

# *Ragtime* Plot Synopsis & Character Descriptions

## **PLOT SYNOPSIS** ([provided by MTD](#)):

### **ACT ONE**

We are introduced to the social and political climate of the United States in the early 20th century by meeting the all the characters in the show--famous celebrities of the time as well as fictional "private citizens." First, we visit New Rochelle to meet a well-to-do white family: Mother, Father (a manufacturer of fireworks) and their Little Boy, Mother's Younger Brother, and Grandfather. They are oblivious to people other than their own kind. Next, we go to Harlem to meet Coalhouse Walker Jr., a ragtime pianist, and his girlfriend, Sarah. Immigrants arrive at Ellis Island, and we meet Tateh, an artist who makes silhouettes, and his Little Girl. The lives of these three American families are entwined with the likes of Booker T. Washington, Harry Houdini, J.P. Morgan, Henry Ford, Evelyn Nesbit and Emma Goldman. Whites, African-Americans, immigrants and celebrities are set on a collision course in the stunning opening number, "Ragtime."

Father is accompanying Admiral Peary on a trip to the North Pole. At the dock, he consoles Mother that everything will be the same upon his return. Mother bids him "Goodbye My Love." On its way out of the harbor, Father's ship passes a "rag ship" filled with immigrants, arriving in New York. Tateh and the Little Girl are on board. Tateh and Father wave to one another; Father admires the immigrants for their naive bravery in coming to a new land, ("Journey On") and Tateh questions Father's reasons for leaving such a place. Simultaneously, Mother wonders what this year without her husband will bring.

Mother's Younger Brother is in love with Evelyn Nesbit. He feels like "a firework, unexploded." He sees all of Nesbit's shows. Nesbit performs "Crime of the Century" as a vaudeville act which tells the true tale of her lover's murder. After the show, Younger Brother approaches her, but she crushes his hopes.

Mother and the Little Boy are in the garden. He yearns to meet Houdini, and she tells him maybe one day he will. As Mother digs in a flower bed, to her shock she unearths a newborn African-American child. The police arrive on the premises with Sarah, the mother of the child. Rather than let Sarah go to prison, Mother takes Sarah and child into her own home. ("What Kind of Woman.")

With many other immigrants, Tateh and The Little Girl disembark at Ellis Island, happy to have reached America. Tateh sets up his business on the Lower East Side, selling paper silhouettes of celebrities for a nickel each. He is chastised by Emma Goldman for selling one of J.P. Morgan, the epitome of capitalization. J.P. Morgan himself enters the scene, an emblem of unattainable "Success" for the immigrants; but Harry Houdini magically appears to Tateh, showing that an immigrant can indeed make it. Time passes, and times become harder, Tateh's business fails, his daughter becomes ill. When a man tries to buy the Little Girl, Tateh has reached rock bottom. He swears to make a better life for himself and his child.

In Harlem, Coalhouse Walker Jr. tells his friends how he loved and lost Sarah, but reveals that he's just found out where she might be living, and is determined to win her back. ("Getting' Ready Rag.") Henry Ford appears to tell us of his new method of mass production and his most famous product - the model T Ford. ("Henry Ford.") Coalhouse drives off in his new Model T, in search of Sarah.

Back in New Rochelle, Mother and the Little Boy wait at the train station, on their way to New York City to take care of the family business while Father is away. Tateh and the Little Girl wait across the tracks for a train to Boston. Mother and Tateh greet one another, and Tateh is surprised to be treated with respect. ("Nothing Like the City.") The Little Boy has a premonition that they will see Tateh and the Little girl again.

In New Rochelle, Sarah is now living in Mother's home. She is remorseful over her desperate act, and begs her infant's forgiveness. ("Your Daddy's Son.") In his car, Coalhouse arrives in New Rochelle, but is met by hostility from a group of firemen, angered that a black man seems to think he can go anywhere. Finally Coalhouse reaches Mother's home, but Sarah will not see him.

Coalhouse returns every Sunday for weeks, wooing Sarah with his ragtime tunes. Father returns from the North Pole to find a very different household from the one he left, filled with a "New Music." He now has an independent wife, a boarder, an African-American baby and a visitor playing Ragtime in his living room.

Coalhouse wins Sarah back. Coalhouse tells Sarah of his admiration for Booker T. Washington's achievements, and together, he and Sarah imagine a future for their child. ("Wheels of A Dream.")

