

trinityrep

STUDY GUIDE

# RAGTIME

book by Terrence McNally  
music by Stephen Flaherty  
lyrics by Lynn Ahrens  
based on the novel  
*Ragtime* by E. L. Doctorow



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Prepared by Trinity Rep's Education Department, Fatima Faris, and Gillian Gurganus  
Designed by Priscilla Parisa

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Cover:  
Left, Rachael Warren as Mother, Wilkie Ferguson III as Coalhouse Walker, Jr.,  
Charlie Thurston as Tateh. Photos by Mark Turek

## THEATRE AUDIENCE

# Etiquette & Discussion

### **TEACHERS:**

Speaking to your students about theater etiquette is ESSENTIAL. Students should be aware that this is a live performance and that they should not talk during the show. If you do nothing else to prepare your students to see the play, please take some time to talk to them about theater etiquette in an effort to help the students better appreciate their experience. It will enhance their enjoyment of the show and allow other audience members to enjoy the experience. The questions below can help guide the discussions. Thank you for your help and enjoy the show!

### **ETIQUETTE:**

What is the role of the audience in a live performance? How is it different from seeing a film? Why can't you chew gum or eat popcorn at a live theater performance? Why can't you talk? What can happen in live theater that cannot happen in cinema? Reiterate that students may not chew gum, eat, or talk during the performance. Please make sure all cell phones and pagers are turned off. Recording devices and cameras are strictly prohibited. If there is a disturbance, they will be asked to leave and the class will not be invited back to the theater. Students may not leave the building during intermission.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS BEFORE SEEING THE SHOW AT TRINITY REP**

What are the differences between live theater and cinema? (Two dimensional vs. three dimensional; larger than life on the screen vs. life-size; recorded vs. live, etc.) Discuss the nature of film as mass produced, versus the one-time only nature of live performances. Talk about original artworks versus posters. Which do they feel is more valuable? Why?

### **Observation #1:**

When you get into the theater, look around. What do you see? Observe the lighting instruments around the room and on the ceiling. Look at the set. Does it look realistic or abstract? Try to guess how the set will be used during the show.

### **Observation #2:**

Discuss the elements that go into producing a live performance: The lights, set, props, costumes, and stage direction. All the people involved in the "behind the scenes" elements of the theater are working backstage as the play unfolds before the students' eyes. Tell them to be aware of this as they watch the show. Observe the lighting cues. How do special effects work? How do the actors change costumes so fast?

Actors in a live performance are very attuned to the audience and are interested in the students' reactions to the play. Ask the students to write letters to the actors about the characters they played and to ask questions of the actors. Send these letters to:

Trinity Repertory Company, c/o Education, 201 Washington St.,  
Providence, RI 02903 or email to: [education@trinityrep.com](mailto:education@trinityrep.com).

# Using this study guide

## IN YOUR CLASSROOM

Welcome to Trinity Rep and the 51st season of Project Discovery! The education staff at Trinity Rep had a lot of fun preparing this study guide, and hope that the activities included will help you incorporate the play into your academic study. It is also structured to help you to introduce performance into your classroom through the following elements:

- Community Building in Your Classroom
- Inspiration and Background on the Artist
- Entering and Comprehending Text
- Creating Text for Performance
- Performing in Your Class
- Reflecting on Your Performance

Trinity Rep's Project Discovery student matinees help high school students in the following common core areas (for more information on the National Core Arts Standards, visit <http://nationalartsstandards.org/>):

- Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme (CCSS. RL.9-10.3)
- Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (CCSS.RL.9-10.4)
- Investigate how cultural perspectives, community ideas, and personal beliefs impact a drama/theater work (TH: Cn10.1.I.)
- Analyze and compare artistic choices developed from personal experiences in multiple drama/ theater works (TH: Re8.1.I.)
- Respond to what is seen, felt, and heard in a drama/ theater work to develop criteria for artistic choices (TH: Re7.1.I.)
- Evaluate and analyze problems and situations in a drama/ theater work from an audience perspective (TH: Re9.1.I)

**Enjoy the show!**



Matt Tibbs, School Partnerships Manager



2017–18 Season at the Lederer Theater Center  
under the direction of

**Curt Columbus**  
The Arthur P. Solomon and  
Sally E. Lapidés Artistic Director

**Tom Parrish**  
Executive Director

# Ragtime

book by Terrence McNally, music by Stephen Flaherty, lyrics by Lynn Ahrens  
based on the novel *Ragtime* by E.L. Doctorow

## THE ARTISTIC TEAM

Directed by **Curt Columbus**  
Choreography by **Sharon Jenkins**  
Musical Direction by **Michael Rice**  
Assistant Musical Direction by **Andrew Smithson**  
Set Design by **Eugene Lee**  
Costume Design by **Kara Harmon**  
Lighting Design by **Dan Scully**  
Sound Design by **Peter Sasha Hurowitz**  
Associate Director/Foley Artist **Julia Locascio**  
Assistant Set Designer **Patrick Lynch**  
Magic Design by **Nate Dendy**  
Production Stage Managed by **Kristen Gibbs\***

**April 26 – May 27, 2018**  
in the Elizabeth and Malcolm Chace Theater

Supported by  ART WORKS.

 National Endowment for the Arts  
arts.gov

Trinity Rep's 54th Season is sponsored by  JOB LOT



Many thanks to **The Providence Journal**  
for their assistance on this production.

Trinity Rep gratefully acknowledges the past support of the B.B. Lederer Sons Foundation, the State of Rhode Island, and the City of Providence.

