An Era Exploding

A triumphant revival of *Ragtime* is both spare and spectacular

By: David Barbour

The opening number. The bright white illumination that one might easily take for cyc lighting is, in fact, video.

All photos: Matthew Murphy

The scenic designer David Korins notes that whenever the musical *Ragtime* is staged, audiences and critics note that it has never felt more relevant. This may be true; however, surely, this is the musical's most red-hot moment yet. Terrence McNally's book, wrangled from E. L. Doctorow's epic novel, renders America in 1904 as an uncanny mirror of a nation roiled by racism, immigration, economic inequality, and disruptive technology. The songs, featuring Stephen Flaherty's soaring melodies and Lynn Ahrens' pointed lyrics, build on the book, beginning with the stunning opening number, a thumbnail sketch of a society bursting with promise yet torn by race and class divisions. The show captures the electric energy and untrammeled fury of a society undergoing profound, irreversible changes. As one character remarks, there is no going back to before.

A major challenge in staging *Ragtime* involves juggling its expansive cast of characters, beginning with its three central families: Wealthy, WASPy Father and Mother, living in New Rochelle on the profits of their fireworks factory; the Black musician Coalhouse Walker, eager to win back Sarah, the woman he loved and lost, and their infant son; and Tateh, the Jewish immigrant, who, seeking a better future for his daughter, will parlay his silhouette-making skills into a career in the nascent film industry, reinventing himself as the "Baron Ashkenazy." Weaving in and out of the action is a chorus of real-life figures: Evelyn Nesbit, the empty-headed showgirl, working to monetize her scandalous past; Booker T. Washington, with his uplift-the-race approach to Black-white relations; the magician Harry Houdini, a symbol of immigrant success, nursing a private sorrow and dabbling in spiritualism; the plutocrats JP Morgan and Henry Ford, preaching the gospel of success; and Emma Goldman, the anar-

chist, furiously demanding a fairer social compact.

It's no small task to keep *Ragtime* moving at top speed while the sprawling action unfolds. And there are questions of scale: Frank Galati's enormous original production was a Broadway landmark that closed at a loss after a two-year run. A trimmed-down revival in 2009 had its virtues but closed after 65 performances. The current Lincoln Center Theater revival, staged by Lear deBessonet, has been universally acclaimed. In addition to a superb cast led by Caissie Levy as Mother, Joshua Henry as Coalhouse, and Brandon Uranowitz as Tateh, it features a production design that catches the show's cinematic nature. New York's third *Ragtime* is arguably the first to hit the sweet spot between pace and spectacle.

Scenery/video

Although much of *Ragtime* unfolds in and around New York City, including a courtroom, a Harlem dive, Ellis Island, a ballpark, and the Morgan Library, it also roams elsewhere, including several locations in New Rochelle, the interior of a Ford plant, and the decks of two oceangoing vessels. Again, the paramount goal was to create a design that moves swiftly and seamlessly through all of these. Korins, who is perfectly capable of renovating an entire Broadway house (*Here Lies Love*) or calling up all sorts of sleight-of-hand visual tricks (*Beetlejuice*), also knows when less is more. For *Ragtime*, he deploys a collection of modular units—a pair of towering staircases, half a dozen lamps—on rollers that can be used to suggest many locations. This approach is especially useful in numbers like "Journey On," which unfolds on two different ships and a dock in New York Harbor.

The design also makes grand gestures with relatively simple means, making use of the Beaumont's enormous depth of just over 65'. The opening begins with the young boys who play Edgar (Mother and Father's son) and Coalhouse Walker, Jr., alone onstage with a piano and an illuminated sign bearing the show's title. Gradually, the stage's depth is revealed, and an elevator, located far upstage, rises, carrying the full company; seconds later, the actors stride downstage en masse. It's a gasp-inducing moment that, in a single image, distills the show's vision of a teeming, diverse, fractious America.

