



## *Ragtime* Performance Preview Guide

We at Wheelock Family Theatre at Boston University appreciate that patrons have different ideas of what material or themes are appropriate for them and their families. For this reason, we provide the following information. Please note that the following contains plot spoilers.

### **Age Recommendation**

Wheelock Family Theatre's production of *Ragtime* may not be suitable for children under the age of 10.

### **Versions available to preview**

A script is available at the Wheelock Family Theatre box office for you to read.

### **Production length**

The show is estimated to run 2 hours and 45 minutes with a 15 minute intermission.

### **Educational Content**

*Ragtime* is a two-act musical with book by Terrence McNally, music by Stephen Flaherty, and lyrics by Lynn Ahrens. It is based on the book, *Ragtime* by E.L. Doctrow. The production interweaves the stories of historical figures with fictionalized characters, providing a kaleidoscopic depiction of the stories of the evolution of the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century.

### **References and Moments of Racism and Strong Language**

- There are three distinct worlds that exist in *Ragtime*. New Rochelle, a historically Caucasian and upper class section of New York. Harlem, a historically African American and lower class neighborhood of New York City. Manhattan's Lower East Side, a lower class neighborhood where historically thousands of immigrants lived after arriving from Eastern Europe.
- Racial slurs and phrases used in the production include: "nigger", "yid", "cracker", "kraut", "stupid pollack", "kike", "mick".
- Other words or phrases used in the show include: "bastard", "sons o' bitches", "ass", "schmuck".

### **References and Moments of Violence, Death, & Sex**

- Willie Conklin and the fireman destroy Coalhouse's car because Coalhouse is African American.
- Sarah, a new mother who is stricken with grief, buries her newborn son in the ground.
- Tateh attacks a man who tries to buy his daughter.
- Characters recount and describe an arsonist setting numerous fires throughout New York, which injure several fireman.
- Characters recount and describe a gunman shooting and killing three people.
- The song "What a Game" has violent tones.
- Coalhouse and Younger Brother plot to blow up J.P. Morgan's Library.
- Sarah is killed by policemen who mistakenly believe she has a gun.
- Characters describe the death of Evelyn Nesbit's lover, Stanford White, who was shot and killed by her husband Harry K. Thaw.
- Coalhouse is shot and killed by the police.
- Evelyn Nesbit's performance in "Crime of the Century" contains sexual undertones. She uses the phrase "ruined at the age of 15."

## **FULL SYNOPSIS**

*Courtesy of Music Theatre International*

### **Act One**

We are introduced to the social and political climate of the United States in the early twentieth century by meeting a parade of characters – famous celebrities and private citizens of the time. First, we visit New Rochelle, New York, to meet a well-to-do white family: Mother, Father and their Little Boy, Mother's Younger Brother and Grandfather. Next, we go to Harlem to meet Coalhouse Walker, Jr., a ragtime pianist, and his admirers. Immigrants arrive at Ellis Island as we meet Tateh, an artist who makes silhouettes, and his Little Girl. The lives of these three American families are entwined with Booker T. Washington, Harry Houdini, J.P. Morgan, Henry Ford, Evelyn Nesbit and Emma Goldman. Whites, African Americans, immigrants and celebrities are set on a collision course in the opening number ("Ragtime").

Father is accompanying Admiral Peary on a trip to the North Pole. At the dock, he consoles Mother that everything will be the same upon his return, but Mother is not convinced ("Goodbye My Love"). On its way out of the harbor, Father's ship passes a rag ship filled with immigrants, arriving in New York. Tateh and the Little Girl are on board. Tateh and Father wave to one another; Father admires the immigrants for their naïve bravery in coming to a new land, and Tateh questions Father's reasons for leaving the place that he has worked so hard to find. Simultaneously, Mother wonders what this year without her husband will bring ("Journey On").

Mother's Younger Brother is in love with Evelyn Nesbit. He is frustrated and lost, searching for meaning in his life and hoping to find it in her. Her show is a vaudeville act that tells the true story of her lover's murder by her famous husband ("Crime of the Century"). Younger Brother goes to all of her shows. One day, after the show, Younger Brother approaches her, but she dismisses him.

