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Intimacy suits electrifying 'Ragtime'

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BY [HEDY WEISS](#) Theater Critic

The Broadway musical "Ragtime" is an epic vision of the American adventure -- a grandly ambitious show designed to capture that staggering moment in the early 20th century when this nation was undergoing a seismic shift.

Yet as Porchlight Music Theatre is now demonstrating in its musically electrifying, emotionally volcanic revival, epic has little to do with stage dimensions. In fact, this panoramic story -- Terrence McNally's adaptation of the best-selling E.L. Doctorow novel set to a glorious score by Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty -- has never seemed more fervent or compelling than it does now in an intimate pace at the Theatre Building.

When the voices of the 21-person cast soar -- and you rarely will hear a more gorgeous sound -- they hold you spellbound. So do the actors' precision-tooled characterizations. This "Ragtime" -- with director L. Walter Stearns, musical director Eugene Dizon and that most ingenious choreographer, Brenda Didier, all working at the very top of their games -- is sensational on every count.

The story interweaves the fates of three families. One is white, headed up by a well-to-do fireworks manufacturer who lives with his wife and prescient son in New Rochelle, N.Y. Another is a black couple caught up in the racial strife and ragtime music of the day. The third is a Jewish father and daughter, part of the vast wave of Eastern European immigrants who arrived at Ellis Island. Intersecting with these fictional characters are a slew of real-life notables: Escape artist Harry Houdini (honey-voiced Jeremy Trager); showgirl Evelyn Nesbit (a sparkling, shapely Maggie Portman); social activist Emma Goldman (the purposeful Sarah Hayes), and scientist Booker T. Washington (an ideally cast Randolph Johnson).

The young, ultimately tragic ragtime pianist at the story's center is Coalhouse Walker -- a man who grows obsessed with finding the justice that has so cruelly eluded him. He is played here by Jayson Brooks, whose youth, good looks and quicksilver passion add up to the most convincing portrayal of this role I've seen to date. Brooks' powerhouse voice adds to the impact, and he is matched in heat, light, vocal beauty and star quality by Karla Beard, who plays his true love, Sarah.

The golden-voiced Charissa Armon is Mother, the New Rochelle wife who finds her own liberation when she takes Sarah and her baby under her wing while her status quo husband (Bil Ingraham) heads off with Admiral Peary to the North Pole.

Mother's black sheep brother (Scott Sowinski in an expertly crafted and sung turn) exercises his revolutionary impulses, while Mother eventually falls for the Jewish artist Tateh (a fervent, strong-voiced Aaron Graham). Mother's son, Edgar (the exceptionally appealing and charismatic DrMikuska), and Tateh's little girl (a delicate Leah Rose Orleans) herald the future.

A crowning achievement for Porchlight, "Ragtime" should run until its last syncopated note fades away.

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'RAGTIME'

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

When: Through May 27

Where: Porchlight Music Theatre at Theatre Building Chicago, 1225 W. Belmont

Tickets: \$30-\$32

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