

West Valley VIEW



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'He sings like nobody's business'

Goodyear man delivers in Ragtime production for Scottsdale troupe

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GOODYEAR RESIDENT Miguel Jackson stars in *Ragtime*, running today through Nov. 1 at Desert Stages Theatre in Scottsdale. Jackson performs in the leading role as Coalhouse Walker Jr., while Brittany Bradford portrays Sarah.

Goodyear resident Miguel Jackson went to audition for the musical, *Ragtime* at Desert Stages Theatre in Scottsdale with one role in mind.

"I was hoping to get the role of Coalhouse Walker; it's rich and has a lot of meat on it," he said of the Harlem musician. "It's a very important role in terms of race. And being so far away, it was [that role] or nothing."

It turns out; the 31-year-old had nothing to worry about.

"There was no doubt," *Ragtime* director Terry Helland said of who would land the part of Coalhouse Walker, one of the show's three leads, after the audition process. "He [Jackson] was an obvious choice because of his stature and how well he sang. He got it right away."

Since then, the recent Canadian transplant has become very familiar with Arizona freeways, making the 45-minute trek - the time it takes without traffic - at least four days a week to rehearse.

"I give full credit to my wife to put up with the three months it has taken," Jackson said.

Jackson's wife, Elissa, is a third-grade teacher at Sonoran Sky Elementary in Glendale. So by the time she gets home from school, Jackson is ready to head out for rehearsal.

"It is really a commitment for her as well," he said. "She has been patient with me and the time it has taken."

Fortunately for her, *Ragtime* opened Oct. 9 and all that is left for Jackson to do are the remaining 12 performances.

Turn-of-the-century America

Ragtime is the story of three groups in turn-of-the-century America: African-Americans, upper-class whites and European immigrants. The story also has appearances from several historical figures, including Henry Ford, Harry Houdini, Booker T. Washington and Evelyn Nesbit.

It is based on the 1975 novel of the same name by E.L. Doctorow. It first appeared on Broadway in 1998, lasting two years. The musical is set for a Broadway revival Nov. 15, marking the first musical from the 1990s to be revived.

Desert Stages' production runs through Nov. 1.

"It's an important story," Hellman said of *Ragtime*.

It tells of the "clash between the races and the conflicts that each American faced during those days," the director said. "It will make you cry; men cry during the performance. It is pretty powerful."

Jackson said he feels the story is relevant.

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Especially with the tension you see in everyday life," he said. "It feels like there is a lot of tension out there and the show mirrors that tension, but there is a sense of relief."

"[*Ragtime*] is one of the most beautiful shows I've seen in my life," said Helland, who is also the artistic director for Desert Stages. "So I wanted to give it a try."

The director placed Jeffrey J. Davey (Tate) and Elizabeth Reeves (Mother) in the other two leads.

"They are all amazing," Helland said, though his praise didn't end with the leading actors.

"It has the most powerful vocals and incredible music of any show I've done," the 30-year theater veteran said. "It's a powerhouse."

"There is a lot of talent in the cast, no question about that," Jackson said. "The cast is incredible vocally and artistically, and I don't say that a lot."

Singing like nobody's business

It appears Jackson picked a winner for his first Arizona performance.

The Canadian and his wife - who has dual citizenship - moved to Arizona in November 2008 from Windsor, Ontario, Canada, which is across the border from Detroit.

"I think we made the right choice," he said of the move. "My friends are shoveling snow and I'm in shorts on my balcony."

"A lot of people warned me [of the heat]," Jackson said. "I was told for eight months of the year it is the Valley of the sun, and the other four months it's the surface of the sun."

He survived his first summer, though, and with a job working behind-the-scenes at a Phoenix TV station in place, said he is excited for his future in Arizona, which might include additional theater performances.

"My wife and I will have to sit down and discuss that," he said of possibly being in other productions. He admits, "The [theater] bug, when it bites, is pretty hard."

Jackson has been performing in theater for about four years, although he has been in front of audiences much longer, getting his start in church choirs as a youngster.

"I've always been very comfortable going in front of people making a fool of myself, whatever to get the job done," Jackson said.

He is definitely getting it done for Desert Stages.

"He sings like nobody's business," Helland said of the Canadian, "Who doesn't have much of a Canadian accent, so that helps, too."

Plus, Jackson knew his lines, his music and is nice to work with, he said.

"That part needs a huge singer," the director said of Coalhouse Walker. "It is one of the best roles for a male in a musical; it's a role of a lifetime."

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