The scene shifts to Mother and the Little Boy in the garden. The Little Boy wants to see Houdini, as he has a cryptic message for him, "Warn the Duke." While he begins to read her Father's letter, mother makes a shocking discovery – there is a newborn African-American child buried in the flowerbed. The police arrive on the premises with Sarah, the mother of the child. Rather than let Sarah go to prison, Mother takes Sarah and the child into her own home ("What Kind of Woman").

With many other immigrants, Tateh and The Little Girl disembark at Ellis Island, full of hope ("America"). Tateh sets up his business on the Lower East Side, selling paper silhouettes of celebrities for a nickel each. Emma Goldman chastises him for selling one of J.P. Morgan, the epitome of capitalism. J.P. Morgan enters the scene and metaphorically crushes the immigrants, but Harry Houdini magically swoops in as an emblem of immigrant triumph. Time passes, Tateh becomes less idealistic – he is still poor, and the Little Girl is sick. When a man tries to buy the Little Girl, Tateh has reached rock bottom. He swears to make a better life for himself and his child ("Success").

In Harlem, the people celebrate the great musician, Coalhouse Walker, Jr. ("His Name Was Coalhouse Walker"). He tells his friends the story of how he loved and lost Sarah but reveals that he's just found

out where she might be living and is determined to win her back ("Gettin' Ready Rag"). Henry Ford appears to tell us of his new method of mass production and his most famous product, the Model T ("Henry Ford"). A new car rolls off of the assembly line, and Coalhouse drives off in search of Sarah.

Back in New Rochelle, Mother and the Little Boy wait at the train station, on their way to New York City to take care of the family business while Father is away. Tateh and the Little Girl wait across the tracks for a train to Boston. Mother and Tateh greet one another, and Tateh is surprised to be treated with respect ("Nothing Like the City"). The Little Boy has a premonition that they will see Tateh and the Little Girl again, but Mother tells him that is absurd.

On his way to New Rochelle, Coalhouse encounters a group of hostile volunteer firemen who threaten him for being cocky by driving past them in his new car. Meanwhile, Sarah, living in Mother's attic, begs her infant's forgiveness for her desperation, trying to explain what drove her to such an unimaginable act ("Your Daddy's Son"). When Coalhouse arrives at Mother's home, Sarah will not see him.

Coalhouse returns every Sunday for weeks, wooing Sarah with his ragtime tunes and winning over Mother, Grandfather and the Little Boy ("The Courtship"). Father returns from the North Pole to find a very different household from the one he left. He cannot wrap his head around the facts that his wife is independent, his family is accepting of the African-American courtship happening in his living room and there is ragtime music coming from his piano ("New Music").

Finally, Sarah comes down to see Coalhouse, and they reunite. Coalhouse tells Sarah of his admiration for Booker T. Washington's achievements, and together, he and Sarah imagine a future for their child ("Wheels of a Dream"). Meanwhile, in Lawrence, Massachusetts, Tateh has lost sight of the American dream and now works at a mill 64 hours a week. In Union Square, Emma Goldman tries to generate a strike against the oppressive mill owners. Younger Brother happens to hear her speech and is energized to the cause of workers rights – he finally has something in which to believe ("The Night That Goldman Spoke in Union Square").

A violent labor strike erupts in Lawrence. Tateh intends to put The Little Girl on a train to a safer place, with other children and a chaperone. However, she is so distraught that he jumps on the train with her. He soothes her terror with a flipbook of silhouettes that he has made ("Gliding"). The train conductor notices the book of moving silhouettes and buys it for his own child. Tateh sees this as a wonderful new business idea.

Coalhouse once again encounters the volunteer firemen, and this time, they do more than threaten him. As Booker T. Washington gives a speech about rising above and holding fast, the men destroy Coalhouse's car. Coalhouse moves through the legal channels, looking for justice for this crime against him, but he is denied at every avenue ("Justice"). He postpones his marriage to Sarah until the matter is resolved. Sarah, out of desperation and naïveté, tries to seek help from a visiting Vice Presidential candidate but is clubbed to death by police who suspect her of having a gun ("President"). Act One closes with the anger and grief of Sarah's funeral ("Till We Reach That Day").

