superbly acted and emotionally stirring.

Despite *Ragtime's* breathtaking scope, its cast of 37 and \$4.4 million price tag, I kept marveling at how economical this restaging is, at the concise visual shorthand devised by the original artistic team and director Marcia Milgrom Dodge.

For instance, in the first scene, Father (ably portrayed by Ron Bohmer) is about to embark on an Arctic exploration organized by Admiral Perry. His wife, Mother (the

winning Christiane Noll), stands on the dock and reflects on her stifled desire for adventure. Meanwhile, Father's ship passes the boat carrying a Jewish Latvian immigrant who is about to set foot for the first time on American soil.

In about three minutes, and in an easily digested format, the audience has been introduced to several of the show's main characters and themes.

And, for a musical with this many narrative strands, for a musical with 34 songs and relatively little dialogue, it's remarkable how complete the storytelling is. It wasn't until the intermission that I realized that *Ragtime* is very nearly sung through.

Perhaps that's because the voices themselves are so entrancing. Bobby Steggert, as Mother's Younger Brother, has a tenor as light and golden as cornsilk. When Jennlee Shallow, playing a young, unwed mother, sings that she has buried her heart in the ground, we hear in her soaring soprano all of Sarah's purity and strength.

In Doctorow's novel, the narrator intentionally keeps an emotional distance from the characters, perhaps to help readers see the big picture. But when these fictional people are fleshed out on stage by actors with idiosyncratic shapes, intonations and ways of walking, a different point gets made.

When Coalhouse Walker Jr. (the assured Quentin Earl Darrington) is the victim of bigotry and refuses to abandon his pursuit of justice, it's impossible not to get emotionally involved. The consequences of the stance he takes are disastrous. What happens to him looks like, feels like, unadulterated tragedy.

And yet, there's that four-tier scaffolding that the characters can't see, but that we can.

Coalhouse doesn't succeed in changing the heart or mind of Willie Conklin, his chief tormentor. But what happens to Coalhouse changes Father.

Sometimes, progress happens at the exact moment it seems to have eluded our grasp.

If you go *Ragtime* runs through May 17 at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, 2700 F St. N.W. Showtimes are 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays; 1:30 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. Tickets are \$25-\$90. Call 800-444-1324 or go to www.kennedy-center.org.

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