**Southwest** Southwest is the official airline of Trinity Rep.

**BOTTLES** Bottles is the official sommelier of Trinity Rep.

Program printing and advertising sales by  Rhode Island

## THE CAST

Younger Brother/Ensemble **Alexander De Vasconcelos Matos**  
Emma Goldman/Ensemble **Janice Duclos\*\***  
Sarah/Ensemble **Mia Ellis\*\***  
Coalhouse Walker, Jr./Ensemble **Wilkie Ferguson III\***  
Booker T. Washington/Ensemble **Taavon Gamble\***  
Evelyn Nesbit/Ensemble **Rebecca Gibel\*\***  
Father/Ensemble **Mauro Hantman\*\***  
Boy/Ensemble **Evan Andrew Horwitz**  
Brigit/Sarah's Friend/Ensemble **Carla Martinez\***  
Grandfather/Henry Ford/Ensemble **Brian McEleney\*\***  
Girl/Ensemble **Olivia Miller**  
Swing **Jude Sandy\*\***  
J.P. Morgan/Willie Conklin/Ensemble **Fred Sullivan, Jr.\*\***  
Harry Houdini/Ensemble **Stephen Thorne\*\***  
Tateh/Ensemble **Charlie Thurston\*\***  
Mother/Ensemble **Rachael Warren\*\***  
Matthew Henson/Ensemble **Antonio Michael Woodard**

## THE MUSICIANS

Keyboard/Conductor **Michael Rice**  
Trumpet **Ron Christianson**  
Woodwinds **Richard Marchetti, Jerilyn Sykes**  
Trombone **James Monaghan**  
Viola **Stephen Moss**  
Percussion **Mike Sartini**

*Ragtime* will be performed **with one intermission.**

Production Director **Laura E. Smith**  
Assistant Stage Manager **Julia Perez\***

\* Member of Actors' Equity Association, the union of professional actors & stage managers  
‡ Trinity Rep Resident Acting Company member

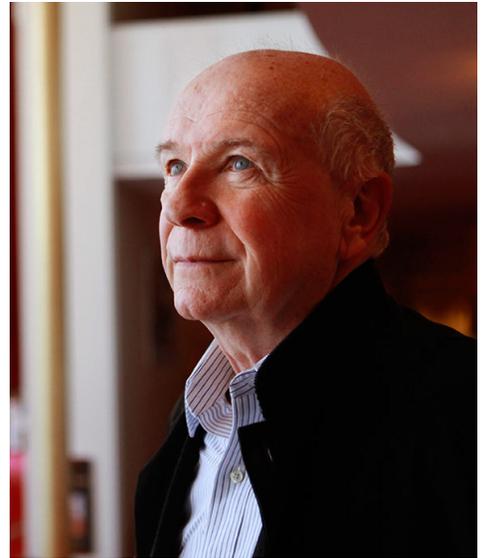
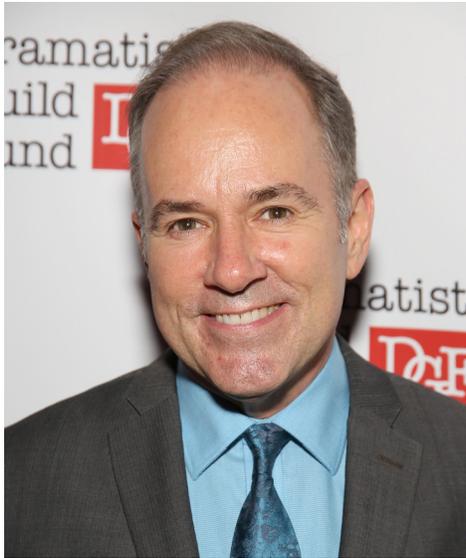
*Ragtime* is presented through special arrangement with Music Theatre International (MTI). All authorized performance materials are also supplied by MTI, New York, NY. [www.MTIShows.com](http://www.MTIShows.com).

L TO R ON COVER: RACHAEL WARREN, WILKIE FERGUSON III & CHARLIE THURSTON • IMAGE BY MICHAEL GUY

**PLEASE TURN OFF** cell phones, beepers, pagers, and alarms during the performance. Texting and cell phone use are limited to intermission, outside the theater. Photography, video and/or audio recording of this performance by any means are strictly prohibited.

# About the authors

Lynn Ahrens, Stephen Flaherty & Terrence McNally



## **LYNN AHRENS and STEPHEN FLAHERTY**

Lynn Ahrens was born in 1948. She is a lyricist and wrote the lyrics to the *Ragtime* songs. Stephen Flaherty was born in 1960. He is the composer of the music in *Ragtime*. Ahrens and Flaherty are a team that has worked together (and still do!) on many soundtracks and songs. Amongst their many awards, the duo has won an Tony for Best Original Score for *Ragtime*!

## **TERRENCE McNALLY**

Terrence McNally was born in 1938. He is a playwright and screenwriter. He wrote the book (meaning the non-sung parts of a musical) for *Ragtime*. He has won dozens of awards, one being a Tony for Best New Play for *Ragtime*!

# Ragtime Characters & Setting

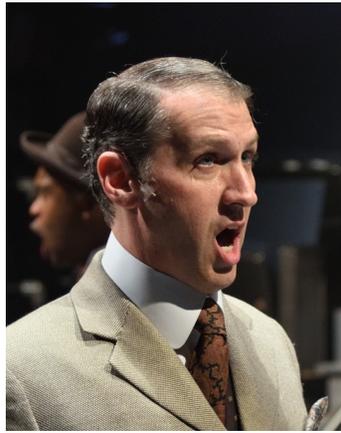
\*you can find a short paragraph about this person under, "Ripped From the Headlines"



## **MOTHER**

Married to FATHER. Part of a well to do family in New York.

Played by Rachael Warren



## **FATHER**

Married to MOTHER

Played by Mauro Hantman



## **THE LITTLE BOY**

Son to MOTHER and FATHER

Played by Evan Andrew Horwitz



## **HARRY HOUDINI**

The famed magician and illusionist\*

Played by Stephen Thorne



## **MOTHER'S YOUNGER BROTHER**

He is in love with Evelyn Nesbit

Played by Alexander De Vasconcelos Matos



## **EVELYN NESBIT**

Famous vaudeville star—plagued by scandal\*

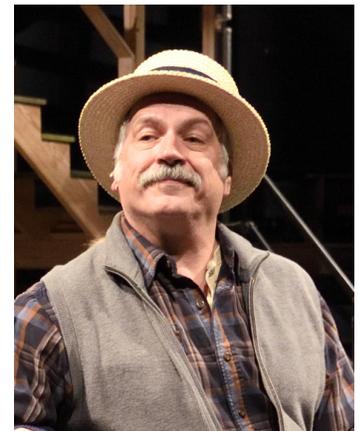
Played by Rebecca Gibel



## **HARRY K. THAW**

Nesbit's abusive husband\*

Played by Brian McEleney



## **STANFORD WHITE**

Family friend of the Nesbits, who took advantage of a young Evelyn\*

Played by Fred Sullivan, Jr.



