

LIFESTYLE

Theater review: Big, sprawling 'Ragtime' a hit at Throckmorton



Photo by Stacey Printz

Throckmorton Theatre presents the musical, "Ragtime," through Sunday. (Photo by Stacey Printz)

By **BARRY WILLIS** | barry.m.willis@gmail.com | Marin Independent Journal
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Success begets success, according to the adage. Following Throckmorton Theatre's stunning full-immersion production of "Romeo and Juliet," the company has launched a huge sprawling production of "Ragtime," the musical based on the popular novel by E. L. Doctorow.

To call this show an ambitious undertaking does it a disservice — it's certainly that, and except for a couple of technical glitches, a hugely successful one. Thanks to a clever set by Steve Coleman, director Amy Marie Haven and movement director Stacy Printz manage to fit a 36-member cast and 24-member orchestra onto the Throckmorton's compact stage. It's a tight squeeze but an amazingly fluid one as they carry off an enormous and well-paced production without stumbling all over each other.

Doctorow's story — adapted by prolific playwright Terrence McNally, with music by Stephen Flaherty and lyrics by Lynn Aherns — concerns the wave of immigration and social change that overwhelmed America in the early days of the 20th century. Intersecting storylines include social and political dominance by robber barons, arctic adventures by a captain of industry, workers' struggles for fair wages and safe working conditions, women's suffrage, the ambitions of penniless immigrants, and the rise of black culture in the decades following the Reconstruction era.



Photo by Stacey Printz

"Ragtime" is still timely today.

It's a monstrous amount of material to cover in little more than two hours but Haven's cast and crew do it beautifully. The primary plot focuses on the fate of Coalhouse Walker, Jr. (Gary Stanford), a financially successful black man who encounters massive resentment and abuse from a group of redneck firemen offended by the fact that Walker is the first in their community to own a new car. His justifiable if foolhardy effort to gain restitution and an apology after his car is vandalized is a major driver of the drama, followed closely by his relationship with a young woman named Sarah (Racquel Nicole Jeté), mother of their infant son. Secondary plots include the chance success of Jewish immigrant Tateh (David Schiller) in the new filmmaking industry, and the private and public difficulties encountered by Sarah and Mother (Jordan Best), the upper-middle-class white woman who takes her in and ultimately adopts her son.

It's all conveyed in nearly 40 gorgeously rendered songs and production numbers. The ebullient Stanford is riveting in the lead role — a tremendous actor, singer and dancer. The beautiful Jeté matches him in a compelling performance that includes a couple of heartbreaking solo songs. Among a cast of daunting talents — too many to mention — are several noteworthy performers, including Best, Melissa Momboisse as Evelyn Nesbit, Jeffrey Moon as Booker T. Washington, Amy Dietz as radical firebrand Emma Goldman, Brage Rollmann as Houdini, Max Kligman as Younger Brother, and Timothy Lynch as Henry Ford.

Director Amy Marie Haven also designed the costumes — some stunning, some tatty, and all of them period appropriate. Kevin Myrick's lighting design works well to minimize the theater's space constrictions, as does Coleman's scaffolding. The orchestra is superb under the direction of David Moschler, but the sound balance during opening and closing numbers is problematic in that the actors/singers' voices tend to be drowned out by the musicians. Exposition was especially difficult to follow from the floor — it's possible that the sound is better balanced in the balcony.

Parents thinking of taking young children to this show should be aware that the language used hasn't been sanitized for politically correct moderns. A little boy was heard at intermission saying "Daddy, they used the 'N' word." Yes, they do — several times. To do otherwise would be not only inauthentic but would detract from the production's impact.

This “Ragtime” is a near-Broadway level production in a small town theater, an astounding achievement. The takeaway from it is that American life a hundred years ago was in many ways a mirror image of life today. We’ve come a long way as a society but clearly have a long way to go. The fates of Sarah and Coalhouse Walker Jr. are tragic, but out of the tragedy emerges hope — a quintessential American theme. The injustice of this spectacular production is that it deserves to run far longer than it will.

Barry Willis is a member of the American Theatre Critics Association and president of the San Francisco Bay Area Theatre Critics Circle. Contact him at barry.m.willis@gmail.com

If you go

What: “Ragtime”

Where: Throckmorton Theatre, 142 Throckmorton Ave, Mill Valley

When: Through May 26; 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 2:30 p.m. Sunday

Admission: \$23 to \$40

Information: 415-383-9600; throckmortontheatre.org

Rating (out of five stars): ★★★★★

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