

Goodspeed Musicals, East Haddam, CT

*Ragtime*, Book by Terrence McNally. Lyrics by Lynn Ahrens. Music by Stephen Flaherty.  
Directed by Christopher D. Betts. Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

*“Make Them Hear You”*

“Ragtime” is one of those shows with a story, a moral, a history lesson, and a heart. What director Christopher D. Betts has done brilliantly is open the show’s heart to the audience and let the historical story overwhelm the dramatic fiction. It is a beautiful and moving experience in musical terms and dramatic themes. Ragtime pianist Coalhouse Walker, Jr. (Michael Wordly)



Jeremiah Valentino Porter, Rory Shirley, Jalyn Crosby, Jordan Alexander and company;  
Photo: Diane Sobolewski

has accidentally impregnated his girlfriend Sarah (Brennyn Lark) and abandoned her which he now regrets. His poignant search for her leads him to the home of Mother (Mamie Parris), Father (Edward Watts), and family including Mother’s Younger Brother (Behr Marshall) who is in love with a Vaudeville star, Evelyn Nesbitt (Mia Garaches). At the same time a Jewish immigrant from eastern Europe named Tateh (David R. Gordon) and his daughter arrive at Ellis Island and begin their journey to success in the entertainment industry. Meanwhile Emma Goldman (Blair Goldberg) and Booker T. Washington (Denver Andre Taylor) are stirring up their people. It is this wonderful mixture of real people and fictional people, all of them active participants in the story, which makes this show so wonderful.

Younger Brother's disenchantment with his performer/star/love brings him into a desperate need for collaboration with something meaningful. His misbegotten effort ultimately leads to the downfall of his brother-in-law, himself a faux hero thanks to Admiral Perry's journey to the Pole. Perry is played by Nathan Haultiwanger. Mother and Father realize their marriage is not working and they drag out a relationship that truly shouldn't exist.



Behr Marshall, Edward Watts, Mamie Parris,  
Sawyer Delaney, Stephen Tewksbury;  
Photo: Diane Sobolewski

E. L. Doctorow's novel goes into much greater detail than the musical does, but time is of the essence and there are 37 musical numbers to perform. With the able aid of choreographer Sara Edwards and the ten musicians led by musical director Adam Souza, Betts keeps his remarkable company alive and moving for just under three hours.



Michael Wordly; Photos: Diane Sobolewski



Brennyn Lark

Michael Wordly makes Coalhouse Walker into the nicest person in this show. Even when his anger dominates his personality, he is engaging and endearing. His motives are clear and very human. His singing is excellent and his acting is so sincere he makes us cry with joy, or horror, or anger. As the love of his life Brennyn Lark is a beautiful Sarah. Silent for a long while, we can only imagine her fear and disappointment, but when she releases her energetic loving we respond with honest emotions and fall in love with her on the spot. These two characters were originally played by Brian Stokes Mitchell and Audra McDonald and what we felt then, we feel again now.

The story of Tateh and his daughter is quite another matter. His Jewish ethnicity is matched by his spirit and his creativity. He advances quickly in his American journey from beggar to artist to creative artist in the infantile movie industry. His ultimate innovations brings him close to the love of his life, an unanticipated treat for him and for us, the audience, as well. In this fine production he is played for all the quirkiness possible by David R. Gordon who gives

the character a freshness that makes his adventures among the most real in the show. As his daughter Sofie Nesanelis does a lovely job. Mia Gerachis (Whee) is a hilarious girl on the red velvet swing, Evelyn Nesbit. Jonathan Cobrda plays a vibrant Harry Houdini. Blair Goldberg's Emma Goldman is a rousing performance.

The show is one of the most beautiful and perfect ever mounted by Goodspeed. The set has been designed by the very talented Emmie Finckel. The perfect costumes were created by Stephanie Bahniuk. The moody, defining lighting was courtesy of Charlie Morrison. Wig, hair and makeup was designed by Tenel Dorsey. Jay Hilton handled the sound design perfectly.

The too-short run of this masterwork is an essential for musical theater lovers, but do bring along your thermos of coffee for your trip home. It's a long show with a lot to say, big stories to tell and a lot of very important history to expose to a modern audience. This is one piece of theater no one should ever miss and this production is about as good as it will ever get.

+ 05/12/2025 +

**Ragtime** plays at Goodspeed Musicals, East Haddam, Connecticut through June 15. For information and tickets go to [goodspeed.org](http://goodspeed.org).



Sofie Nesanelis; David R. Gordon;  
Photo: Diane Sobolewski