The design is also unusually unified. Scenery, lighting,

Opposite: Evelyn Nesbit. Note how the lighting bathes her chorus of accusers in deep blue. Above: Korins deploys two rolling staircases to set the scene of a political rally in Union Square.

and video often combine in ways that make it difficult, if not impossible, to separate individual elements. This cross-breeding of disciplines supports the musical's faintly hallucinogenic quality, marked by constantly shifting locations, the surreal courtroom vaudeville turn "Crime of the Century," and the frequent interactions between fictional characters and historical figures.

Korins notes that in early talks, "[deBessonet] said, 'I think this is a black-box show.' She showed me a few visuals that might be our north star. I also felt that the show really needed to move; it had to be poetic, elegant, and elevated, and it had to take advantage of the Beaumont stage, which gives you 35' downstage of the proscenium. It's the craziest apron in the world. It can deliver real intimacy, but you've also got 60' upstage of the proscenium, where you can't stage narrative-driven scenes. So, what to do?"

Researching iconic images such as the Statue of Liberty and the American flag, Korins had a revelation: "Wouldn't it be interesting to have a series of translucent layers that could change the topography of the landscape, that could be individually pulled out with lighting and projection to create depth, texture, and movement—but which didn't have to drive the narrative?" Also, he notes, such elements "could close down the space." With them in place, he adds, "We could think about systems of scenery like the irises, the metal truss that delivers the Lower East Side," as well as the streetlamps and staircases. The show's turntable also became a crucial element.

Even more fully furnished scenes have a poetic, slightly abstract touch. The living room of Mother and Father's New Rochelle home "demands its own architectural grounding," Korins notes. "You need the staircase because Sarah is upstage waiting to come downstairs and join Coalhouse." He's referring to the song, "New Music," which marks the culmination of a series of visits made by Coalhouse. "We thought, wouldn't it be interesting to do the passage of time using the turntable?" Thus, the set shifts its angle throughout this sequence. To create these and other moments, the designer says, "We rigorously storyboarded the show. We sat in my conference room, going moment to moment to moment of that three-hour show; we probably did it 50 times." As he did so, he began to see the roles that lighting and video could play in suggesting locations.

Interestingly, Korins adds, the show's score influenced some scenic-design choices. The production "has the biggest orchestra on Broadway. When do you ever get an orchestra as big as a cast? The spareness of the production's systems—the lamps, the irises, the turntable—allows you to hear the music again, as if for the first time. In the Beaumont, you can deliver it into the audience's laps." Thus, he says, the question became: "What's the least we can do to render this scene? How can we move fluidly from one to the next? It became about transitions, then picking out moments that delivered the stage's depth."

Honoré and Holder take sharply different approaches to the musical's vastly different worlds. For the Harlem scenes, Honoré notes, "We had the idea that the characters exist in clubs and basement cabarets, so we move the angles further down, giving them a heavy incandescent, sort of a lamplit look pushed to amber."

That restraint is useful in rendering the New Rochelle house and the Atlantic City sequence, the latter backed by an azure-blue ocean and a wooden roller coaster. Perhaps the most original scenic effect is the enormous muslin, hung above the stage, used as a surface for lighting and video imagery in "Back to Before," Mother's declaration of independence. "It's a gesture that could only happen on the Vivian Beaumont stage," Korins says. The piece "tracks backward 75' and is hung at an angle. When it starts to move, it's almost imperceptible."

Noting that many audiences see the muslin as a representation of the sky, Korins characterizes it as "an emotional barometer for Mother. It represents her inner strength and turmoil, how she becomes a powerful, amazing person. Then it transitions into an American flag." Following the number's conclusion, he adds, "You next see Coalhouse, whose American dream literally gets ripped from him. It's not about the scenery; it was about what could be used to reflect Mother and Coalhouse's journeys. It's almost incidental that it was done with scenery."

