

BASED ON THE NOVEL BY E.L. DOCTOROW

# RAGTIME

A HISTORICAL TALE OF THREE DIVERSE  
AMERICAN FAMILIES

APRIL 19 & 21, 2024

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## Audience Preview Guide

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**Wednesday, April 17, 2024 -**

**Student Night at the Opera**

**Friday, April 19, 2024**

**Sunday, April 21, 2024**

**Valentine Theatre**

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 **TOLEDO OPERA**

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## The Setting

Setting: In and around New York City

Time: Turn of the 20th Century - The Gilded Age

## Characters

### Ragtime

Book by Terrence McNally

Music by Stephen Flaherty

Lyrics by Lynn Aherns

Coalhouse Walker, Jr. - a sophisticated, black pianist in love with Sarah

Mother - a well-bred woman of the time. Married to Father

Tateh - a Latvian immigrant who will do anything for his daughter

Father - owns a bunting factory and likes to travel. Married to Mother

Sarah - a young strong-willed black washwoman in love with Coalhouse

Younger Brother - Mother's younger brother who wants to change the world for good

Emma Goldman - an anarchist immigrant fighting for workers' rights (historical figure)

Evelyn Nesbit - a Vaudeville performer and iconic sex-symbol of the era (historical figure)

Harry Houdini - a magician and escape artist of the Vaudeville circuit (historical figure)

Little Boy - young, inquisitive son of Mother and Father, somewhat clairvoyant

Booker T. Washington - a black American educator, author, and orator (historical figure)

Grandfather - Mother's very conservative and irritated father

Henry Ford - an American industrialist who created the assembly line (historical figure)

J.P. Morgan - an American financier and investment banker (historical figure)

Little Girl - Tateh's daughter, reserved and quiet in her new home

Willie Conklin - a bigoted fireman who sparks Coalhouse's rage



## Synopsis

### ACT I

*Ragtime* opens at the turn of the 20th century: a time of progress, a time of excitement, a time of "a distant music changing the tune, changing the time."

The lives of three different families and worlds collide. These families are an upper-middle-class family from New Rochelle (Mother, Father, Little Boy, Younger Brother, and Grandfather), a couple from Harlem (Coalhouse Walker, Jr. and Sarah), and a Latvian immigrant and his daughter (Tateh and Little Girl). *Ragtime* opens with the intersection of these people's lives and those of prominent historical characters such as J.P. Morgan, the financier; Evelyn Nesbit, the famous beauty; and Harry Houdini, the escape artist and illusionist.

After Father departs for an expedition to the North Pole with Admiral Peary, Mother finds an African-American baby in her backyard while gardening. The police find the baby's mother, Sarah, and Mother invites the two to live with her family. Eventually Coalhouse Walker, the baby's father, comes to court Sarah and after months of charming the New Rochelle family with his music, Sarah agrees to marry him.

Coalhouse's arrival disturbs the sheltered peace of New Rochelle; a black man in a Model T is a new and shocking addition to the white community. The arrival of Coalhouse and Sarah also changes the dynamic for the New Rochelle family, and Father does not know how to cope with his changing family and changing world upon his return. After Sarah and Coalhouse are finally reunited, the Fire Chief Willie Conklin and his men harass the couple and when Coalhouse leaves to find a policeman, the firemen vandalize his car. Unable to find justice through the police and the courts, Coalhouse vows not to marry Sarah until justice is served.

Younger Brother also experiences unrest during this period. He fosters a serious infatuation with Evelyn Nesbit, and one night after her vaudeville show, she kisses him as a publicity stunt. Younger Brother is heartbroken by the realization that she will not be with him. In his search for love and purpose, he finds himself pondering the larger ideas of life, and ends up at a labor rally led by Emma Goldman.