**TATEH**

A Jewish Lithuanian immigrant who moves to America with his daughter

Played by Charlie Thurston



**THE LITTLE GIRL**

Daughter of Tateh

Played by Olivia Miller



**COALHOUSE WALKER, JR.**

Father of the baby found in MOTHER's garden. In love with Sarah

Played by Wilkie Ferguson III



**SARAH**

Mother of the baby found in MOTHER's garden. COALHOUSE's love interest

Played by Mia Ellis



**EMMA GOLDMAN**

A Jewish Lithuanian political anarchist\*

Played by Janice Duclos



**J.P. MORGAN**

Famous banker\*

Played by Fred Sullivan, Jr.



**HENRY FORD**

Creator of the first Ford automobile\*

Played by Brian McEleney



**BOOKER T. WASHINGTON**

Successful black man, founder of Tuskegee University\*

Played by Taavon Gamble



**WILLIE CONKLIN**

Racist fire chief

Played by Fred Sullivan, Jr.

**SIGMUND FREUD**

Famous psychiatrist and philosopher\*

**JACOB RIIS**

Social reformer, photographer, creator of How the Other Half Lives\*

**CHARLES S. WHITMAN**

State District Attorney of New York\*

**Setting**

Ragtime takes place in New Rochelle, New York.

Photos by Mark Turek

RIPPED FROM THE

# Headlines

Many of the characters you will see in Ragtime are real people who lived during the turn of the twentieth century! Here's a little information on them:



## **EVELYN NESBIT**

Evelyn Nesbit lived from 1884-1967. She was known as the 'Girl on the Red Velvet Swing.' Although she was a model and chorus girl in show business since she was a young, her career

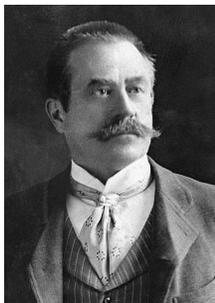
really took off after her marriage to Harry Kendall Thaw when she was twenty. Just two years into her abusive marriage, her husband killed an old family friend who had sexually taken advantage of Nesbit when she was a young teenager. After this, she received a reputation as a "lethal beauty" and continue do onto a successful career, but was ultimately unhappy. She attempted suicide in 1926, which led to her steady public downfall. *Ragtime* plays on the public perception of Nesbit to fuel her character.



## **HARRY KENDALL THAW**

Harry K. Thaw lived from 1871-1947. He was the husband of Evelyn Nesbit before their divorce while

he was in an asylum. He was known to be incredibly violent his whole life, and the violence did not stop when he was pursuing and married to Nesbit. Thaw was born to a very wealthy family, which is how he was able to get by in life and maintain the lifestyle he did. When he shot and killed Stanford White, Thaw's mother made it such that he would not go to prison, but instead have a comfortable stay at an asylum where he was treated like royalty.



## **STANFORD WHITE**

Stanford White lived from 1853-1906. He was a famous architect. He was a family friend of the Nesbits and

served as a mentor to Evelyn Nesbit. After raping Evelyn when she was a young teenager, he remained a friend of the family. Nesbit married Harry K.

Thaw a few years later. Not soon into their marriage on the rooftop of Madison Square Garden, White and Thaw crossed paths, and Thaw shot White four times, killing him.



## **HENRY FORD**

Henry Ford lived from 1863-1947. He is well known for creating the first Ford Model T automobile. He is also famous for the assembly line. The assembly line cut down the tasks workers had to do, creating more jobs, and cutting down the overall manufacturing time of the automobile. Ford was strongly anti-war and believed in peace and pacifism. Despite this, Ford was anti-Semitic, meaning he was prejudiced toward Jews.



### **J.P. MORGAN**

J.P. Morgan lived from 1837-1913. He started off his career as an accountant and

later became a partner in the firm Drexel, Morgan and Company. Today, his name is associated with banking and an avant garde lifestyle. He is also known for reorganizing and revitalizing the railroad industry in the US at the turn of the 20th century. His company held a monopoly over many financial institutions in the country until his death.



### **HARRY HOUDINI**

Harry Houdini lived from 1874-1926. Born Ehrich Weisz, Houdini was a Hungarian immigrant and illusionist. He moved to the United States with his family when he was just two years old. He quickly rose to fame after

being able to evade handcuffs and jail. He did not maintain his health and, after inviting university student, J. Gordon Whitehead, to punch his abdomen, her died of peritonitis, or an inflammation of the abdominal lining. In Ragtime, Houdini represents the possibility of immigrant success for Tateh.



### **EMMA GOLDMAN**

Emma Goldman lived from 1869-1940. She was a Lithuanian Jewish immigrant, much like Ragtime's Tateh.

She was a strong proponent for freedom of expression, education and sexual freedom for women, and workers' unions. She is seen as a political anarchist, constantly pushing against repressive societal norms.



### **BOOKER T. WASHINGTON**

Booker T. Washington lived from 1856-1915. He was the founder of what is now known

as Tuskegee University. He was one of the most influential spokespersons for African Americans at the time. Though born a slave, he and his family moved after the abolition of slavery, and he worked as a janitor in order to pay for schooling. He believed that African Americans should focus less on trying to get equal social and political rights, and more on educating themselves so they could uplift their family financially, which, in turn, would lead to the rights for which they were currently fighting. Washington's ideals of what the Black man should work toward is in direct contrast with what Ragtime's Coalhouse believed was more important.



### **CHARLES WHITMAN**

Charles Whitman lived from 1968-1947. He served as the 41st governor of New York from 1915-1918. In Ragtime, he

is not yet the governor. He is the State District Attorney. Later in his life, he served as President of the American Bar Association.



### **JACOB RIIS**

Jacob Riis lived from 1849-1914. He was a Danish immigrant who came to America in 1870. Riis is most

famously known for his book, How the Other Half Lives. His book branded him a social reformer because he did not shy away from the living conditions that low income families faced in New York. The book is filled with photos by Riis, which were hard to look at and hard to ignore.



### **SIGMUND FREUD**

Sigmund Freud lived from 1856-1939. He was an Austrian psychiatrist and philosopher. He is known for

being the forerunner of psychoanalysis, which attempts to unpack the deeper meanings behind patients' dreams and subconscious. The 'id,' 'ego,' and 'superego' and the Oedipus and Electra Complexes are all Freudian theories!

# Plot Synopsis

## Act One

It's New York City at the turn of the 20th century and three different communities welcome the audience to their world. First, an upper-class white family from the wealthy suburb of New Rochelle: Mother, Father, Mother's Younger Brother, Grandfather, and the Little Boy, Edgar.