If the muslin is a simple concept, it was a challenge to rig, Korins notes. "It needs to show up in 20 seconds behind an active scene. It has 30 or 40 rigging points, and they all need to drop. Then it gets pulled off on its own." He credits Paul Smithyman, Lincoln Center Theater's production manager, with figuring it out. "Obviously, it needed its own tracking system to take it back. We had to set it up, work through it, and fit it into show mode. It's a nice thing to put into a rendering, but it's another thing to pull it off." Helpfully, he notes, unlike any other Broadway house, "Backstage is not a problem at the Beaumont. There's a lot of space."

The previously mentioned upstage elevator, Korins says, is situated in "an unobstructed area underneath the deck, so we knew we could put something there." Then there's the smaller downstage lift, which reveals various characters. "It goes basically in the middle of the orchestra. We have stagehands down there, tiptoeing around the orchestra, trying to maneuver boxes and things on the lift. It is like threading a needle straight into the orchestra pit."

The interaction of dimensional scenery and video imagery is often imperceptible. When Coalhouse and

The Atlantic City sequence, featuring an azure-blue ocean and a wooden roller coaster, takes advantage of the Beaumont stage's extreme depth.

Sarah sit in his new Ford auto (a gorgeous scenic element), they are backed by a forest that could be scenery or a digital image. (It is the latter.) The Statue of Liberty, seen in the distance in certain scenes, looks three-dimensional but is a projection. Many images, projected upstage, are seen through layers of fabric that lend a dreamlike quality. This was intentional, says Benjamin Pearcy, of 59 Studio, who designed the projections with Brad Peterson. "From the beginning, Lear talked about it being a mysterious world, with lots of layers and nothing clearly defined. It took quite a bit of iteration to get to where it is now, because that's not an easy thing to articulate or create."

Pearcy adds, "My background is in both lighting and projection, and in this production, video often is lighting. Video functions as a backdrop, and it's also a very close collaboration with lighting. It wasn't easy to find the right language; we didn't find a lot of it until we got into the theatre." For example, see the photo on pages 30 and 31, showing the opening number. The bright white illumination that one might easily take for cyc lighting is, in fact, video. Similarly, the muslin in "Back to Before" is treated with both lighting and video.

Pearcy speaks with relish about "confusing the audience" in the name of "telling the story, creating the places" with a deliberate economy of means. "We could easily have done it with expansive and detailed backdrops. But it's not about that; it's about deploying just enough information needed to tell that audience where we are."

Seeking the right style for the imagery, Pearcy says, "Early on, I tried to find an [emblematic] artist of the period, because it's nice to ground the work in, in this case, a particular style of painting. But we never did find that, because the story is about three distinct groups of people. Instead, we thought about painterly techniques. We decided the immigrants are in more of a charcoal world; Mother and Father's family is a watercolor world; and the Harlem world is filled with rich fabrics. We went through iterations of these ideas, and some of them are still represented. We drew what we wanted from various painting and illustration styles, using what felt right."

Pearcy's design uses a combination of media; the

upstage wall consists of video panels, but, in other scenes ("Back to Before," for example), projectors are employed. The presence of LED panels is not at all obvious, in part because diffusion materials are used. Other techniques are in play, too: "It's funny," he says. "Only since we did *Stranger Things: The First Shadow* in London [see *LSA*, July 2025] have we started to master how to use LED screens in a way different from how they've been used until now." The secret? "Instead of going for the full dynamic range, we concentrate on how the processing works so you can't tell that you're looking at LEDs."

Indeed, he says, "It's become clear to me that the choice of LED screen doesn't make that much difference, but the processing does. We're using Brompton processors, which have lots of little tricks, so you don't have banding and the other things that we used to struggle with. Most of the time, LED screens are too bright for the theatre, although there are times when you need the full dynamic range. When you want something to be very bright and then not, a 10-bit color workflow allows us to do that. We can use the full range of the screen without having to worry about turning it up and turning it down."