Meanwhile, Tateh and the Little Girl arrive at Ellis Island after a long journey to America. They find life in New York difficult, and Tateh cannot make a living though his art, the creation of paper silhouettes. After a man offers to buy the Little Girl, Tateh decides that they must leave New York in search of a better life. Tateh finds a factory job working 64 hours a week for minimal pay in Lawrence, Massachusetts. There is a strike and Tateh tries to send the Little Girl away for her safety, but he cannot bear to hear her cries and accompanies her to Philadelphia. He comforts her by giving her a flipbook he has created, which he later sells to the train conductor, jump-starting his future career.

The act closes with Sarah at a political rally where she tries to tell appeal to the vice-presidential candidate for help with Coalhouse's case. Police, who think she is an assassin, kill her.

### ACT II

New Rochelle is in chaos: Coalhouse has killed three firemen and burned the firehouse, demanding justice and the return of his Model T. Mother decides to take care of Sarah's child permanently, against the wishes of the child welfare officials and Father. After the pressure builds in the New Rochelle home and Younger Brother angrily leaves the house, Father decides that the best way to cope is to take the Little Boy to a baseball game and the family for an extended stay in Atlantic City.

Upon their arrival in Atlantic City, the family sees a movie being filmed by Baron Askenazy, later revealed to be Tateh, who has turned his flipbooks into a successful film career. The Little Girl and the Little Boy become friends, and in turn, Tateh and Mother form a bond of their children's friendship.

After his rampage in New Rochelle, Coalhouse retreats to the relative safety of Harlem. Younger Brother arrives full of ideas and passion, and become a part of Coalhouse's gang due to his expertise in creating explosives. Coalhouse and his men take over the Morgan Library and threaten to blow it up if the district attorney does not meet their demands.

Both Father and Booker T. Washington arrive at the library to convince Coalhouse to give himself up for the sake of his men and his son. Coalhouse finally sends all of his men to safety. After a heart-to-heart with Father about his child, Coalhouse walks out of the library into a barrage of bullets.

In the epilogue, we discover: Father dies aboard the Lusitania, Younger Brother joins the revolutionary Emiliano Zapata in Mexico, and Mother weds Tateh after Father's death. They raise the Little Boy, the Little Girl, and Coalhouse Walker III together as a family.

*There will be one intermission between Act I and Act II.*

# Ragtime Writing Team

## Terrence McNally (1938-2020)

Terrence McNally was an American dramatist whose plays explore human relationships—frequently those of gay men—and are typically characterized by dark humour. He also wrote books for musicals such as *Ragtime*.



Terrence McNally

As a young man, McNally worked as a newspaper reporter, as a tutor for the children of the American novelist John Steinbeck, and as a stage manager at The Actors Studio. His early plays included *Bad Habits*, *The Ritz*, and *Frankie and Johnny in the Claire de Lune*. In 1995, McNally won a Tony Award for best play, for *Love! Valour! Compassion!*, and he won another the following year for *Master Class*, one of several works he wrote about opera including *The Lisbon Traviata*.

McNally's *Corpus Christi* generated controversy upon its 1998 premiere for its depiction of a Christ-like character as homosexual. Among his later plays were *Deuce*, *Golden Age*, *Mothers and Sons*, and *Fire and Air*.

McNally's librettos for *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and *Ragtime* won him Tony Awards. Additional credits as a librettist included the Broadway musicals *The Full Monty*, *Catch Me if You Can*, and *The Visit*. In 2019, Mr. McNally received a Tony Award for lifetime achievement.

## Stephen Flaherty (1960-)

## Lynn Ahrens (1948-)

Best known for their long-running partnership, Stephen Flaherty is a Tony Award-winning composer of musicals and Lynn Ahrens is a Tony Award-winning lyricist. Among their most popular work together are the Broadway musical *Ragtime* and the Fox animated film *Anastasia*.



Stephen Flaherty

Mr. Flaherty began studying piano at the age of seven and composed his first

score for a musical at 14. His first collaboration with singer, songwriter, and lyricist Lynn Ahrens was in 1985 for Theatreworks USA, a group specializing in youth-oriented theater. The off-Broadway musical *Lucky Stiff* followed in 1989 with music by Flaherty and book and lyrics by Ahrens. The team's first Broadway musical was the one-act *Once on This Island* receiving eight Tony nominations, including the categories of best musical, book, and score.