Meanwhile, in the mills of Lawrence, Massachusetts, Tateh has lost sight of the American dream and now works at a mill sixty-four hours a week. In Union Square Emma Goldman tries to generate a strike against the oppressive mill owners. Younger Brother happens to hear her speech ("The Night That Goldman Spoke at Union Square") and is energized to the cause of the blue-collar workers.

A violent labor strike occurs in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Tateh escapes the violence with his Little Girl, and soothes her terror with a little flip book of silhouettes that he has made. ("Gliding"). The train conductor notices the book of "moving" silhouettes and buys it for his own child. Tateh sees this as a wonderful new business idea.

Booker T. Washington gives a speech about struggling against the odds, even as Coalhouse's Model T is destroyed by the same group of firemen who first harassed Coalhouse. Coalhouse vainly tries to find "Justice" through legal channels, postponing his marriage to Sarah. Sarah tries to seek help from a visiting Vice Presidential candidate ("President") but is clubbed to death by police.

Act One closes with the anger and grief of Sarah's funeral. ("Till We Reach That Day.")

## **ACT TWO**

Coalhouse mourns the loss of Sarah. Seeking vengeance, he shoots three of the firemen who trashed his car, burns their firehouse and demands that the fire chief be brought to justice. ("Coalhouse Demands"). Coalhouse now has a band of followers, and becomes a notorious celebrity. Booker T. Washington publicly condemns Coalhouse's actions. Father goes to the police to tell them what he knows about Coalhouse. He has a huge fight with Younger Brother, who has been moved by the plight of the oppressed and the injustice done to Coalhouse. Younger Brother leaves the house in anger, and Mother is deeply upset.

In reaction, Father takes the Little Boy to a baseball game, which he sees as a "civilized pastime." But even this has changed, and is now a game not just for upper class whites but for immigrants, too. ("What A Game.") Meanwhile Coalhouse's band of men set fires around the city. Reporters besiege the family in New Rochelle and Father decides to take the family to Atlantic City so that child welfare officials cannot take the baby away. ("Let's Run Away to Atlantic City.")

In Atlantic City, we discover that Tateh is now a famous film director and has recreated himself as "The Baron Ashkenazy." His daughter, healthy and beautifully dressed, is by his side. Once again, Tateh meets Mother, and revels in his successful new company, "Buffalo Nickel Photoplay, Inc."

Later, the Little Girl and Little Boy play together as Tateh and Mother watch from the boardwalk. ("Our Children"). Tateh reveals his humble origins to Mother, who is moved by his honesty.

In Harlem, Younger Brother searches for Coalhouse, and though the residents are mistrustful of him, one of Coalhouse's men takes him to Coalhouse's hideout. Meanwhile, drawn by laughter and dancing in a club, Coalhouse thinks of the first time he met Sarah. ("Sarah Brown Eyes.") A blindfolded Younger Brother is brought to Coalhouse's den. Younger Brother wants to express his sympathy for Coalhouse's actions ("He Wanted to Say"), but all he can manage to do is offer his knowledge of explosives.

Coalhouse focuses his rage by taking over J.P. Morgan's Library. He threatens to blow up the library and all its treasures, as well as himself and all his men, one of whom is now Younger Brother. Father tells Mother that he has volunteered to act as a negotiator or hostage, and Mother realizes that their relationship can never go "Back to Before."

Coalhouse and his men are barricaded inside the Morgan library. Emma Goldman applauds and Booker T. Washington deplors these actions. Father tells the authorities that Booker T. Washington is the only man Coalhouse will listen to. Booker T. is sent in the library to speak with Coalhouse. He assures Coalhouse that he will have a fair trial and forum for his opinions if he surrenders. Coalhouse negotiates the safe passage of his men, including Younger Brother, while Father remains behind in the library.

When Coalhouse is left alone with Father, he asks about his son. Father promises a safe end to the standoff. But when Coalhouse exits the building to surrender, he is shot dead by authorities.

Epilogue: The era of Ragtime has ended. The characters come forward one by one to tell us the end of their stories--Younger Brother joins the revolutionary Emiliano Zapata. Emma Goldman is deported. Booker T. Washington establishes the Tuskegee Institute. Evelyn Nesbit fades into obscurity. Grandfather dies. Father is killed during wartime. Mother and Tateh marry and move to California with their children, where Tateh creates a wonderful new movie, based on watching his children play together. In the final tableaux, Little Coalhouse runs into Mother's arms, and we see that a new American family has formed--white, immigrant, African-American.

## CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS:

**Booker T. Washington (mid to late 40's, baritone):** One of our story's historical figures comes to life. In our show Washington strives to embody and provide the voice of restraint and wisdom for his people in the face the injustices and unimaginably trying circumstances they face. In speech and demeanor, his character very much mirrors that of Coalhouse. Of course, that's about where the similarities end. Washington should be portrayed as polished, educated, and emblematic of actual man as he was. He delivers passionate speeches as a means of swaying the direction his people should take in the struggle for racial justice and equality. He must speak with great conviction and authority. He must be convincing.

**Coalhouse (low to mid-30's, powerful rich baritone with strong high notes. Low Ab to high A):** Although our story is told through the chance interactions of a number of historical figures and fictional characters at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Coalhouse is truly the driving engine behind it all. Similar to Booker T. Washington, he must convey strength, polish, and intelligence. However, internally, he also reflects the unbridled rage experienced by vast numbers of African Americans at the hands of an oft unjust society that was America in this era. Even so, he controls and channels this rage into a highly calculated, systematic approach to his own brand of justice. The actor who seeks to fill this role must exhibit polish, charisma, intelligence, and strength. Coalhouse is a very intricately written character. While many may not condone his actions, most would certainly concede the challenges he faces.

**Emma Goldman (mid to upper 30's to low 40's, alto):** A fascinating firebrand, Goldman adds to the lengthy list of historical figures that populate the world of our show. Staunchly leftist, Goldman spends her entire life tirelessly crusading against the injustices faced by the poor working-class, uneducated masses who struggled to make a life for themselves. In our story, Goldman meets Tateh, a new immigrant to America, and his daughter. She works to enlist him the fight to earn rights for workers. She also becomes acquainted with Younger Brother. Goldman must be played as a tremendously passionate human being. She must speak with the vigorous enthusiasm and influence that would command masses to take action, even in the face of jeopardizing their very livelihoods and lives alike. A staunch anarchist, Goldman's verbalized political zeal must be palpable in audition. She is *not* for the weak or tame of heart. Show a commanding presence, ladies!

**Evelyn Nesbit (18 – 25 years old, messo-soprano):** Okay, she's *the* iconic sex symbol in America during the time in which our story is set. Her character is vastly different in the novel than in the musical production from which it is based. In keeping with tradition, I enjoy complexity. I'm still shaping a sense of how much I wish to incorporate elements of the characters' composition in the novel as they exist in our production of the show. In the show, her character is invariably played, and arguably written to be, very one-dimensional. Goofy, gorgeous, bombshell young actress and model, period. Not so. In reality, as in the novel, Evelyn was a remarkably sharp young woman. Yes, she may project the outward appearances of a clichéd mindless beauty, but I also want to see the truth of her personality revealed in small doses. Anyway, in audition, play with this direction as best you can. Still, she must suggest the full allure and vibrato that she is written to display in the musical adaptation.

**Father (30 – 45 years old, baritone with good high notes, low A to high F):** No, not *that* Father! We got a new Father this year! Gotta feel a little bad for this guy. Yes, he makes the decision to go off stomping around the North Pole and leaves his family. Still, you really can't help but feel sorry for him as he, unsuccessfully, tries to reconnect with the world left behind before his journey. What struggles to eventually realize is that the world he left no longest exists. In truth, this process is probably quite similarly experienced by many people as they age. His sense of nostalgia and connection for the past prevents him from adapting to the realities of the new world in which he exists. It's strange, on the one hand, he can be played as a staunch conservative who simply doesn't understand the modern in which he lives. On the other hand, the novel paints him as much more of a sympathetic character. Father is a great guy. He can't help his predicament any more than anyone can help his or her own personal biases and perspectives formulated over the course of a few decades. Anyway, he should be played as a sympathetic, albeit somewhat short-sighted person.

**Grandfather (50 – 65, baritone):** He's *really* written as very simple, clichéd crotchety old man in the show. To be fair, Doctorow doesn't provide that much more insight into the character in the novel either. Anyway, I suppose we might view him as little more than comedy relief, given his one-liners. I don't think I'll be looking for him to be played as anything other than the way he is written in the show. Give me a crotchety old man!

**Henry Ford (35 – 45, tenor):** One list of character descriptions for Ford describes him as “Folksy. Full of himself,” and I think that's pretty fitting. Now, I haven't spent as much time catching up on bios of the actual man. I've my collected recollections of things I've heard about him over the years, and I've got the novel's portrayal of him on my mind. Still, I think the aforementioned descriptors hold pretty true. We can go a bit further though. No one can doubt the contributions Ford gave to industrialization in America and the world. His processes for manufacturing lead to the rapid rise of a new class of citizens in this country who enjoyed vastly increased financial gains and creature comforts in the decades that followed. He's one of the Steve Jobs of his day. He's an innovator. His passion for his business is felt and reflected in every waking second of his life. I want to see this reflected in his stage time. Show me the energy and enthusiasm this man embodied.