He adds, "The big difference you get with LED screen products is subtle but important for us: How reflective is the LED surface? Does it reflect light badly or not? Again, we're not the only ones making light in the room; we need to interact with everything else going on. If there's bounce light hitting the screen, is it being suppressed by the screen? That's what matters." *Ragtime* employs ROE Visual Carbon CB5 panels.

"We also have an RP screen that we fly in front of the LED screen," Pearcy notes. "We don't use it very often, but there are times when we need another layer of obscurity. With multiple layers of scrim—even one layer—moiré effects are a concern. Putting RP in front of helps with that."

As noted, Pearcy says, "'Back to Before' is a big mix of lighting and video. We each had our challenges about how to project or light the surface without revealing all the rigging that makes the muslin pull away. Also, because it ends with the American flag, that obviously needed to be a projection, so we had to create an image that would work on it." Imagery is delivered via three Disguise media servers.

"On basically every show we do now, lighting triggers video," Pearcy adds. "We do it using sACN, because it is

Opposite: Perhaps the most original scenic effect is the enormous muslin, hung above the stage, that appears, used as a surface for lighting and video imagery in "Back to Before." Above: Much of the lighting has a rather noirish cast, with the principals pulled out of the darkness.

the most reliable and straightforward way. We have our own cue list in the lighting console to trigger the video. We have a very useful piece of software, Toucan Type, that handles programming. To use the sACN triggers, you have to have in each cue a fixture with values that match the cue number in Disguise. With Toucan Type, you hit a button and it programs in those values and, more importantly, if we have a cue in Disguise and it's not in Eos [lighting console], it makes the cue for us. If we add a cue and forget to tell lighting, it warns us that a specific cue number doesn't exist for lighting. It has saved us untold hours." The projection gear is supplied by Sound Associates.

Lighting

With the vast stage and large cast but relatively little scenery, lighting designers Adam Honoré and Donald Holder had to master Rodin-level carving skills. In this production, Honoré notes, "Lighting picks up a lot of the architectural responsibility in addition to time and place and directing where to look." Honoré, who lit the original version of this production for the Encores! program at New York's City Center, says, "It had been in a really big theatre, and then we had to translate it to an even bigger one In the transfer, we picked up the incomparable Don Holder, who has done I don't know how many shows in the Beaumont. One thing he said, when doing the paperwork for the transfer, was, 'Always hang two times as much as you think you need.' And boy, was he right; you almost need to double everything just to cover that much space. Also, *Ragtime* is such an epic piece; it's kind of operatic." (Holder's credits in the Beaumont include *Juan Darién*, *South Pacific*, *The King and I*, *Oslo*, *My Fair Lady*, and *McNeal*. He also lit the 2009 Broadway revival of *Ragtime*.)

Honoré says, "After we did Encores!, we met to discuss whether to make big changes for Broadway. We decided we had nailed the tone and aesthetic. Everything felt right for the *Ragtime* of today. But we wanted to flesh out things that could have been handled better. We have a real Model T in this production, and a turntable. We have a video designer to fill in some of the blanks. And we spent a lot of time figuring out how we could be more precise with our visual style. But the Encores! production was the guiding force."

Much of the lighting has a rather noirish cast, with the principals pulled out of the darkness. As Honoré notes, "David Korins talked about the tones and quality of the scenery as shades of gray and black. What's great about the space is how it can open up, but we can make it really small, using black soft goods. There are scenes where we fly in a blackout drop like a grand drape, but I don't think the audience realizes it."

Then again, Honoré says, picking out the actors on a vast, dark stage comes with challenges. "It's one thing to turn on a spotlight and pick up Coalhouse so he is beautifully lit. But the thrust stage is so deep that a front light for

him is a side light for someone else." The problem is compounded in larger scenes: "You can't hang 16 followspots," he notes. Thus, to get the necessary coverage, "There's a lot of intentional cueing, so, as the characters move around the stage, it feels like they radiate light. At times, it feels so natural that light exists around them, as in Mother's and Sarah's songs. They look like light sources themselves. The lighting for some of the men has more of an industrial feeling. That's why you see those shafts of light far upstage in 'Coalhouse Demands.' It's a harsher, more angled world, kind of like the streets of New York after it rains and the light bounces off the water. When we're in Henry Ford's factory, there's a mechanical, percussive quality to it."

