

'Ragtime' opens at the Lied

■ The musical, based on the book by E. L. Doctorow, reflects the culture of America at the beginning of the 20th Century.

BY SEAN MCCARTHY

Like the music genre, "Ragtime" reflects a collision of musical and cultural differences at the turn of the century. And as music changes with societal changes, Ragtime offered a revolutionary and often-hedonistic style that fused elements of African and Caribbean beats.

The Tony award-winning musical will open tonight at the Lied Center. The musical is based on E.L. Doctorow's best-selling novel. Terrence McNally penned the musical.

The musical genre of Ragtime, which begins at the Lied Center Tuesday and runs through Jan. 28, has enjoyed a slight resurgence of interest thanks to the Ken Burn's documentary, "Jazz." In the early installations of the epic documentary, the genesis of jazz was traced back to ragtime and blues. The documentary showed written statements of critics of Ragtime, that stated fans of the music genre should be treated the same way as sufferers of leprosy.

Ragtime's popularity was not limited to the United States: the music genre was popular in Canada, Europe and Australia before its influence faded in the early 1900s. The name, Ragtime, was used to describe the 'ragged' rhythms played. It is also a word to describe an instrumental composition with a syncopated melody against a march-style bass rhythm.

Alisa Belflower, lecturer of musical theater at UNL, said she was planning on seeing "Ragtime." She has seen the musical in New York and has taught students some of the original songs.

"It is an epic musical, composed by Americans based on an epic novel," Belflower said.

Belflower said "Ragtime" had universal appeal because it depicted historical events as well as emotional storytelling. For actors, the musical requires strong skills because of the complex emotions of the characters.

"That culture is so well defined," Belflower said, "You have the white upper-class culture, the Jewish culture and the African American culture."

"Ragtime"'s Broadway run was directed by Frank Galati, who directs the musical, "Seussical." Choreographer Graciela Daniele also choreographed the acclaimed "Annie Get Your Gun." Belflower said it was unique that all of the original collaborators were able to make an original composition out of historical events.

"Every single collaborator achieved a claim of artistic notoriety," Belflower said.

Even though "Ragtime" takes place at the dawn of the 20th century, there are many parallels to today's society. Just as the musical showed vastly different cultures coming together, technology and the Internet are acting to join different cultures. Belflower said the challenges the characters faced as a result of the "melting pot" synopsis are similar in today's world.

"You are maintaining a cultural identity and belonging to a whole," she said.

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UNL lecturer of musical theater