Ms. Ahrens began her career in advertising as a copywriter for McCaffrey and McCall. She would regularly bring her guitar to work and write music during lunch. George Newall, creator of Schoolhouse Rock! asked her to write a song for the series and her musical career was born.



Lynn Ahrens

In 1997, the team created the hit Twentieth Century Fox animated film *Anastasia*. Based on the legend of the daughter of Russia's Tsar Nicholas II, the film earned Flaherty two Academy Award nominations, for Best Original Musical or Comedy Score (with Ahrens and David Newman) and Best Original Song "Journey to the Past" (with Ahrens).

In the meantime, the Ahrens-Flaherty musical *Ragtime*, an epic based on the 1975 novel by E.L. Doctorow about class issues in early 20th century New York, took Broadway by storm. Its score was steeped in the period's ragtime music, as well as incorporating other thematic material, such as Eastern European folk music. The production was nominated for 12 Tony Awards®, winning four including Flaherty and Ahrens' score and Terrence McNally's book.

The songwriting team's subsequent musicals included 2000's *Seussical*, 2002's *A Man of No Importance*, 2005's *Dessa Rose*, and musical revue *Chita Rivera: The Dancer's Life*, *The Glorious Ones*, *Little Dancer*, a Degas-inspired musical that played at the Kennedy Center in 2014. *Rocky: The Musical* opened on Broadway that same year. In April 2017, 20 years after the film, a stage version of *Anastasia* with a book by Terrence McNally opened on Broadway.

# What to Listen For

Ragtime the musical is filled with some of Broadway's most iconic numbers. From the sweeping opening number introducing its many characters to Mother's haunting ballad to Coalhouse's call for action, Flaherty and Ahrens provide the audience with beautiful melodies and poignant lyrics to bring the action of the Gilded Age to life on stage. Take a listen to these selections from *Ragtime*.

## Evelyn's Introduction

Evelyn Nesbit is introduced as the "girl on the swing" and her involvement in the famous murder trial of Henry K. Thaw. Sung by Lynette Perry from the original Broadway cast recording.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UJsaWunYBPK>

## Wheels of A Dream

Coalhouse Walker Jr. and Sarah sing of the life they hope to live with their son. This clip is from the Kennedy Center Honors featuring Brian Stokes Mitchell as Coalhouse and Audra McDonald as Sarah.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6wdSlyhv1I&t=80s>

## Back to Before

Mother reflects on how her life has changed and she isn't going back to her previous life. Marin Mazzie sings Mother in this performance from the original Broadway cast recording.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gaL11b-Lcso>

## Make Them Hear You

Coalhouse Walker, Jr. sings this triumphant call for action to his supporters as the musical comes to its dramatic conclusion. Brian Stokes Mitchell performs Coalhouse in this performance from the original Broadway cast recording.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Whg\\_OS7P-c&t=5s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Whg_OS7P-c&t=5s)



# Historical Figures in Ragtime

## Harry Houdini

A famous illusionist and stunt performer, Harry Houdini, born



ensuing trial was a sensation, and Nesbit's fame rose. She modeled, acted, and performed in a variety of vaudeville acts throughout her career.

## Booker T. Washington

An educator, orator, and activist, and adviser to several United States presidents, Mr. Washington was born a slave and later worked to improve race relations in the South and across the United States.



## Emma Goldman

An activist, anarchist, and feminist who gave fiery speeches and wrote controversial books, articles, and pamphlets about the issues she most supported. She was never afraid to be arrested for her actions or her words; eventually Goldman's activism led to her deportation to Russia.



## Evelyn Nesbit

A vaudeville performer who inspired the Gibson Girl ideal



popular in the early 1900s. Ms. Nesbit married the wealthy Harry K. Thaw, but Thaw's anger about Nesbit's affair with prominent architect Stanford White led him to murder White. The

## Henry Ford

An American industrialist and business magnate, Henry Ford, founder of the Ford Motor Company, invented his first automobile in 1896 and

released the Model T in 1908. Ford's assembly line production

methods revolutionized the manufacturing industry. Ford was a conspiracy theorist and was a known antisemite and emerged as a spokesman for right-wing extremism and religious prejudice.

