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From the Chicago Tribune

'Ragtime' makes the most of move to bigger theater

By Chris Jones

Tribune theater critic

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Charissa Armon, the anchor of the Porchlight Music Theatre's highly emotional and exceptionally well-sung production of "Ragtime," could barely get through the second act on Thursday night. The gorgeous lower register of her voice was full of melancholy and spirit on "We Can Never Go Back to Before," the most beautiful and stirring melody in a show chock-full of musical pleasures. Tears welled in her eyes and passion flowed from her mouth. She blew maybe one note and one lyrical line. Nobody cared. Everyone knew she was singing the truth.

"Ragtime," which has transferred from the Theatre Building Chicago to a summer run at the much bigger Apollo Theatre, is the best work this small off-Loop company has ever done. It's not a perfect show — the design elements are run-of-the-mill and, in the first-act scenes when races and classes first clash, the dramatic stakes do not rise as high as they should. But it is most assuredly a very special off-Loop show with an uncommon window into the humanism of E.L. Doctorow's expansive novel about turn-of-the-century America. And especially given the budgetary level of this theater and the youth of most of this cast, Eugene Dizon's musical direction of Stephen Flaherty and Lynn Ahren's rich score is very impressive.

The show looks and sounds far better at the Apollo (Porchlight, which now uses a blend of Equity and non-union performers, has outgrown the Theatre Building). The unit set fits very nicely and the director, L. Walter Stearns, has shrewdly restaged the show for the Apollo's raked theater.

There has been one major cast change. Sarah, the woman whose baby sets many of the wheels of the story in motion, is now played by Alexis Roberts. Roberts lacks the vocal experience of the departed Karla L. Beard, but her youth and passion are, in many ways, a better match with Jayson Brooks' earnest Colehouse. The show's other superb performances — like Bill Ingraham's Father, Drew Mikuska's Boy, Scott Sowinski's Younger Brother — have deepened.

Based on my conversations and eavesdropping, the audience Thursday mostly wasn't made up of Porchlight supporters or off-Loop denizens. Many knew nothing about the company. These were regular theatergoers — the kind of folks you might see at imported shows such as "Forbidden Broadway" or "The Color Purple." People lept to their feet at the end. Expectations, clearly, had been greatly exceeded. I suspect yours would be too.

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"Ragtime"

When: Through July 22

Where: Apollo Theatre, 2540 N. Lincoln Ave.

Running time: 2 hours. 30 minutes

Tickets: \$41.50-\$46.50 at 773-935-6100

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