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Intertwining Lives Produce Hit

### **Ragtime, the Musical**

Book by Terence McNally

Music by Stephen Flaherty

Lyrics by Lynn Ahrens

Director - Terry Helland

Music Director – Terry Temple

Choreographer – Katy Callie

[Desert Stages Theatre](#)

Oct 9-Nov 1, 2009

480-483-1664



by

**Paula Shulak**



I am so glad that someone finally had the vision to produce RAGTIME in the Valley of the Sun! This is one of the most beautiful shows I have ever seen in every sense of the word. It is the quintessential story of America at the turn of the 20th Century, the melting pot of the world. Based on the classic novel by E. L Doctorow, RAGTIME has a magnificent message, a gripping story, glorious music and enough history to satisfy any one. Here we meet the likes of Booker T. Washington, Emma Goldman, Harry Houdini, J. P. Morgan, Henry Ford, Evelyn Nesbit, Admiral Peary as well as a future scion of the motion picture industry. Here we watch the interweaving of three important ethnic groups who have made America strong – the WASP backbone of the country, the immigrants who flocked to these golden shores and the African Americans who finally came into their own in the middle of the 20th Century. This is their story told with stirring song and intricate dance. Desert Stages is to be commended and lauded for telling their story.

And Director Terry Helland deserves Kudos galore for his coup in presenting this broad based, gigantic show in a theater not much bigger than my living room! At one point I counted almost 50 people on stage at once. This is no small feat – to do this Helland made use of every inch of space, even staging several scenes in the eaves of the room high above

us. Another clever use of space was the revolving circular stage in the center of the floor. Helland and Choreographer Katy Callie were absolutely ingenious in their designs and staging. It almost was a shame that they could not have had more space in which to work their magic. They did well with what they had, but I kept imagining what they could do with a roomier venue.

There were few if any weak links in the huge ensemble; even the young people knew their roles well and deserve praise. But of course, there were a few standouts. Miguel Jackson, a newcomer to the area, was clearly the star of the show as he sang and acted his role of Coalhouse Walker Jr., the ragtime piano player who falls in love with Sarah and with the idea of America but who is thwarted at every turn by bigotry and prejudice. In true tragic fashion, he loses in the end, but he puts up a stellar fight. He has a fascinating voice which captured the role beautifully. And opposite him was Brittany Bradford in the role which made Audra MacDonald famous, beautiful Sarah, another tragic figure representative of the fate of the Negro in the early 20th Century. Her voice was a delight. In the role of Tateh, the Jewish immigrant who met nothing but poverty until he accidentally hits on the idea of moving silhouettes was Jeff Davey, a natural who portrayed this bedeviled man to the hilt. Both his characterization and his much improved singing voice was perfect for his part. Then there was Elizabeth Reeves as Mother, the Victorian woman subservient to her husband, who discovers what life should be all about as she rebels, much like the heroine of *A DOLL'S HOUSE* written at this same time period. Reeves has a beautiful voice and a charming, serene characterization which was just right. Sean Taylor as Younger Brother was suitably rebellious and symbolic of the change in attitude that was taking over in America at the time. And in several small roles, Wade Moran, and all those playing the famous Americans listed above did a spectacular job of bringing these icons to life.

Technically, the costume design is a real winner. True to the period, the designer, Lisa Suico-Scheir, produced stunning dresses for Mother, accurate clothing for a slew of immigrants and typical dress for the African American group. And the choreographical staging played up the intermingling of the three groups so well with the costuming adding to the mix. It was a delight to watch. Musically the ensemble was very strong and well trained for which Terry Temple is to be thanked. Lighting was good except in the very few places where the segues from scene to scene appeared to be a little rough. The set was necessarily simple due to the lack of space and the number of actors that graced the stage. The one area where I felt there could have been some improvement was in some of the props.

But don't let this few very small item deter you from going to see a truly excellent show; *RAGTIME* at Desert Stages should be on your must see list now before it closes on November 1. You will adore the music, marvel at the staging and agree that the actors deserve all the plaudits they can get. The intertwining of the author's characters and the talents of those who make them come to life are superb.