**Houdini (20's to early 30's, baritone):** He's a magician who gains worldwide notoriety for his feats as an escapist. His character is, along with many others, less pronounced in the show than in the novel. In the show, he embodies the story of an immigrant's success in America. He also reflects the rise of the fame and celebrity status that was newly emerging in this era due vastly improved communication. I have very few notes for what I would like to see in audition for this role. Surprise me.

**J.P. Morgan (60 – 65, baritone):** He likes mummies, and he forms a club with his new pal, Hank Ford. Okay, so Morgan represents the upper .0013% of the country at this time in American history. He is a shrew financier, and the show paints him as pompous, and oblivious to the plight of the common man. The novel gives him greater dimension. Anyway, in audition I want to see a man in somewhat advancing years who reflects status and wealth.

**Little Boy (7 – 10, tenor- cast from children's chorus):** The young, inquisitive, and slightly unique son in our story's core family, the Little Boy is often seen as being one of two possible sources of the narrative in the novel. His exact role in the show is somewhat confused. It's difficult to tie everything the novel embodies together in the show. Still, here's what I do want to see. He's intelligent, has sharp diction, is creative, and somewhat clairvoyant. Something needs to stand out as unique in audition. I can't exactly articulate what I'm looking for, so I look forward to what our young candidates will bring. As with the Little Girl, the actor who plays this role must have a solid sense of comedic timing for the delivery of some wonderful one-liners.

**Little Girl (8 – 12, soprano- cast from children's chorus):** Tatch's daughter, she is a young Eastern European immigrant. Both the novel and the show offer us some solid insight in the lives of this small family. Among the information we are given is the fact that the Little Girl is quite stoic, and unusually mature for her age. She is reserved and quiet, but not necessarily because she is shy. She is intelligent and is raised by her father to be a cautious participant in a world of struggles. Her dead-pan delivery of a few lines that provide some wonderful laughs must be played stone-faced. I also want to see how our applicants handle dialect for the role.

**Mother (25 – 35, mezzo-soprano with a strong belt):** Mother is a remarkable character. She very much represents the rapidly changing ideals and cultural norms at-play within the country during this era. In the absence of her husband, she must not only take on the role of managing the household, but must also lead the business affairs of her husband's company during his expedition. The novel takes a bit more time to describe the successes she has at this venture. She both witnesses and is equally changed by the times in which she lives. While it is not a transformation she sought, she nevertheless accepts it and emerges vastly stronger, much to the chagrin of her husband who feels displaced. The actor who seeks to take on this role will display quiet strength. Mother is a reserved woman, and is the epitome of elegance and social conditioning. She should reflect polish

and formality, but not suggest a sense of being elitist or unapproachable. She displays warmth, kindness, and grace.

**Sarah (18 – 25, alto):** She gets shot and killed.

**Tateh (30 – 40, tenor):** Father to the Little Girl, Tateh is a wonderful character. He displays the struggles of the newly arrived to this country during the turn of the century. As he sits aboard the rag ship that provides his passage to a new life, he dreams of the ease with which he will find success and wealth in America. In the novel, we first meet Tateh after he has arrived in America. At any rate, in both the novel as well as the show we are given a fairly intimate view into the lives these new immigrants. We witness Tateh's progression from naive optimism, to misery in the face of stark poverty, to a rise and rebound who enjoys absolute success as a pioneer in the early days of the motion picture industry. Tateh is an imaginably devoted and loving father to his daughter. His entire being is dedicated to her, and her needs are ultimately the source of his drive to emerge from the abject poverty they endure. The actor who seeks this role must convey the undeniable sense of showmanship and charisma that Tateh exhumes. A command of the dialect is also something that I want to see in audition.

**Sarah, for real (18 – 25, alto):** She's got to be quite an amazing young woman. Her death gives rise to the transformation within Coalhouse that leads to devastating effect. She is uniquely strong-willed for her age and race in this time period. Although the exact circumstances of Coalhouse's mistreatment of her remain a mystery, we are able to piece together the basic narrative. Regardless, Coalhouse makes it his unwavering mission to regain her affection, which he ultimately succeeds in doing. Sadly, their renewed life and love affair is short-lived. In the brief period between their reunion and her death, they display an amazingly deep, rare, and passionate sense of connection. The actor who seeks to play this role must embody that of an innocent. She is young, passionately idealistic, naïve, and beautiful. I want to see this character come alive.