## Act Two

Coalhouse mourns the loss of Sarah ("Coalhouse's Soliloquy"). Seeking vengeance, he shoots three of the firemen who trashed his car, burns their firehouse and demands that the fire chief, Willy Conklin, be brought to justice ("Coalhouse Demands").

A group of young men joins Coalhouse as he strikes out against the system. Booker T. Washington publicly condemns Coalhouse's actions. Father goes to the police to tell them what he knows about Coalhouse. Younger Brother, who is moved by the plight of the oppressed and angry about the injustice done to Coalhouse, erupts at Father for working against Coalhouse. He storms out of the house in anger, and Mother, who is still caring for Sarah and Coalhouse's baby, is deeply upset. In reaction, Father takes the Little Boy to a baseball game, but even this has changed and is now a game, not just for upper-class whites, but for immigrants, too ("What a Game"). Meanwhile, Coalhouse's band of men sets fires around the city. Reporters besiege the family in New Rochelle. Father, thinking that it is time to get away, takes the family to Atlantic City, where Evelyn Nesbit and Houdini both happen to be starring attractions ("Let's Run Away to Atlantic City").

In Atlantic City, we discover that Tateh is now a famous film director and has recreated himself as Baron Ashkenazy. His daughter, healthy and beautifully dressed, is by his side. Once again, Tateh meets Mother and tells her the story of his success ("Buffalo Nickel Photoplay, Inc.").

Later, the Little Boy asks Houdini for his autograph and gives him the message, "Warn the Duke." Houdini is confused and intrigued, but the Little Boy runs off. The Little Girl and Little Boy play together as Tateh and Mother watch from the boardwalk ("Our Children"). Tateh reveals his humble origins to Mother, who is moved by his honesty.

In Harlem, Younger Brother searches for Coalhouse, and although the residents are distrustful of him, one of Coalhouse's men takes him to Coalhouse's hideout. Meanwhile, drawn by laughter and dancing in a club, Coalhouse thinks of the first time that he met Sarah ("Sarah Brown Eyes"). A blindfolded Younger Brother is brought to Coalhouse's den. Younger Brother wants to express his sympathy for Coalhouse's actions, but all he can manage to do is offer his knowledge of explosives ("He Wanted to Say").

Coalhouse focuses his rage by taking over J.P. Morgan's Library. He threatens to blow up the library and all of its treasures, as well as himself and all of his men – one of whom is now Younger Brother. Father tells Mother that he has volunteered to act as a negotiator, and Mother realizes that this experience has irrevocably changed their relationship ("Back to Before").

Coalhouse and his men barricade themselves inside of the library. Emma Goldman applauds this, but Booker T. Washington deplores these actions. Father tells the authorities that Booker T. Washington is the only man to whom Coalhouse will listen. Booker T. is sent into the library to speak with Coalhouse. He chides Coalhouse, both for risking the lives of the young men around him while leaving his own son to be raised by white men and for endangering the position of all African Americans, by making them seem hot-headed and violent ("Look What You've Done"). He assures Coalhouse that if he surrenders, he will have a fair trial and a forum for his opinions. Coalhouse negotiates the safe passage of his men, including Younger Brother, while Father remains behind in the library. The men protest his decision, but he explains to them that the only way to win the fight is to go out into the world and tell their story ("Make Them Hear You"). When Coalhouse is left alone with Father, he asks about his son. Father promises a safe end to the standoff, but when Coalhouse exits the building to surrender, he is shot dead by authorities.

The era of ragtime ends. The characters come forward, one by one, to tell us the end of their stories: Younger Brother joins the revolutionary Emiliano Zapata, Emma Goldman is deported, Booker T. Washington establishes the Tuskegee Institute, Evelyn Nesbit fades into obscurity, Houdini has the one true mystical experience of his life when he is performing in Sarajevo and the Duke is shot, Grandfather dies, and Father is killed during wartime. Finally, Mother and Tateh marry and move to California with their children.

As the curtain falls, Little Coalhouse runs into Mother's arms, and men and women of all nationalities – and race – join Mother on the stage ("Epilogue").