Honoré and Holder take sharply different approaches to the musical's vastly different worlds. "New Rochelle is crisp, clean, pristine," Honoré says, noting the influence of Linda Cho's costumes for these characters, which are all in shades of cream and white. Also, he says, "There's something about the sunlight up in New Rochelle that feels like that." For the Harlem scenes, he notes, "We had the idea that the characters exist in clubs and basement cabarets, so we move the angles further down, giving them a heavy incandescent, sort of a lamplit look pushed to amber. For the immigrants, we wanted a feeling of the Lower East Side, so we went with an early-evening/daylight quality, when the sunlight bumping off the buildings creates a heavy sort of blue. You can put all three looks onstage, like we do in the opening number, and it works like a magic trick," jumping from one reality to the next. "By the end of that brilliant opening number," he adds, "you have all the lighting information you need for the whole show."

Discussing the rig, Honoré says, "Pretty much everything at the front of house is a [Martin] MAC Encore Performance WRM. We went with them because it feels like the show exists in either an incandescent world or in sunlight. We also went with [Vari-Lite] VL3500s, which are a little punchier and brighter, for crisper backlighting. They're a little louder, though, so we buried them up where the soft goods are stored. To fill in space, we have a handful of MAC Ultras, which provide a really good punch. That's basically it. I prefer to stick with a smaller grouping of moving lights so the show has a clean quality and the colors align." He adds, "I'm thrilled with the Martin line; they really understand theatre, and the quality of light we want." Control is via an ETC Eos console. Lighting gear was supplied by PRG.

If ever a show cried out for a fluid cueing style, it is *Ragtime*; Honoré and Holder's design adds to the sense of a world constantly in motion. "When we started tech," Honoré says, "Everyone said, 'We have to go faster.' But I said, 'If we do this well now, by the time we get to previews, it will feel like a polished production'." Often, he notes, "You start with broad strokes, and you go back during previews, putting nuance. But on this one, I felt we needed to create those moments in tech, so the actors would know, say, when there was a little pin spot on them from a mile away. When we got through the first pass, everybody was shocked at how much specificity there was. Of course, there was work to be done in previews, but because we went at a bit of a slower pace, we got that seamless, cinematic quality."

Sound

The Vivian Beaumont Theater has notoriously tricky acoustics, even after several upgrades. Kai Harada's only previous experience there was on *Mike Birbiglia: The Old Man and the Pool*. But designing a solo comedy piece is hardly the same as providing the sound for a sweeping, epic musical. "Lear shared her concerns based on shows she had seen there," Harada says. Her worries included getting a proper balance between voices and orchestra, which the designer took to heart. For his part, he noted more fundamental challenges: "There aren't that many places for speakers; nor are there better locations than where they usually go. I knew I shouldn't try to reinvent the wheel: I stuck with traditional speaker locations in concentric rings and used speakers I am very accustomed to."

Harada also notes the challenges of the Beaumont itself: "Every row gets a different amount of acoustic energy from the pit and from the stage, so there was a delicate dance to make sure that the sound from the loudspeakers was appropriately complementing what we were hearing acoustically." He also cites the "exceptional" orchestrations by William David Brohn.

To cope with the deep stage, Harada says, "We set up an upstage zone, a mid-stage zone, and left-center-right downstage zones for the actors; we put people into the system at slightly different times, which helps to create separation during counterpoint sections and provide a depth to the overall sound."