**Willie Conklin (25 – 40, tenor):** Willie, Willie, Willie. Well, he's a very colorful guy, I'll give him that. Conklin is the spark that ignites Coalhouse's mini-revolution. He is the very epitome of racial intolerance. His lack of intelligence and utterly palpable displays of racial superiority echo the deep divisions that existed between the various races, creeds, and ethnicities within the country both at the time of the show and nowadays. I want the actor who seeks this role to be brash, brazen, abrasive, offensive, and just plain ugly. He's not really a guy with whom anyone can empathize. A rare character indeed!

**Younger Brother (20 – 30, baritone):** He represents one of the characters from the novel who is a bit short-changed in the show. At least, at first he seems to be. Younger Brother is a bit of a lost soul. He is quite intelligent, very idealistic, and very gifted in his trade, but he lacks direction and focus. We seem him two faces during the show. First, we're shown his Evelyn Nesbit infatuation phase. Next, we're shown his crusade for social justice phase. We're never given truly deep insight into this character, so I'll be quite interested to see what candidates will bring to the audition as they interpret the role. Bottom line, he needs to be focused, identifiable with his social standing, and played somewhat reserved and awkward.

#### **Ensemble Roles:**

**Sarah's Friend (F):** A friend of Sarah's. She is in attendance at her funeral.

**Conductor (M):** He mans the train that brings Tateh and the Little Girl to New Rochelle.

**Policeman (M):** He's ready to throw Sarah in the big house for the mistreatment of her newborn child. He can't stand the petunias in Mother's garden.

**Charles S. Whitman (M):** Such ambition, Mr. District Attorney.

**Admiral Perry (M):** He makes the others break in the passage on his trek to the North Pole.

**Houdini's Mother (F):** She's very proud of her magical boy.

**Coalhouse Follower (M):** He follows Coalhouse.

**Harlem Man (M):** A man from Harlem.

**Harlem Woman (W):** A woman from the Jersey Shore. She moved to Harlem to be with Harlem Man.

**Fan 1 (M):** He loves baseball, but he's an obnoxious fan.

**Kathleen (F):** She's the family's Irish-born maid. Love to hear some accents in audition ladies.

**Fireman (M):** He helps to start fires... well, indirectly anyway.

**Bridget (F):** She's the family's impertinent new maid.

**Henson (M):** *His* people were also brought here on ships! Pretty much like absolutely *everyone else* except Native Americans.

**Man (M):** What more do you need to know?

**Town Hall Bureaucrat (M):** He just enforces the red-tape as he's told. Give me indifference and disinterest.

**Welfare Official (M):** Same thing.

**Baron's Assistant (M/F):** A film biz lackey.

**Coalhouse Follower #1 (M):** He's the first follower. Well, after Coalhouse Follower anyway.

**Coalhouse Follower #2 (M):** He's another follower.

**Coalhouse Follower #3 (M):** He's also another follower.

**Fan 2 (M):** An equally obnoxious fan of baseball.

**Second Bureaucrat (M):** His role was deemed necessary by the Broadway Writers Guild's regulatory body.

**Stanford White (M):** An architect who has designs for pretty young models. He hates the roofs of skyscrapers.

**Judge (M):** Who doesn't love a good judge role? He presides over the trial of the century, but there are ninety more years to go!

**Fan 2 (M):** He hates his home team.

**Fan 3 (M):** He can't wait for basketball to rise in prominence.

**Fan 4 (M):** He goes to some of the games.

**Solo Woman (F):** She sings by herself.

**Clerk (M):** It's a good desk job.

**Coalhouse Follower #4 (M):** He follows Coalhouse, but he distances himself a bit from the other followers when placed in character descriptions.

**Doctor (M):** He hates Mother Azaleas. He wasn't even supposed to work today!

**Henry K. Thaw (M):** He loves spanking people. Seriously, read the novel. He's also a very jealous guy.

**Mrs. Whitstein (F):** She's interesting.

**Newsboy #1 (M/F):** He sells papers.

**Newsboy #2 (M/F):** He sells more papers.

**Newsboy #3 (M/F):** He sells still more papers.

**Newsboy #4 (M/F):** He has a novel that's waiting to be written about his childhood career as a newsboy.

**White Attorney (M):** He won't take Coalhouse's case.

**Jury Foreman (M):** He can't keep his eyes off Ms. Nesbit.

**Various Chorus Groups**