

Ragtime Initial Scenic Design Guidelines

Let's begin with some of the core elements at-play with the show and the novel on which the musical is based.

Dominant Themes (taken from [Sparknotes.com](https://www.sparknotes.com)):

• The Difficulty of Accepting Change

- E.L. Doctorow addresses several major societal changes in turn-of-the-century America in his novel *Ragtime*. He conveys the effects of these changes through the reactions of the characters. Some characters welcome and accept change, while other reject and struggle with it. These differing reactions become one of the ways in which Doctorow develops his characters. For example, Father cannot abide by the changes he faces upon his return from his expedition. Father becomes depressed by his feelings of alienation from his family and from the ways of the new century. He feels helpless in light of the increased self-sufficiency of both his wife and his son. Mother, on the other hand, finds her newfound abilities and freedoms liberating, and thrives in Father's absence. Her duties with the family business and her responsibilities toward Sarah and her child make her realize her potential. At the end of the novel, she has become so separated from the previous societal norms that she marries Tateh at a time when marriage between Christians and Jews had not yet gained acceptance.
- **IMPLICATIONS ON DESIGN CHOICES:**
 - Rapid scene changes and quick progression of storyline (inherent in way in which the show is written)
 - Use of heights to distance characters from each other, heightening sense of separation and display of change between characters
 - Possibly different areas of the set that convey sense of power
 - Use of projection surfaces to offer further narrative voice on the historical dimensions.



Pioneer HS made use of project in such a manner

• The Struggle for Stability and Meaning

- Throughout the novel, the characters attempt to derive meaning from their experiences and from the way in which the world challenges and changes them. Doctorow focuses on the process by which the characters attempt to reconcile their own desires for stability with their knowledge that life's events often seem to possess no reason or direction. For example, in Chapter 20, J.P. Morgan asks Ford, "Suppose I could prove to you that here are universal patterns of order and repetition that give meaning to the activity of this planet." Their discussion about reincarnation also reflects this desire to seek more outside the realm of what is known and to give meaning to life. Morgan's musings, as well as his journey to the Egyptian pyramids, demonstrate his search for truth and meaning. Doctorow also briefly alludes to Theodore Dreiser, whom he portrays as constantly shifting the position of his chair to align himself correctly, yet never quite attaining satisfaction. Peary's expedition to the North Pole, and the subsequent inability to pinpoint the precise location of the North Pole express this effort to find peace amongst chaos.
- **IMPLICATIONS ON DESIGN CHOICES:**

- Movement of certain major or minor components of the set



Pioneer HS made use of giant spinning reels/wheels/gears, which were used to represent a number of different themes and concepts.

- Perhaps an thin gangway or corridor of the set design that visually feels unstable or precarious to as certain characters exist on it?
- Perhaps a moving portion of the set that literally displays a lack of stability for the character on it
 - NO TURNTABLE THOUGH, PLEASE!

• The Impact of Technological Development on Culture

- The Progressive Era (1900–1917) during which this novel is set was a time marked by rapid technological developments and industrialization. These years also brought a heavy influx of immigrants as well as an increasingly urban American landscape. Technological advancements enabled increased efficiency and mass production. However, Doctorow clearly brings into question the consequences of this new technology for the average American worker. J.P. Morgan's discussion with Henry Ford about Ford's assembly line innovations brings this debate to the forefront. At the end of chapter eighteen, Doctorow writes, "From these principles Ford established the final proposition of the theory of industrial manufacture - not only that the parts of the finished product be interchangeable, but that the men who build the products be themselves interchangeable parts." Here Doctorow clearly addresses the potential for technology to undermine the value of the individual and his abilities.

○ IMPLICATIONS ON DESIGN CHOICES:

- This theme **MUST** be starkly represented in the visuals of your design. This was the absolute boom times of the great rise of industry in our nation. People left behind their farms as they flocked to cities in order to work in the rapidly expanding factories



Pioneer AND Andover's design choices both reflected the raw industrial feel of the era in their design choices

- Work to develop a core industrial, factory, tenement, feel to the visual design elements of your set.
- Checkout the following website resources
- [VISUAL IMAGES OF THE PROGRESSIVE ERA](#)
- [THE PROGRESSIVE ERA](#)
- [AMERICAN LIBRARY.GOV – PROGRESSIVE ERA](#)

• Imprisonment and False Liberation

- Doctorow incorporates the tension between imprisonment and liberation into the struggles of several of his characters. Imprisonment manifests itself in many different ways in the novel: physical, emotional,

philosophical, political, and economic. For example, Harry Houdini, a famous escape artist, astounds crowds with his ability to escape from any given enclosed area; therefore, his struggle does not originate in physical imprisonment, but in emotional imprisonment. Publicly, he demonstrates his freedom from imprisonment. However, he does not derive any sense of satisfaction from his feats, because privately, his obsession with his mother, which continues even after her death, prevents him from emotional liberation. Tatch also experiences a feeling of imprisonment during his time in New York, and attempts to "escape" to Lawrence, Massachusetts, Philadelphia, and other locations.

○ **IMPLICATIONS ON DESIGN CHOICES:**

- This is perhaps a more difficult theme to visually embody in your scenic designs
- The scenes depicting Tatch's hovel should offer a sense of claustrophobia in some manner.

General Requests for Your Approach:

- I suppose I do feel unable to divorce myself from use of a long US platform that runs USL to USR with escapes both USL and USR
 - I might also like to use smaller outcroppings that pull DS from the extreme UL and UR sections of the platform
- Let's really consider use of projection images. I know that they draw focus, but the visuals of the time period and enhancements they offer seem to be worth the costs. The question becomes, where are they used?
- Use of factory-like, industrial visuals as the dominant driver in the scenic design are very important.
 - But also tie-in other elements of technological development if you can
 - Use of the wheel (rise of automobiles)
 - Use of film reels (development and rapid rise of motion picture industry)
 - Visual sense of grand architectural achievements of the power barons of the progressive era. See [Morgan Library](#).
- Fluidly moving set pieces to convey certain locales
 - Perhaps copying PH's approach to unfolding/reversing elements of the set to reveal settings such as the interiors of the family's home
 - Using veiling surfaces that can fold up/out underneath sections of the US structure and MSL/MSR outcroppings for further locale reveals that are easily shifted into and out of