## Admiral Robert Peary

An American explorer and officer in the United States Navy, Admiral Robert Peary was determined to reach the North Pole and was the first to do so in 1909 with the assistance of Inuit guides.



He made many journeys to the northern arctic circle. He is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

## Matthew Henson

A black explorer, Henson accompanied Admiral Peary on many expeditions over the years as his assistant. Out of all of the group, only Henson and the Admiral arrived at the North

Pole with their guides. In 1988, Mr. Henson was re-interred in Arlington National Cemetery near Admiral Peary.



# Life in the Gilded Age

## Innovations

The age of *Ragtime* was an era of change, and much of that change came from innovations in technology and industry. The musical Ragtime includes one of the greatest innovators of his day, Henry Ford. Ford was only one of many great innovators; many technologies we take for granted today were created in the early 1900s.



### The Model T and the Assembly Line

The Model T was an automobile produced by the Ford Motor Company from 1908-1927. Ford built over 15 million Model Ts, and due to new assembly line production methods, the cost of the automobile became much more reasonable for the American public. At one point, the Model T comprised 40% of all automobile sales in the United States.

### The Airplane

In 1903, Orville and Wilbur Wright were the first people to successfully fly a self-propelled, heavier than air aircraft. Inspired by the glider flights of a German engineer, and armed with their skills in building bicycles, the brothers set out to design several versions of different aircraft. After a number of hits and misses with gliders, the brothers finally successfully piloted a propelled aircraft in December of 1903.

### The Radio Receiver

In 1901, Guglielmo Marconi broadcasted the first transatlantic radio signal, allowing for safer maritime travel and further communication worldwide.

through industrialization, urbanization, and different areas of American life.

By 1900, 20% of American women were employed outside of the home. Unfortunately, many women held low-paying jobs with no hope for advancement. As more women found themselves with roles outside of being mothers and wives, they founded organizations to deal with issues ranging from suffrage to the right to vote to working conditions.

The suffrage movement gained steam during the Progressive era, with more women becoming involved as the new century arrived. Women in Ohio had



organized some of the earliest women's rights conventions in 1850 and 1851. In June of 1919, Ohio ratified the 19th amendment, and women secured the right to vote nationwide in 1920.

## Labor Movement

The Industrial Revolution brought great progress to the U.S., but also many new problems for the laboring class. Overcrowding, child labor, poor working conditions, sweatshops, and excessively long work hours were all issues that arose in the age of industrialization.

As conditions worsened, but the economy improved, workers started to organize through labor unions. The first large union was the Order of the Knights of Labor founded in 1869. Labor organizers hoped to eventually unionize all workers, but that was an uphill battle.

Unorganized workers held many strikes and protests in the second half of the 19th century, and these protests brought many changes to labor laws: the enactment of minimum wages, child labor regulations, and maximum hours per day.



The advent of the American labor movement met much opposition; factory owners often called in police or punished participants who participated in labor protests. Despite the consequences, the American labor movement continued, with many labor victories and expansion of membership in the first several decades of the 20th century.

# Pre-Opera Activities

1. Consider the roles of the many different people who prepare for and perform in a musical. Which role appeals to you as a possible career? Once you have seen *Ragtime*, you may reconsider your choice.

2. The American Broadway musical is a close relative to opera. Before you attend *Ragtime*, think about how the two art forms are the same and differ.

Here are some things to think about: musical melodies, story lines, orchestrations, characters, language, spoken dialogue versus recitative.

After you attend, did your ideas change?

# Post-Opera Activities

## Accepting Change

Every character in *Ragtime* experiences change in one way or another—whether they accept those changes or not is another story. For instance, Mother and Father both deal with the changes in their household and community in their own ways. Though hesitant at first, Mother takes Sarah and her child in, taking responsibility for them both. When Father returns from his expedition from the North Pole, he is less than thrilled with this new living situation and the changing times that are happening inevitably. On the other hand, Mother grows in her own right and realizes that she is capable of so much more than what society has told her she can be.

