

British Theatre Guide

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Ragtime

Based on the novel by E L Doctorow, music and lyrics by Stephen Flaherty and Lynn Ahrens, book by Terrence McNally

Danielle Tarento, Steven M Levy, Sean Sweeney and Vaughan Williams

Charing Cross Theatre

8 October–10 December 2016

E L Doctorow's novel presents the overlapping stories of three fictional families to provide a panoramic picture of American society in the early twentieth century: an unnamed respectable white family from New Rochelle with a father who leaves to go to the North Pole with Peary, a black piano player, Coalhouse Walker Jr and his fiancée and a Jewish European immigrant, Tateh, newly arrived with his daughter.

Historical events and real people, from anarchist Emma Goldman and escapist Houdini to Henry Ford and Booker T Washington, are woven into the fictional narrative, along with radical black power action more like protests that came fifty years later; there is even a prophecy of the Sarajevo assassination. It isn't documentary history but it is a strong story.

Even at nearly three hours (including interval), not all Doctorow's detail can be put on stage but McNally's book gets in all the main points of the story and director Thom Sutherland's fast-moving production concentrates on the human core of the story. Tom Rogers and Toots Butcher's setting with its moving gantries and swivelling pianos doesn't recreate locations but more a visual counterpart to the orchestrations, with Howard Hudson's golden lighting creating an atmospheric chiaroscuro.

Where the action is set is usually clear from the text, though the frequent fast tempi and band balance often make it difficult to catch all of Lynn Ahrens's award-winning lyrics. It's a small price to pay when the sound overall is so good in a score that has been arranged for a much smaller band made up of the performers with Jordan L Smith leading them from the piano. You can still follow the story and, though its critical edge could be stronger, it still has strong resonance for our own time as America replaces its President.

The characters tell their own stories in third person as well as acting them, with Ethan Quinn's Little Boy beginning the narration (sharing performances with Samuel Peterson). Earl Carpenter is his at first somewhat reactionary Father, Anita Louise Combe splendid as his warm-hearted mother taking a new line when free to think for herself and Jonathan Stewart plays her younger brother who is also discovering a new humanity.

Gary Tushaw is moving as the ill-treated immigrant who finds his own entrepreneurial way of succeeding in capitalist America, with Alana Hinge delightful as his little daughter (a role shared with Riya Vyas).

The Mother discovers an abandoned black baby whom she takes in, along with his mother Sarah, temporarily separated from Coalhouse his father, who finds success playing ragtime but finds

himself in a struggle against racism. Jennifer Saayeng's beautifully sung Sarah and Ako Mitchell's powerful Coalhouse are the beating heart of this production.

Among a multi-talented company of musician-actors, some of whom are singing, dancing and playing an instrument all at the same time (James Mack in one moment especially), Valerie Cutko is the elegant anarchist Emma Goldman, Nolan Frederick a striking Booker T Washington, Christopher Dickins is Harry Houdini and Simon Anthony a racist fireman.

This is a show full of the rhythms of ragtime and floating melodies. It gains from the proximity of a smaller theatre and, though its themes may aim to be serious, its vitality send its audience out on a high.

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)