

By Bob Brown

'Ragtime'

This is as exciting a production as you're likely to see

NO, you haven't picked up last week's *TIMEOFF* by mistake. Yes, there is another local production of *Ragtime*, following that of the Pennington Players, whose run at the Kelsey Theatre ended this past weekend. By Anthony Stoeckert's account in this venue, it was a splendid affair. I'll have to take his word for it, since I didn't see it myself.

But if you missed that one, not to worry. You still have a chance to catch the terrific production now on the big stage at Villagers Theatre in Somerset. Here's a theater company that is celebrating 50 years of live performances, quite an accomplishment by any measure.

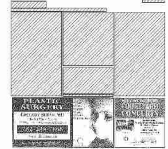
I won't go into plot details; if you follow the reviews here, you'll already have the story. But it's interesting to note some historical tidbits about the show. It's based on E. L. Doctorow's 1975 novel, a sprawling historical fiction of a kind not much in vogue these days. Who but a Doctorow is interested in, or capable of, writing them? While the book received critical acclaim, the original musical did not. The Canadian impresario Garth Drabinsky opened the show in Toronto in 1996, bringing it to Broadway in early 1998, where it had a two-year run.

It was a spectacle of such lavish dimensions that the production was a financial bust. (Drabinsky was later convicted of fraud and forgery in connection with his theatrical dealings, but that's another story.) *New York Times* critic Ben Brantley called it "utterly resistible... it often has the feeling of an instructional diorama in a pavilion at a world's fair... less a celebration of theater per se than of theatrical technology..."

What bothered Brantley, a sort of bloodless "earnestness of a civics lesson," is not likely to trouble theatergoers of this production. In fact, the show has been popular with regional theater groups since it was licensed for local production in 2006. One reason is it has a large cast (33 members in this show), which gives everyone a chance to shine. And the music soars, so featured players can show their chops.

In a sense, it's three casts in one, each group representing an ethnic thread of a story set in the New York metropolitan area from 1900 to 1917. Mother (Amanda Conn-Levin) is the matriarch of the upper-class white family from New Rochelle, consisting of Father (Christopher D. Smith), son Edgar (Jason Wilks), Younger Brother (Ryan Aiello), and Grandfather (Sam Rosalsky). The black group, centering on ragtime pianist Coalhouse Walker, Jr. (Khy Garner), intersects with the whites when Mother discovers a foundling near the front porch, left there by Sarah (Ashleigh Myers), Coalhouse's girlfriend. Tatch (Jan Topoleski), an impoverished silhouette artist, and his daughter (Julia Lupi) are the focal characters of the Latvian Jewish immigrant group. Tatch intersects with the upper class when he meets Mother on a train.

All three groups are introduced in an eye-popping opening number, with each group moving and dancing in a style appropriate to their ethnicity. Throughout, choreography by Renee Chambers-Liciaga, a 25-year veteran of Broadway shows, is joyous and polished. Music director Peter de Mets, a freelance composer and conductor with off-Broadway credits, puts the ensemble smoothly through their paces. His 23-member "pit-



band” (not visible and apparently pre-recorded, since they didn’t take a traditional bow) provided about the best musical backing I’ve heard recently on local stages. Pulling it all together was director Rick Joyce, who has a long list of credits in New York and international productions. What a treat to have such talent and experience at the wheel — it really shows.

This show is mostly sung, with featured solos by main characters, strong singers one and all. Each of the 37 numbers (score by Stephen Flaherty, lyrics by Lynn Ahrens) is a stand-out. In addition to the main groups, there are outstanding solos by historical figures, including Emma Goldman (Patricia Bartlett), the exotic/erotic performer Evelyn Nesbit (Ellie MacPherson), Booker T. Washington (Stephen Gant, Sr.), Harry Houdini (Jason Barrameda — who gets to hang upside down and escape from a straitjacket), J. P. Morgan (Wesley Loon), and Henry Ford (A. J. Mecker). Willie Conklin (Joe Zedeny) heads a group of white racist firemen who ignite the shocking climax to the story.

While this staging necessarily lacks the technical sophistication that made the original Broadway show a spectacle (imagine fireworks), it benefits from creative lighting design by Marilyn Anker and solid sound design by Scott Kuker (my one nitpick is that sometimes vocals are overbalanced by instrumental music, and body microphones have a tendency to cut out at times). Oh, and there is one realistic Model-T Ford that makes a stage appearance. Costumes, coordinated by Deepshikha Chatterjee, are elaborate and historically authentic. The set design by Chuck Reece is spare but effective.

Musicals like this take a lot of effort and talent to pull off successfully, and there’s an army of support staff who deserve kudos for this show. The currency of standing ovations has been devalued these days, since every performance seems to induce them. (Call me a curmudgeon; I for one refuse to join the stand-up crowd unless I’m moved by an extraordinary experience.) What you don’t often hear in the theater are boisterous cheers, which were hearty and often for the performances at this show. It’s as exciting a production as you’re likely to see. ●

Ragtime continues at the Villagers Theatre in the Franklin Township Municipal Complex, 415 Demott Lane, Somerset, through June 27. Performances: Fri.-Sat. 8 p.m.; Sun 2 p.m. Tickets cost \$16-\$18. 732-873-2710; www.villagerstheatre.com



From left: Amanda Conn-Levin as Mother, Christopher Smith as Father and Jan Topoleski as Tateh.