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'Ragtime' keeps glowing rhythm in spite of shift

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BY [HEDY WEISS](#) Theater Critic

To sustain the magic of a hit production as it moves from one venue to another requires nothing less than a perfect alignment of the stars. But then Porchlight Music Theatre's glittering production of "Ragtime" has been operating beneath a luminous firmament ever since it opened in April at the 150-seat Theatre Building Chicago and garnered glowing reviews.

Now beautifully remounted at the 461-seat Apollo Theater (still a marvelously intimate arena for this epic musical drama), this 1998 Broadway musical looks and sounds more glorious than ever, with its emotionally fervent Tony Award-winning score by Stephen Flaherty and Lynn Ahrens, and its savvy book by Terrence McNally that spins smartly off of E.L. Doctorow's syncopated historical novel.

Porchlight has finessed an ideal retro-fit, with L. Walter Stearns' exquisitely synchronized direction, Brenda Didier's lush, rousing choreography, Eugene Dizon's galvanic music direction -- plus a dream cast and scorching band -- all coming together in a show of deep meaning and fiery individual character. This is a soaring, tremendously vivid production that could easily knock the socks off any Broadway competitor in the Loop -- a production sure to set the bar for all future Chicago-mounted musicals. And if there were any justice, Broadway in Chicago would stuff its programs with fliers about this stunning Off Loop production whose Lincoln Park location is just slightly outside the tourist circuit.

As it happens, justice, as well as race, immigration, big business, labor rights, terrorism and celebrity, all are part of this show, which captures a defining period in early 20th century American history. And the large cast, using its double-threat acting and vocal talents, brings an authenticity and radiance to every engrossing minute.

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'RAGTIME'

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

When: Through July 22

Where: Porchlight Music Theatre at the Apollo Theater, 2540 N. Lincoln

Tickets: \$41.50-\$46.50

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