



D.C. 'Ragtime' Recalls Houdini, Ford, Divided America: Review

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Review by Jim O'Connell



April 29 (Bloomberg) -- The new production of the musical "Ragtime" at the Kennedy Center in Washington is explosive and thrilling, at least after the intermission. For that, thanks are due to Quentin Earl Darrington in a ferocious, pivotal performance as Coalhouse Walker Jr.

E.L. Doctorow's sprawling 1975 novel captured America in the midst of technological, social and political upheaval at the dawning of the 20th century. Such disparate historical figures as **Harry Houdini**, **Henry Ford**, **Stanford White** and **Emma Goldman** intermingle with the story's fictional characters.

The show, with a book by playwright **Terrence McNally** and score by **Lynn Ahrens** and Stephen Flaherty, won four Tony Awards in 1998. The team effectively captured the novel's social sprawl while keeping the focus on the key players. The first act does an admirable job of introducing them all, but the emotional payoff comes after the intermission, when their fates are rendered, sometimes with theater-shaking intensity.

The turn of the century, via Doctorow, is occupied by a male-dominated white family made wealthy from fireworks manufacturing; a black underclass openly scorned by white society, and boatloads of immigrants eager to gain their own economic foothold.

Garden Bloom

The story begins with Sarah, Walker's young girlfriend, literally planting the black couple's son in a garden in the New York City suburb of New Rochelle. When Mother finds the child, Sarah and the baby are invited to stay in the household. Conveniently, Father, a bigot, is off on yearlong expedition with Admiral Peary.

Coalhouse wants to raise his son and marry Sarah, but that would make for a dull show. When his precious Ford Model T (did they really make them bright red?) is destroyed by drunken racist firemen, Coalhouse's complaints to the police are ignored. He responds with a shooting spree, setting up a cycle of violence that martyrs him to the cause of racial equality.

The timing of the revival, four months into the administration of the nation's first black president, adds poignancy to the central story. Credit also director and choreographer Marcia Milgrom Dodge for a vibrant production.

Sure, sure, but how was the singing? Impressive.

Darrington shows great range as an actor and singer as Walker, in a role in which he transforms from the life of the party to an avenging killer. He is matched in voice by Jennlee Shallow as Sarah, Walker's ill-fated lover.

Derek McLane's set is essentially five levels of scaffolding, through which storm clouds can be seen in the distance. Jonathan Hammond, as Houdini, makes use of the steel beams in his death-defying

entrance, and it proves versatile enough to become a believable backdrop as a railroad station, a speakeasy, the beach at Atlantic City, New Jersey and the Morgan Library in New York.

Through May 17 at the Kennedy Center, 2700 F. Street NW, Washington, D.C. Information: +1-202-467-4600; <http://www.kennedy-center.org>. Rating: ***

What the Stars Mean:

**** Excellent

*** Good

** Average

* Poor

(No stars) Worthless

(**Jim O'Connell** is an editor for Bloomberg News in Washington. Opinions expressed are his own.)

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