

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

'Ragtime' captures early 20th-c

By Ruth Ross
Correspondent

"Ragtime: The Musical" officially opens on Broadway on Nov. 15, but you don't have to wait that long — or break the bank to pay for tickets, dinner and parking — to see this quintessential American musical based on the best-selling novel by E. L. Doctorow. Just hustle on over to the Westminster Arts Center in Bloomfield, where the Montclair Operetta Club wows lovers of musical theater for the 85th year with a luscious production that runs only through Saturday.

Set in the first decade of the 20th century, "Ragtime: The Musical" interweaves three distinctly American stories: that of a stifled white, upper-class wife; a Jewish immigrant determined to succeed in "Amerike"; and a talented and daring young black pianist who refuses to be held down by bigotry. All display courage to break the chains of their respective social classes and exhibit a hope for a better future. Along the way, their trajectories cross, bringing happiness and tragedy in equal measure.

Bob Cline directs a cast of more than 40 with a sure hand, moving them smoothly on and off stage through 18 scenes and getting his principle actors to express emotions and advance the story mostly through music instead of interludes of dialogue. A 20-piece orchestra led by Judy Stanton accompanies the lush melodies, composed by Stephen Flaherty with lyrics by Lynn Ahrens. The result is truly an ensemble endeavor.

Standouts include Gabrielle Visser, incandescent as Mother, the New Rochelle housewife who takes charge of her life when her husband accompanies Admiral Perry on a trip to the North Pole. It is amazing



Photos By Carl Schmidt

The Montclair Operetta Club pulls out all the stops in their production of 'Ragtime: The Musical' at the Westminster Arts Club in Bloomfield, including numbers such as 'Baseball.'

to watch her metamorphosis from "one who stays put" to a woman with a mission. James Ryan Sloan is terrific as Mother's Younger Brother; he, too, undergoes a change: from louche playboy to anarchist. With a strong voice and great stage presence, he commands our attention whenever he appears. Uton Evan Onyejekwe's Coalhouse Walker Jr. is charming and sympathetic, and Vanessa Robinson as Sarah is heartbreakingly beautiful and vulnerable. As Tateh, the Russian silhouette artist turned film director, Todd Shumpert captures the immigrant's optimism tinged

with the fear he won't be able to provide for his child; his dignity in the face of abject poverty is palpable. Barbie McGuire's Emma Goldman is full of zeal, and Lara Hayhurst captures the charming silliness of Evelyn Nesbit, "The Girl in the Swing" and a real media darling of the period. Clay Smith's Father is appropriately clueless about the changes in the world around him, and Mitchell Epstein is adorable as his Little Boy.

The set on the small Westminster Center stage is functional and clever: two sets of risers and a staircase plus a rolling piano stand in

for 18 different locations. One time, people move up and down the risers to simulate an assembly line in "Henry Ford"; another time, the risers serve as bleachers at a baseball game. Actors playing immigrants walk down the theater's aisles, simulating disembarking from a ship. And slides projected on a screen on the back wall of the stage give visual cues as to where we are in the action and when.

Nicholas J. Marmo's lighting also helps direct our attention to various parts of the stage where the action is occurring. Dan Schulz's wonderful costumes enable the

'The Ruby Sunrise' shines at Union

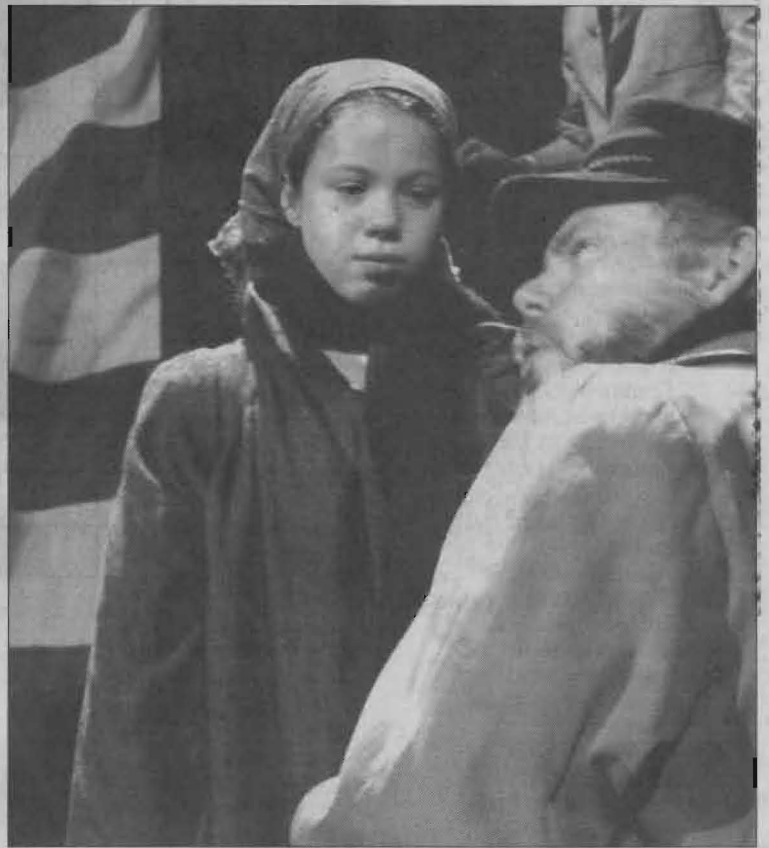
ENTERTAINMENT

Res early 20th-century America



Photos By Carl Schmidt

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Tateh and his daughter, played by Todd Shumpert and Kylie Francis, respectively, look to a brighter future in America.

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large ensemble to assume a variety of roles and telegraph the social status of the principal actors in the blink of an eye.

For more than three-quarters of a century, Montclair Operetta Club has provided Essex County theatergoers with a chance to experience the best of musical theater, first with works by Gilbert & Sullivan and, since 1953, with a range of Broadway shows, from "Brigadoon" to "Jesus Christ Superstar" to "Titanic."

"Ragtime: the Musical" is a prime example of dedicated and talented people working together to produce a professional, first-rate

theater experience well within the financial reach of families and groups who love the theater. Besides, it provides a painless history lesson of a time of change a century ago that is, in so many ways, a harbinger of 2009!

"Ragtime: The Musical" will be performed Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m. at the Westminster Arts Center on Franklin Street in Bloomfield, just a few blocks west of Garden State Parkway Exit 148. For information and tickets, call the box office at 973-744-3133 or visit online at www.mocmusicals.org.

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