

[Scottsdale](#)

Desert Stages Theatre makes 'Ragtime' sing

by **Michelle Hoffman** - Oct. 19, 2009 10:59 AM
Special for the Republic

The word "ragtime" conjures thoughts of bright, driving [piano](#) tunes that beat to a syncopated rhythm, not a bunch of progressive-era junk that nearly brought the big melting pot to its knees a century ago.

A synopsis for "Ragtime: The Musical," which runs through Nov. 1 at Scottsdale Desert Stages Theatre, would surely read like a unit summary in a history textbook.

E.L. Doctorow's novel "Ragtime" was published in 1975, and a [movie](#) wasn't far behind. The 1981 film was nominated for eight Academy Awards.

But why stop there? Why not cook up a really killer musical for the Broadway stage? It was a great time for music; there isn't a piano player alive who doesn't get a rush from banging out Scott Joplin rags.

So it came to be. In 1998, with an \$11 million budget, an indulgent "Ragtime: The Musical" hit the Broadway stage.

With all of that dough, though, the script isn't anything to write home about, as it attempts to weave three story strands: a WASP-y matriarch, a ragtag Russian [immigrant](#), and a Black pianist who all struggle for identity in turn-of-the-century America.

What works on the page doesn't always work on the stage, and none of the characters fully develops to a satisfying end.

The talent of Desert Stages trumps any faulty writing, however. With a smashing cast under the spot-on direction of Terry Helland, this can-do troupe takes a mediocre story and turns it into a slamming evening of [entertainment](#).

Michelle Hoffman can be reached at michelle.hoffman@cox.net.