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Director chooses a different path with 'Ragtime'

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The musical "Ragtime," which opened on Broadway in 1998, is being given a new production at the Kennedy Center through May 17.

The book, by Terrence McNally, is an adaptation of E.L. Doctorow's novel. It takes place in New York at the start of the 20th century and intertwines three stories: of a Harlem musician, a wealthy Victorian family and a poor Latvian immigrant.



Director and choreographer Marcia Milgrom Dodge speaks with the cast of "Ragtime."

"It's very exciting to be doing this production," director and choreographer Marcia Milgrom Dodge said in a recent interview, "and quite a privilege to be working with this company and these designers.

"We've scaled down the numbers of bodies onstage, but that doesn't take away from the largeness of the production or the scope of the show. We're using 33 classically trained and musical theater singers, all experts in their field. It's Shakespearean and operatic, and huge in terms of events and emotions."

"Ragtime" can be done in what Dodge calls a "presentational" way, but she has resisted that approach.

"I wanted to get involved with the characters," she said, "to feel their heartbeats and connect with what they were going through emotionally.

"I chose to do this production impressionistically, meaning that there is a scenic

structure, but within that space we define locations very sparingly — with a gesture, or a table to say we're in the dining room, for instance. We're not being literal." All the choreography in this production is new. As Dodge explains it, she always approaches her work as a choreographer first.

"I come at things through my body, not necessarily to create dance vocabulary, but to create behavior for characters. And there is a plethora of opportunities in this show.


"We go from New Rochelle, where the characters are very stiff, to the immigrants, who have an Eastern European approach to their movement, and then to Harlem, where the characters are much more in touch with their bodies and feelings. We try to evoke the differences and celebrate them through movement."

Dodge has been working with "Ragtime" since February 2008.

"I've been getting 'Ragtime' into my DNA since the authors asked me to do it," she said. "As soon as I said 'yes,' I immersed myself in the score and began working with the designers to come up with what we thought would be the perfect physical production for the show. And I think we've achieved something really special and beautiful."

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