Next, in Harlem, is the African-American community, where the beautiful Sarah enjoys the new music of Coalhouse Walker, Jr. Lastly, Jewish immigrants moving into the tenements of the Lower East Side find their home, namely artist Tateh from Latvia and his young daughter. The only connections these communities have to each other are the celebrities they all know and read about: businessmen J.P. Morgan and Henry Ford, activists Booker T. Washington and Emma Goldman, and entertainers Harry Houdini and Evelyn Nesbit, who became a star when her lover murdered her wealthy husband.

Mother and Father say goodbye as he leaves on an expedition to the North Pole, leaving Mother alone for the first time in her life. His ship passes Tateh's: Father thinks about how the immigrants "don't have a chance" in his country, Tateh wonders why anyone would leave America.

Mother's Younger Brother is always trying to find his passion, and for now it's Evelyn Nesbit. He watches her perform and professes his love for her. She kisses him for the attention of the press, but doesn't really have any interest in him.



After finding an African-American baby in her garden, Mother invites the child's mother, Sarah, into the Family home, claiming responsibility for them, even though she knows her husband would not approve.

Immigrants arrive at Ellis Island, and Tateh tries to make a living selling drawings on a cart on the street corner. As his Little Girl becomes sick, Tateh becomes desperate for money. When a wealthy stranger offers to buy her from him, Tateh is angered and becomes disgusted in his new country. He thinks of the success immigrant Harry Houdini, and Tateh decides to sell his cart and try his luck somewhere else.

Coalhouse introduces his new music, called ragtime, and sings lovingly about Sarah, whom he can't find after he broke her heart. When he learns she's in New Rochelle, he comes up with a plan to win her back, starting with a visit to the Ford Factory to buy the new Model T.

On his way to Sarah, Coalhouse is accosted by a volunteer fire squad who are angered by the site of a black man driving his own car. At the same time, Sarah thinks about how her heartbreak and fear led to the baby in her arms. Coalhouse finally makes it to the Family house and is shocked to learn he has a son. Though Sarah turns him down at first, he persists courting her, eventually leading to Mother inviting him inside. Coalhouse tells her about his plans to support his family playing ragtime, and Sarah and he reunite.

Mother, Younger Brother, Sarah, and Coalhouse have formed a tight-knit bond, which upsets Father as he comes home. Father grapples how much he has missed and how unsure he is of the changing world. Coalhouse and Sarah are inspired by the words of activist Booker T. Washington and dream of a great life for their son.

In a Worker's Hall, Emma Goldman rallies the group, talking about the textile mills in Massachusetts, where the workers' strike against their working conditions has turned violent. Tateh, who was working there, escapes with Little Girl, showing her a flipbook of moving images he invented to calm her down. When the train conductor sees it and buys it from him, Tateh realizes he's invented a product people will buy.

In New Rochelle, Coalhouse and Sarah are stopped by the volunteer fire squad again. When Coalhouse refuses to give them the money they demand, the group destroys Coalhouse's Model T and rolls it into the lake. When Coalhouse is not able to find comfort in the justice system, Sarah goes to a campaign rally to convince the Vice Presidential candidate to help them. As she approaches him, J.P. Morgan mistakes her for an assassin, and she's beaten to death by Secret Service. As she's buried, people wonder when every American will truly have equality.



### **Act Two**

In a dream sequence, The Little Boy watches Harry Houdini escape a dynamite-covered box. When he wakes from his nightmare, he warns Mother something bad will happen.

Following Sarah's death, Coalhouse decides to take matters into his own hands and pursue his own justice. He kills several fireman and bombs the volunteer fire house, but Booker T. Washington condemns his actions. Still, other young angry men think Coalhouse has the right idea and support him. Father is frustrated at Mother for making them the center of the Coalhouse scandal, since they still have custody of Sarah and the baby. Mother is upset and urges Father to talk to their son about what is going on, but he is too horrified by all the immigrants suddenly surrounding him in their world to do so.

Father moves the family to Atlantic City to get away from the chaos in New York. As they walk along the boardwalk, they see Tateh directing a film crew under the name "Baron Ashkenazy;" he has since reinvented himself as a movie director. Atlantic City is full of Evelyn Nesbit, Harry Houdini, and other celebrities who are in the down spiral of their careers. As The Little Boy and The Little Girl become friends, so do Mother and Tateh.

In New York, Coalhouse and his followers, including Mother's Younger Brother, threaten to blow up J.P. Morgan's library. Father leaves Atlantic City, having been called in to help reason with Coalhouse, and promises Mother all will be back to normal soon. Mother knows it won't. Booker T. Washington convinces Coalhouse not to blow up the building, reminding him of the legacy he would be leaving for his son. In the end, Coalhouse tells the group that it's not violence that will make a difference, but words and the power of each of them sharing their story. As Coalhouse and Father make up, Coalhouse leaves the library and is immediately killed by police.

The Little Boy decides to fulfill Coalhouse's dream to make sure each of their voices are heard. The play ends with each of the characters telling their stories and what happens in their future, all as America becomes more of a melting pot each day.



A CONVERSATION WITH

# Curt Columbus



Gillian Gurganus, one of the education interns, got the chance to sit down with the artistic director of Trinity Rep and director of this production, Curt Columbus.

Gillian Gurganus: What do you hope that student audiences, specifically, get out of this show?

Curt Columbus: I hope a couple of things—one: I hope people are led back to the book. I really want people to read this novel. It's one of the great twentieth century works of American literature. So I'm really hoping that student audiences will find their way to E.L. Doctorow and to this novel. You know Gillian, it's this incredibly constructed piece of writing in terms of the language that he uses, the way that he crafts sentences, and it's remarkably telegraphic in the way that it's written and by that I mean it's written in these short and very concise, and a little bit terse, burst of language. So it feels journalistic, like early twentieth century journalism, but that's a style that is part of the way the book is being told. So I want people to experience that! What I hope that they talk about, though, are the ways in which the history is our present. I'm hoping that people see the metaphor of the rehearsal room as something that represents the fact that we rehearse the same stories in America over and over and over again. I hope people will have things to talk about.

GG: How does setting this production in the round make it different?

