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THEATER REVIEW

Porchlight's cast shines in 'Ragtime' revival

By Chris Jones
Tribune theater critic

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I've never understood "Ragtime" detractors, even though there are legions of them, invariably eager to argue that history hasn't been kind to Garth Drabinsky's spectacular production.

They're wrong. Especially from the current Broadway vantage point of jukeboxes, esoterica and movie spin-offs, this glorious 2000 musical adaptation of the E.L. Doctorow novel seems to me to have been the zenith of several fine careers, including that of the composer, Stephen Flaherty, the lyricist, Lynn Ahrens, and the original director, Frank Galati. More important, the show (which christened Chicago's restored Oriental Theatre in 1998) surely was the best-ever marriage of the novel-into-drama performance style developed extensively by Galati in Chicago and the classic tradition of serious, melodic Broadway vehicles.

To watch Galati's metaphorically vapid current effort, "The Pirate Queen," on Broadway is to lust for this show. To watch "The Color Purple," a genial, populist reduction of a novel, is to be reminded that "Ragtime" actually showed how one can maintain the richness of a big, multi plotted narrative opus and still turn it into a viable, unified musical. How did this crew achieve this? Largely by coming up with the simple-but-brilliant central metaphor of the American wheel, turning relentlessly through progress and pain.

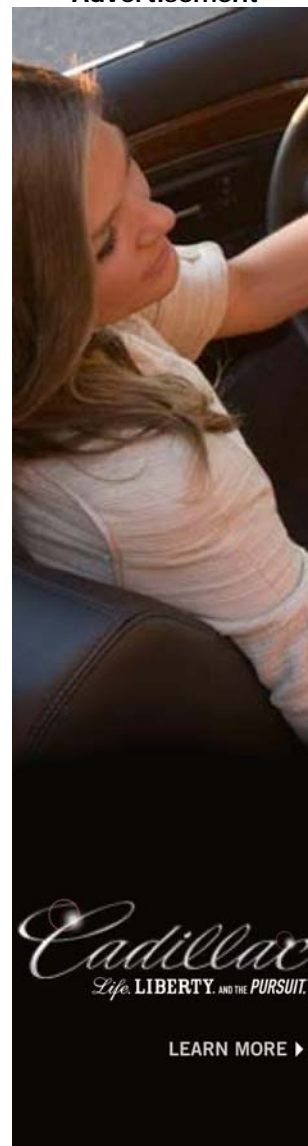
I saw that first Galati production four or five times, in various Chicago, New York and touring versions. But the Porchlight Music Theatre's Chicago revival, which opened Monday at the Theatre Building Chicago, was the first time I'd ever seen the show on this scaled-down, intimate, off-Loop level.

It holds up quite beautifully.

And while L. Walter Stearns' production is no stunning feat of revisionist direction (the stage pictures are limited, and the design mostly reminds me of the set for "It's a Wonderful Life"), this show features an uncommonly talented cast. And along with vocal renditions that go far, far beyond what Porchlight has offered us earlier this season (any of its seasons, really), this piece brims with such communal heart that all the right emotional keys are tinkled.

Porchlight has two Equity actors -- the highly accomplished Karla L. Beard, a lovely Sarah, and passionate New York actor Scott Sowinski, who offers an unusually reflective, tenor take on Mother's Younger Brother. You'd think they'd be using up one of their precious Equity contracts on Colehouse Walker Jr., the lead role, but they didn't need to. They've found a young fellow named Jayson Brooks who'll blow your socks off. He's more youthful

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than those we associate with this role, but that works. Colehouse's inherent, infectious idealism belongs in a younger man. And Brooks is credible in every note.

Happily, the show also has a couple of deserving Porchlight regulars -- Charissa Armon, who plays Mother, and Bill Ingraham, Father, both singing and acting at the top of their games. Ingraham dials back his usual comedy and beautifully evokes a limited and confused man. Armon, meanwhile, has the benefit of deeply set features, which adds to her deft sense here of a still woman, running deep.

Once you relax in the quality of the voices and the admirable musical direction from Eugene Dizon, you tend to sit there and let the score wash over you anew. "Goodbye My Love." "New Music." "Wheels of a Dream." And, most of all, "Our Children." Such satisfying songs. Such an iconic story. Still such a pleasure.

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"Ragtime"

When: Through May 27

Where: Theatre Building Chicago, 1225 W. Belmont Ave.

Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes

Tickets: \$34-\$35 at 773-327-5252

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