



SUMMARY

Like a soaring piano solo, *Ragtime* sings the story of early 20th twentieth century America, a fast-changing country where liberty and justice are not yet for all. The musical weaves the stories of three very different groups: a wealthy white tycoon and his family in New Rochelle, a brilliant Black jazz musician and his community in Harlem, and a Jewish immigrant on the Lower East Side with his young daughter. At first, the world feels full of possibility for each group. But that promise quickly cracks under the weight of racism, poverty, and violence. As the lives of these three groups intertwine, the idea of the “American Dream” gets put on trial. By the end, no one gets to stay neutral: each character must decide whether to obey an unjust system, fight it, or burn it down to demand a future that includes them.

CHARACTER GUIDE

Coalhouse Walker Jr.: A brilliant Black pianist with style, pride, and an unbreakable sense of justice. When he is violently wronged by white supremacists, he refuses to accept humiliation and rebels against a racist system.

Sarah: A young Black woman longing for safety and love. Her quiet determination and vulnerability reveal the devastating cost of American racism.

Mother: A white woman from New Rochelle who begins sheltered and compliant. When she finds an abandoned Black infant in her yard, she is forced to choose between what she sees as right and her husband’s insistence on conformity.

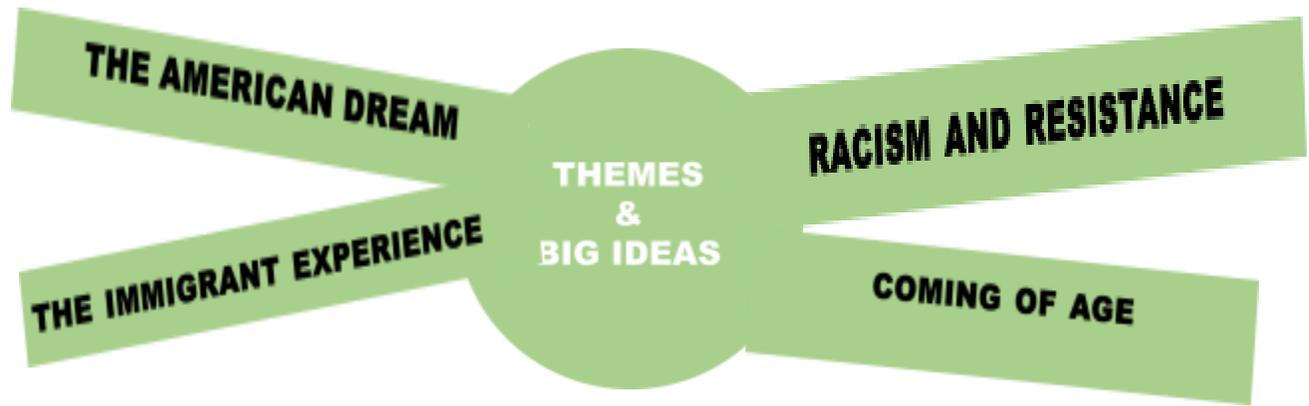
Father: Mother’s husband, a business tycoon and fervent adventurer, secure in tradition and authority. As the world shifts, his rigid belief in order and status leaves him increasingly isolated.

Mother’s Younger Brother: A young man coming of age in wealthy New Rochelle. As he learns about the unfairness of life, he becomes radicalized and must choose between his family and his principles.

Tateh: A Jewish immigrant artist newly arrived in New York City. Clever and relentless, he journeys from poverty to fame, all in a quest to care for his beloved daughter.

Little Girl: Tateh’s daughter, curious and resilient. Through her eyes, America is both magical and merciless.

Emma Goldman: A fiery radical who refuses silence or compromise. She challenges authority and capitalism by giving raucous speeches at protests and rallies.



EXERCISES & ACTIVATIONS

Writing About Music

"It was the music/of something beginning/an era exploding/a century spinning." These are some of the first lyrics heard in *Ragtime*, establishing the importance of music in this revolutionary story. In *Ragtime*, they have ragtime – the jazzy music of Scott Joplin and Jelly Roll Morton – who sang songs of both freedom and joy. What is *your* ragtime today? What artists sing the songs of freedom and revolution of your era? Pick one verse from your favorite contemporary song and explain what makes it your ragtime.

Embodying

Read the character profiles above and create a single physical gesture or short movement phrase for each character that reflects their social position, power, or emotional state. Working in small groups, then layer or contrast movements between characters (for example, Coalhouse and Father, or Mother and Sarah) to explore tension, hierarchy, and collision.

Contextual

Ragtime features several real historical figures in its cast of characters, including Harry Houdini, Henry Ford, Emma Goldman, Booker T. Washington, and Evelyn Nesbit. Choose one of these real characters and complete additional research to learn more about their life stories before and after the events of the play. Then write a paragraph from the perspective of the character 10 years after the end of the play in which they reflect upon how the musical concludes.

This guide was written by TDF and distributed in part by The Broadway League.
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