CC: I'm hoping that the audience is aware of themselves in the story. That's part of the reason for being in the round for almost all of these shows this season, but it's particularly—and a little bit selfishly (laughs)—because I was the one who wanted to put them in the round—and I think it's best for *Ragtime*. I want the audience to be in the show. I want them to be part of what we're doing because I really feel strongly that this is a piece about us as a nation now, not about us as a nation in 1906. I want their presence to be part of the telling of this story.

GG: The Caucasian family members in this show are all labeled as generic roles like Mother, Father, Younger Brother, etc.—while Tateh, Sarah, Coalhouse, etc. are all named characters. Why do you think that is?

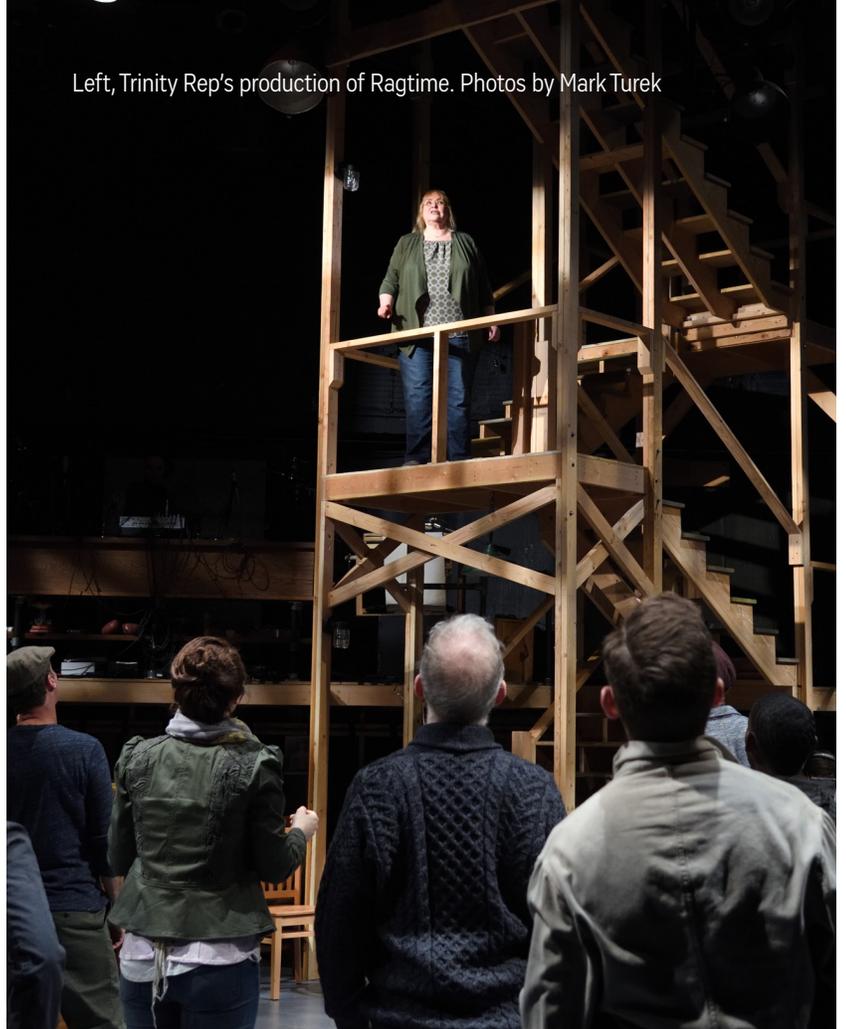
CC: This is a huge part of my analysis of the novel—I think Doctorow is making a rough draft of what the archetypal Caucasian family in the twentieth century is going to think of as their model. Right? And so the other characters have names because they are actual people, whereas for the predominantly caucasian readership of this novel, when it came out, there's a very clear calling forth of archetype in my mind. I mean, literally, everybody else in the book is name checked. Not just Coalhouse and Sarah, but Emma Goldman, Evelyn Nesbit, Harry Houdini, J.P. Morgan and Henry Ford—they're all name checked. This family is "Mother," "Father," "Younger Brother," "Grandfather," and "Little Boy." So it calls into question their existence as a reality against the reality of the time, I think? It's part of his project—Doctorow is doing something really weird with this, and avant garde for the times. It really comes from the novel.

GG: What theme lives at the core of this show for you and why?

CC: It's a theme of American identity and the construction of American identity itself in an inherently white supremacist, patriarchal, heteronormative, nation state that keeps the "other" out. In order to fit it, the "other" has to "become American." I think that the main theme of the novel and particularly this play is just that the identity of being American draws a very strong question.

GG: My favorite song in the show has to be "Your Daddy's Son." I cry every time! I have to know—what is your favorite song or moment in the show and why?

Left, Trinity Rep's production of Ragtime. Photos by Mark Turek



CC: Oh golly! There's so many. It changes every day! Every day I have a new favorite song. Yesterday it was "The Night that Goldman Spoke at Union Square," which isn't ever on anybody's lists, (laughs), but some days that song really gets to me. Some days it's "Wheels of a Dream," and some days it's "Journey On-"

GG: I LOVE "Journey On!"

CC: Yes! I think one of the things that people are going to get blown away by in this production is "Back to Before." Oh! "Sarah Brown Eyes." I mean, there's just so much great music in this show and it isn't as widely known as it should be. It's literally great music that is tied very directly to the narrative of this show. It's so alive to us now. "Make Them Hear You." Right? Stephen Flaherty [one of the composers of the show] and I talked about this when I met him in New York a couple of months ago. He was like [referring to the song "Make Them Hear You"] "Oh yeah, that's the one that the DC Gay Men's chorus sang on the steps of the Supreme Court on the day that marriage equality passed." He said that that particular song had gained new meaning. So I think that song's really powerful in this show as well.

# Themes

## ACCEPTING CHANGE

Every character in *Ragtime* experiences change in one way or another—whether they accept those changes or not is another story. For instance, Mother and Father both deal with the changes in their household and community in their own ways. Though hesitant at first, Mother takes Sarah and her child in, taking responsibility for them both. When Father returns from his expedition from the North Pole, he is less than thrilled with this new living situation and the changing times that are happening inevitably. On the other hand, Mother grows in her own right and realizes that she is capable of so much more than what society has told her she can be.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

What character adapts to change the fastest? What character adapts to change the slowest? How does Mother's acceptance of Sarah and her situation affect her family dynamic?