The reinforcement system includes three rings of loudspeakers: one close to the stage, hung as low as any have ever been in the Beaumont, and then two more off the second catwalk: the first aimed at the back of the orchestra seating and the other aimed at the front of the balcony. A final ring of ten UPMs covers the last couple of rows in the balcony. Most of the boxes are from Meyer Sound's Ultra-X line. Harada adds, "We also have some UPA-2Ps, which I use all the time, and UPMs for fill, plus a couple more Ultra-Xs for additional orchestra reinforcement; they provide additional clarity and detail, so we're not just relying on sound coming from the same speakers as the vocals."

Foldback, he adds, "was slightly challenging because we couldn't put anything in the deck—it's a shiny surface, and then there's the turntable in the middle. So instead, all foldback—Meyer UPJuniors—is hung overhead. If we mute the main system and keep the foldback on, it's actually quite loud onstage, but it needs to be at that scale so the

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actors can hear it.” The orchestra, located under the stage, “has no personal mixers,” he says. “We have little zoned speakers for each section of musicians, but we [including James Moore, the musical director] wanted them to play like an ensemble and not rely on headphone mixes.”

The overall speaker package includes, from Meyer, 17 Ultra-X40s, seven Ultra-X42s, 18 UPM-1Ps, 12 UPJuniors, two 500-HPs, two 600-HPs, two 750-LFC subwoofers, and 18 MM-4s, three MM-4CEU processors, plus two Lab Gruppen four-channel amps, and d&b audiotechnik gear for the surround system and orchestra pit foldback. The system is processed by five Meyer GALAXY 816 with reverb courtesy of TC Electronic M3000 and M6000 units.

Given the show’s elaborate period costumes and headwear, mic placement was always going to be a challenge. “A lot of the male ensemble wear mics over their ears,” Harada says, “including Joshua Henry. We did score a coup with John Clay, who plays Booker T. Washington, by getting a mic on his hat, which makes him sound incredible. Colin Donnell, who plays Father, has a mic on his ear and another in the center. We switch between the two depending on what he’s doing with his hat. We had originally done that with Joshua, but he doesn’t consistently have the hat on.” The mics are Sennheiser MKE1s connected to the company’s 6000 wireless systems. Orchestra mics consist of gear from Schoeps, AKG, Sennheiser, Ear Trumpet Labs, Shure, Neumann, and Royer.

Control is via a Studer 5 console, an unusual choice for Broadway these days, but Harada remains loyal to the brand. “It is getting a bit old,” he admits, but Masque Sound [the show’s audio gear supplier] has been buying used systems where they can find them to support my shows, because pretty much everything I do these days is on a Studer. It’s completely configurable, so it’s easy for me to funnel all the necessary information into it. Then I get with Gary Stockard and Kevin Kennedy at Masque; we put it together and make sure it all works. Ultimately, it’s the sound quality that keeps me going back; it’s like a high-precision sports car, and the engineers who mix my shows feel that, too.”

Key personnel on *Ragtime* includes Justin West (associate set designer), Shannon Clarke and Victoria Bain (assistant lighting designers); Owen Meadows (associate sound designer); Matthew Ward (deck automation); Ryan Palacios (flyperson); Ed Flynn (deck stagehand); Daniel R. Naish (deck carpenter); Kevin Johnson (board operator); Bridget Chervenka (moving light programmer); Michael Bert, Tanya Engeleit, Colin Evans, and Maeve Markee (followspots); Lukas Guilbeau (sound mixer); Craig Van Tassel and Jack O’Brien (deck sound); Sean Beach (projection programmer); Daniel Mueller and Michael Fudge (projection technicians); Rachel M. F. Kenner (props supervisor); Charlie Rausenberger, Katie Stevens, and Will Sweeney (props crew); Amanda Stephens, Anton Volovsek, Emmie Finckel, Andrew Bellomo, and Alexander Kuhn (assistant set designers); Natalie Shipley (assistant lighting designer); Olive Barrett, Ned Gaynor, Addison Heeran, Sarah Carney (props assistants). Having extended its initial limited run more than once, *Ragtime* is now scheduled to close on September 26.