## Discussion Questions:

What character adapts to change the fastest?  
What character adapts to change the slowest?  
How does Mother's acceptance of Sarah and her situation affect her family dynamic?

## Repression

Repression runs rampant in *Ragtime*. Women being repressed by the patriarchal society, people of color being persecuted for the color of their skin, immigrants and poorer people being viewed as less than because of their financial situations and ethnic backgrounds. 1906 is such an interesting time because it is no longer the Victorian Era, a time of constricting clothes and modesty, but we haven't quite reached the scandalous roaring twenties yet. We do seem some leniency here and there with the popularity of figures like Evelyn Nesbit, but people in this time are still very much held back from reaching their full potentials from the society structures in place.

## Discussion Questions:

How does clothing represent repression?  
What group in the show is repressed the most, in your opinion?  
What group sees the least amount of repression?  
What figures in the show "push the envelope" and defy the norm of what is expected?

## The American Dream

The American Dream is the idealistic view that with hardwork, determination, and initiative, one will live a successful and prosperous life. When one thinks of the American Dream, one usually thinks of a nice house to live in, a successful breadwinner husband, a homemaker wife, and bright children with bright futures ahead of them. This ideal is revisited throughout the play almost every character—but one character in particular has high aims for the ideal: Latvia immigrant and widower Tateh.

Tateh is committed to finding a new life for him and his little girl, even when circumstances become so grim that he questions why he chose America in the first place. When Tateh and Mother's lives intertwine, it is apparent that Mother's American Dream and Tateh's American Dream are very different yet essentially the same. Mother, being highly privileged and taken care of by Father, wants their life in New Rochelle to stay nice and peaceful while taking care of her little boy, Edgar, while Tateh is determined to complete the long journey to America, and not just take care of his little girl, but make a life for her that is beyond anything they experienced in Latvia. Those two do share the ultimate core value of providing for their children so that they can have better futures and lives than they have experienced.

## Discussion Questions:

How does Tateh's perception of the American Dream differ from Mother and Coalhouse?  
How do Tateh's actions affect his journey to succeeding?  
Is Tateh's idea of the American Dream the same or different than the ideal life of the typical American today?

# Post-Opera Activities

## Injustice

Injustice seems to be around every corner in *Ragtime*. There's racism, classism, sexism—all the isms—and not to mention xenophobic injustices too. Racism is shown most prevalently with the treatment of Coalhouse in the plot, from tiny racist comments made to him by Father and Grandfather to his ultimate murder by the firehouse crew. Classist injustice? Let's talk about it. Think about all those poor people and their children that probably died due to malnourishment or disease because of their living conditions—living conditions like where Tateh and his little girl were forced to live in: the angry, fetid tenements of the Lower East Side of New York City. This area is described to be worse than anything Tateh and his wife suffered in Latvia. Tateh and many other immigrants came to America for something better for themselves and their families, but when they finally get here, they are treated even worse. *Ragtime* doesn't shy away from the fact that this was a world where people could die simply because of the color of their skin, where they are from, or how much money they have.

### Discussion Questions:

Is Coalhouse just in his reaction to the vandalism to his car?

How do the wealthy people in this show react differently from the marginalized populations?

How do they act similarly?

## Stop the Presses!

The stories of the real characters in *Ragtime* are told through the perspectives of the fictional characters and the newspapers of the time. A typical news article is anywhere from 500-800 words. That's not a lot of characters to detail someone's life! If you were to have your life told in a news article, what would you include?

### Directions:

Design the front of a newspaper. Create a five word title to draw the reader in on "your life" and write an 250-500 word article about an important or shocking moment. Once completed, have the class swap news stories.

## Rag of a Time

*Ragtime* beautifully transfers the words of a novel into a musical while maintaining and adding to its cultural relevance.

### Directions:

Either solo or with up to four group members, create a song or rap about an important social issue. This can be just a chorus or a verse and a chorus. Don't be shy! Songs are just poetry with tunes!