## REPRESSION

Repression runs rampant in *Ragtime*. Women being repressed by the patriarchal society, people of color being persecuted for the color of their skin, immigrants and poorer people being viewed as less than because of their financial situations and ethnic backgrounds. 1906 is such an interesting time because it is no longer the Victorian Era, a time of constricting clothes and modesty, but we haven't quite reached the scandalous roaring twenties yet. We do seem some leniency here and there with the popularity of figures like Evelyn Nesbit, but people in this time are still very much held back from reaching their full potentials from the society structures in place.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

How does clothing represent repression? What group in the show is repressed the most, in your opinion? What group sees the least amount of repression? What figures in the show "push the envelope" and defy the norm of what is expected?



"Each day, the maids  
Trudge up the hill.  
The hired help arrives.  
I never stopped to think  
They might have lives beyond our lives..."  
—Mother, "What Kind of Woman"



"If I had dreams  
Then I let you dream them for me  
Back in the days  
When everything seemed so much clearer  
Women in white  
Who knew what their lives held in store  
Where are they now,  
Those women who stared from the mirror?  
We can never go back to before."  
—Mother, "Back to Before"

## THE AMERICAN DREAM

The American Dream is the idealistic view that with hard work, determination, and initiative, one will live a successful and prosperous life. When one thinks of the American Dream, one usually thinks of a nice house to live in, a successful breadwinner husband, a homemaker wife, and bright children with bright futures ahead of them. This ideal is revisited throughout the play almost every character—but one character in particular has high aims for the ideal: Latvia immigrant and widower Tateh.

Tateh is committed to finding a new life for him and his little girl, even when circumstances become so grim that he questions why he chose America in the first place. When Tateh and Mother's lives intertwine, it is apparent that Mother's American Dream and Tateh's American Dream are very different yet essentially the same. Mother, being highly privileged and taken care of by Father, wants their life in New Rochelle to stay nice and peaceful while taking care of her little boy, Edgar, while Tateh is determined to complete the long journey to America, and not just take care of his little girl, but make a life for her that is beyond anything they experienced in Latvia. Those two do share the ultimate core value of providing for their children so that they can have better futures and lives than they have experienced.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

How does Tateh's perception of the American Dream differ from Mother and Coalhouse? How do Tateh's actions affect his journey to succeeding? Is Tateh's idea of the American Dream the same or different than the ideal life of the typical American in 2018?



"You'll soon be eating apple pie  
From off a china plate.  
Pretty dresses, pretty dolls,  
Just wait!  
For shining in your Tateh's eye  
And just beyond this gate—America!  
Here in America anyone at all can succeed.  
Do what you do,  
and the world will come to you guaranteed!"  
—Tateh, "Success"

Previous page:

Above, Rachael Warren as Mother

Below, Rachael Warren as Mother

Current page:

Olivia Miller as Little Girl and Charlie Thurston as Tateh

Photos by Mark Turek

## INJUSTICE

Injustice seems to be around every corner in *Ragtime*. There's racism, classism, sexism—all the isms—and not to mention xenophobic injustices too. Racism is shown most prevalently with the treatment of Coalhouse in the plot, from tiny racist comments made to him by Father and Grandfather to his ultimate murder by the firehouse crew. Classist injustice? Let's talk about it. Think about all those poor people and their children that probably died due to malnourishment or disease because of their living conditions—living conditions like where Tateh and his little girl were forced to live in: the angry, fetid tenements of the Lower East Side of New York City. This area is described to be worse than anything Tateh and his wife suffered in Latvia. Tateh and many other immigrants came to America for something better for themselves and their families, but when they finally get here, they are treated even worse. *Ragtime* doesn't shy away from the fact that this was a world where people could die simply because of the color of their skin, where they are from, or how much money they have.

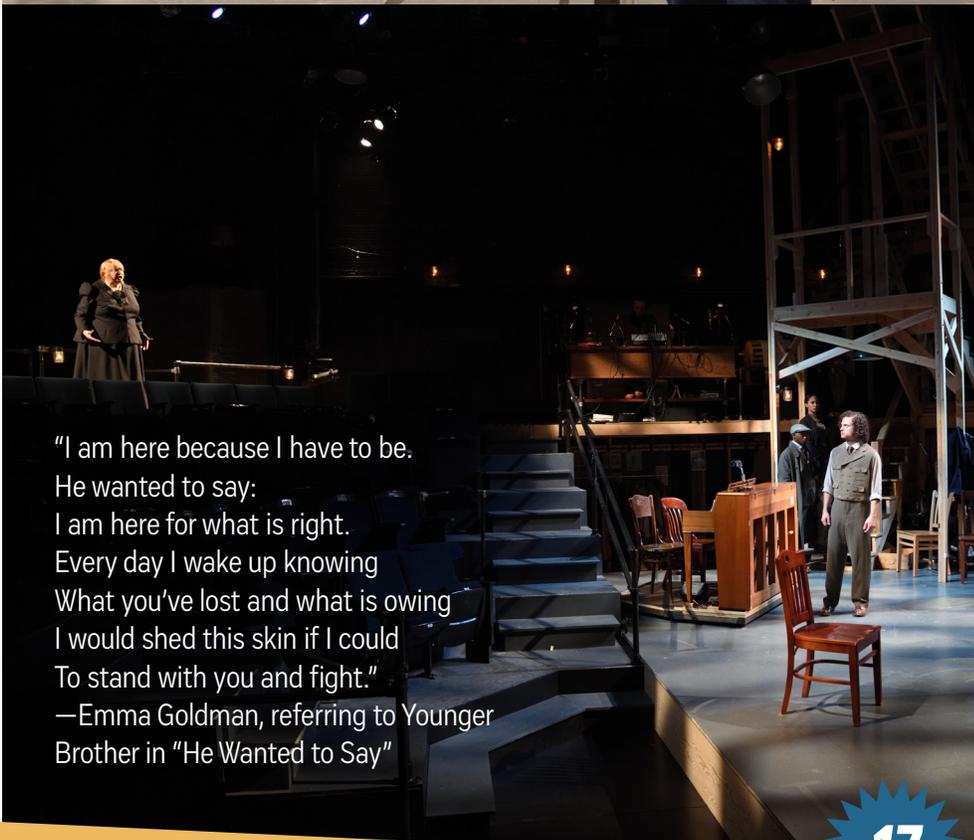
### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Is Coalhouse just in his reaction to the vandalism to his car? How do the wealthy people in this show react differently from the marginalized populations? How do they act similarly?

