**Ragtime, The Musical**

A review by Louis G. Newman, B.S., Ph.D,

Occasional Stage, Screen, Video, and Music Pundit

Just the name, *Ragtime*, brings to mind that delightful music era from 1890 to 1910 when the works of Scott Joplin and other composers reflected the optimistic and expansionistic attitudes of the progressive environment available in America. Many people came here to get personal freedom and to seek their fortune. This musical, like many others, views New York City as the center of the world, and the events there are viewed as representative of the country at large. The musical opened in Toronto in 1996, went to Los Angeles in 1997, and to the correct location for this show at “The Great White Way” on Broadway in New York City in 1998. It is based on a 1975 novel by E. L. Doctorow.

The stage play follows three families (White, Black, Jewish Immigrant) in the New York City area and combines many of the political and social incidents that occurred in the metropolitan vicinity at that time. Not everything in that era was sweetness and light. There were many injustices directed toward minorities and many street protests demanding an end to the abuse of children, Blacks, Jews, Women, and other groups. The show attempts to combine all these features into a musical depicting the life and social changes during that bygone era.

So what happens? Ragtime actually summarizes the angst of that time by combining several incidents involving the three families into a coherent show about the era. I am reminded of the current “Black Lives Matter” movement and the history of discrimination that still pervades society today. Although, California was even then a more inclusive state, many areas of the country, even today, discriminate against mixed marriages, children without married parents, and people whose appearance displays their religious beliefs. However, I am a wimp. The amount of graphic violence towards people in the staging, while trying to be historically accurate, makes the show dark and depressing.

The title says it is a musical, and the voices are outstanding. There is a lot of talent in the large cast. But where are the memorable tunes? I was hoping for a ragtime-based score. I am reminded of the superb stage music from Arthur Sullivan, Cole Porter, Richard Rogers, Alan Jay Lerner, Andrew Lloyd Webber, and John Williams. I am sure that others will want to add more names to this list! What I got was lilting voices and a completely forgettable discordant composition that did not reflect the music prevalent at that time in history. There were way too many loud noises emanating from the stage. However, my opinion is at variance with the show getting the 1998 Tony award for Best Original Score.

The 2019 performance venue was the Pasadena Playhouse which calls itself the official “State Theatre of California”. This is a magnificent building with 686 seats dating from 1924 and reopened in 1986. I was surprised that I had never heard of the place or been there. My local cultural background must be sorely lacking even after spending 4 years at college in Pasadena. The theater depends on the financial support of many individuals and institutions in the area. All aspects of the production were professional. The theater location in Pasadena, California is interesting because the first black player in major league professional baseball (1947) was Jackie Robinson who grew up in that city. The first woman president of the Pasadena Tournament of Roses was not until 2005, and the first African-American president was not until 2018. That seems like a long time from the ragtime era around 1900.