Above: Trinity Rep's production of *Ragtime*.  
Photos by Mark Turek



"The law's the law.  
The law's been broken  
Why should I turn the other cheek?  
What about justice!"  
—Coalhouse, "Justice"



"I am here because I have to be.  
He wanted to say:  
I am here for what is right.  
Every day I wake up knowing  
What you've lost and what is owing  
I would shed this skin if I could  
To stand with you and fight."  
—Emma Goldman, referring to Younger  
Brother in "He Wanted to Say"

## UNIT TWO

# Entering the Text

### **EXERCISE ONE: JOURNEY ON**

Characters risk a lot in this show to get what they want. Some succeed in certain aspects, and some end up paying the ultimate price—their lives. These risks say a lot about each character and their relationships in the show. Describe a time you took a risk in forming a friendship or relationship, whether or not there was a good outcome in the end. In groups of four or five, have your students create tableaux (frozen pictures) of these moments, and share with the class.

#### **Discussion Questions:**

Did the risk turn out to be worth it in the end? What made it worth the risk or pain, or conversely what made it not worth it?

### **EXERCISE TWO: HERE IN AMERICA**

You will need: a slip of paper and writing utensils for each student.

One of the major themes in *Ragtime* is the concept of the American Dream. Have each student write what they think the ideal lifestyle is to succeed in America. Then, collect all of the slips of paper and hand them out to the students. No one should have their own slip of paper. Use the discussion questions to compare each other's "dreams."

#### **Discussion Questions:**

How do the students' idea of the perfect life differ across the board? What does this say about the different paths we choose to take in life? Have the class relate this back to *Ragtime* and how each of the character's goals in life differ—and what tensions do these cause?

### **EXERCISE THREE: STOP THE PRESSES!**

The stories of the real characters in *Ragtime* are told through the perspectives of the fictional characters and the newspapers of the time. A typical news article is anywhere from 500-800 words. That's not a lot of characters to detail someone's life! If you were to have your life told in a news article, what would you include?

#### **Directions:**

Design the front of a newspaper. Create a five word title to draw the reader in on "your life" and write an 250-500 word article about an important or shocking moment. Once completed, have the class swap news stories.

### **EXERCISE FOUR: RAG OF A TIME**

*Ragtime* beautifully transfers the words of a novel into a musical while maintaining and adding to its cultural relevance.

#### **Directions:**

Either solo or with up to four group members, create a song or rap about an important social issue. This can be just a chorus or a verse and a chorus. Don't be shy! Songs are just poetry with tunes!

For the ambitious: Share with the class!

## EXERCISE FIVE: READ ALOUD SCENES

### ACT ONE: FATHER'S DEPARTURE

FATHER

Everything will be fine, MOTHER. You'd think the world was coming to an end every time a man sailed off to the North Pole with Admiral Peary.

MOTHER

I shall miss you.

FATHER

Of course you will. But it's only a year. Nothing much happens in a year. The world will not spin off its axis. Nothing will change, Mother. We will miss each other but the world will stay the same.

GRANDFATHER

I hope not. What this world needs is a good swift kick in the pants.

YOUNGER BROTHER

Look! Down there! On the pier! It's her! Evelyn Nesbit! She's even more beautiful in real life than she is in the magazines. I'm going to try to speak to her.

(Exit YOUNGER BROTHER. THE LITTLE BOY wants to follow.)

LITTLE BOY

Me too!

FATHER

Edgar, stay here.

LITTLE BOY

I want to see her, too.

FATHER

You're the man of the house now. You have to keep an eye on Mother for both of us. Will you do that?

LITTLE BOY

Yes, sir.

FATHER

That's my little soldier.

GRANDFATHER

I want to go now. My legs hurt. Everyone say goodbye.

FATHER

I'll miss you, sir.

GRANDFATHER

Then stay home.

(Exit GRANDFATHER and LITTLE BOY.)

MOTHER

Come back soon and safe to us.

FATHER

That is my intention.

MOTHER

And not too many polar bear skins.

FATHER

I promise. Now, unless you want to be the only woman left on a shipful of men, you'd better get ashore.

(This is FATHER's idea of a joke.)

I'm sorry. That was coarse. Goodbye. Stay well. God bless you.

(MOTHER watches as the figure of FATHER recedes.)

FATHER

And remember to cancel our subscription to the Philharmonic. I left money for an emergency under the library rug. Don't smile. You can never have enough money. And you'll remember to bring in the dahlias? Goodbye. Say a prayer for us. God bless America. God bless each and every one of us.

## **ACT ONE: THE CRIME OF THE CENTURY**

Outside the theatre. EVELYN enters. She is being hounded by an unrelenting REPORTER.)

REPORTER

Daily Journal Miss Nesbit! Is it true you haven't visited your husband in the asylum since the trial?

EVELYN

I don't know what you're talking about!

REPORTER

And you have nightmares about your lover's shot-off face?

YOUNGER BROTHER (stepping forward)

Leave the lady alone.

EVELYN

Thank you. You! You're at the theatre every night. You've never missed a performance. You deserve a reward.

(She kisses him.)

Is that what you wanted.

YOUNGER BROTHER

I love you, Miss Nesbit.

EVELYN

Would you repeat that for the press?

YOUNGER BROTHER

No, I really love you.

EVELYN

You love the Girl on the Swing. Well, now you can say she kissed you. But she could never love a man as poor or as thin or as nice as you. I'll blow you a kiss from the stage tomorrow night, if I haven't forgotten all about you.

(EVELYN goes, followed by the REPORTER. YOUNGER BROTHER)

YOUNGER BROTHER

I was going to change the world for you.

## **ACT TWO: COALHOUSE DEMANDS**

MOTHER and YOUNGER BROTHER are sitting around a table. MOTHER has Sarah's baby with her. FATHER stands with a pistol. THE LITTLE BOY watches.)

FATHER

We are suffering a tragedy that should not have been ours. What in God's name possessed you? You took that woman in without sufficient thought. And she brought Coalhouse into our lives. You have victimized us all with your foolish female sentimentality.

YOUNGER BROTHER

Are you going out to find him and shoot him?

FATHER

I'm protecting my home. If Mr. Walker makes the mistake of coming to my door I will deal with him.

YOUNGER BROTHER

Why should he come here? We did not desecrate his car.

FATHER

I went to the police. I told them this murdering madman was a guest in my home. I told them we are keeping his bastard child. I told them everything I knew. They were very grateful.

YOUNGER BROTHER

Did you tell them he's the Negro maniac whose car they destroyed? The same black man who went to them for justice but whose every legal complaint they ignored? The same crazed Negro killer who followed the coffin of a woman they murdered? Were they grateful for the truth?

FATHER

I hope I misunderstand you. Would you defend this savage? Does he have anyone but himself to blame for Sarah's death? Anything but his damnable nigger pride? Nothing under heaven can excuse the killing of men and the destruction of property in this manner.

YOUNGER BROTHER

I did not hear such a eulogy at Sarah's funeral. I did not hear you say then that death and destruction of property were inexcusable.

FATHER

Must I endure this?

YOUNGER BROTHER

You are a complacent man with no thought of history. You have traveled everywhere and learned nothing. I despise you.

(YOUNGER BROTHER exits angrily.)

FATHER

He'll be back.

MOTHER

I don't think so.

THE LITTLE BOY

Why is uncle angry? Why is everyone so angry?

MOTHER

Ask your father.

THE LITTLE BOY

It's because of Coalhouse, isn't it?

MOTHER

Why don't you explain this to your son. He is confused. Why don't you ever talk to him?

(There is a silence.)

FATHER

How would you like to see a game of baseball tomorrow?

THE LITTLE BOY

I think I would like that, sir.

FATHER

I've been neglecting you. The Giants are at the Polo Grounds. Mother, I'm taking the boy to see a game of baseball.

MOTHER

You fool.

FATHER

You'll like baseball. It's a civilized pastime.



Left, Mauro Hantman as Father and Evan Andrew Horwitz as Little Boy.  
Photos by Mark Turek

# More musicals

by Lynn Ahrens & Stephen Flaherty

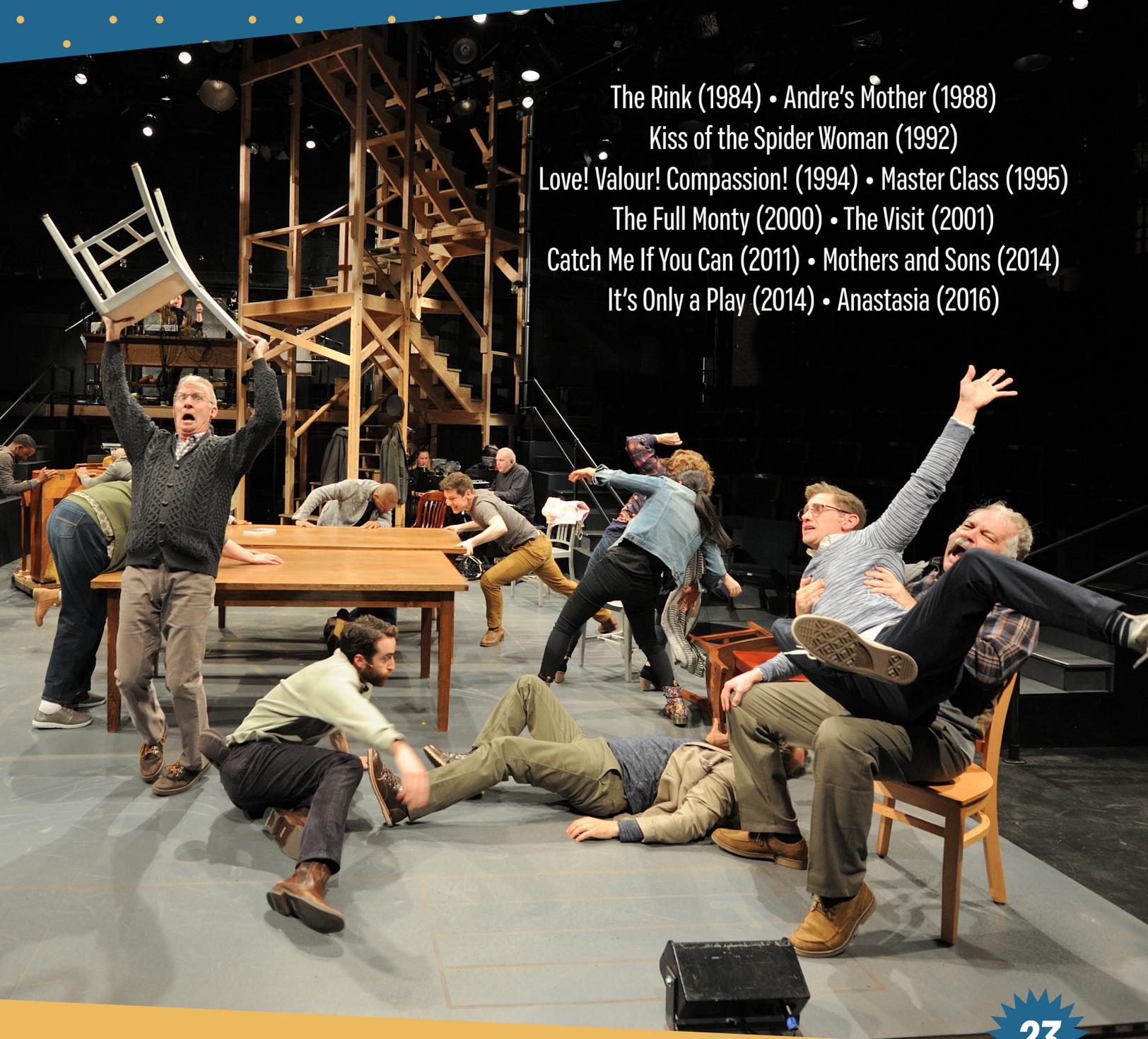


Once on this Island (1990) • My Favorite Year (1993) • Suessical (2000)  
Dessa Rose (2005) • Rocky the Musical (2012) • Anastasia (2016)

# More works

by Terrence McNally

The Rink (1984) • Andre's Mother (1988)  
Kiss of the Spider Woman (1992)  
Love! Valour! Compassion! (1994) • Master Class (1995)  
The Full Monty (2000) • The Visit (2001)  
Catch Me If You Can (2011) • Mothers and Sons (2014)  
It's Only a Play (2014) • Anastasia (2016)



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