In Riches, Rags, Rhythm, and Rhyme:
Designing Kent State University’s Production of Ragtime

A thesis submitted to the College of the Arts
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The Cast and Crew of Ragtime
Chapter I: Introduction

For my thesis, I designed costumes for Kent State University’s Spring 2012 production of Ragtime: the Musical, with book by Terrence McNally, lyrics by Lynn Ahrens and music by Stephen Flaherty; based on the 1975 novel Ragtime by E. L. Doctorow. In the novel, Doctorow illustrated how the idyllic ‘Aughts’ were just as fraught with racial tension, gender issues, and familial drama as was his present day 1975. Creators McNally, Ahrens, and Flaherty put this story to music and narrowed Doctorow’s scope to show modern audiences how these issues affected people of all classes. Directed by Associate Professor Eric van Baars, the School of Theatre and Dance’s production of Ragtime was staged in the E. Turner Stump Theater, a traditional proscenium theater that seats 454 patrons. The production team included scenic designer Connie Hecker, a third year M.F.A. student; lighting designer David Krupla, a senior B.F.A. student; props coordinator David Burrington, a third year M.F.A. student; and sound designer Brian Chismar, a junior B.F.A. student.

Ragtime, which takes place in the New York metropolitan area from 1906 to 1914, is about the American dream and the battles waged to make it come true. The lives of the main characters become entangled as they struggle through each difficulty set before them. In Kent State University’s production, Director van Baars’ concept was to highlight the story of the main family as it grew and changed over the course of the play. Director van Baars believed that the backbone of the play was found in the characters’ transformations, which reflected changes in the country. These changes foreshadowed the existence of the modern mixed family, which is what the main characters are depicted as in the final moments of the play. Director van Baars pointed to Tateh’s final declaration at the end of the play as the most meaningful:
“One, afternoon, watching his children at play Tateh had an idea for a movie: a bunch of children, white, black, Christian, Jew, rich, poor-- all kinds of kids-- a gang, getting into trouble, getting out of trouble, but together despite their differences. He was sure this would make a wonderful movie- a dream of what this country could be.”

Director van Baars felt that *Ragtime* illustrated an ideal that is more sustainable today because it is more socially acceptable than it was at the turn of the century.

**Chapter II: Pre-Production Process**

The main design challenges of *Ragtime: the Musical* included: visually dividing a cast of thirty-six people into three socio-economic groups, costumes requiring up to twelve pieces to facilitate a period look, and the need to build and rent additional garments. Of these challenges, the most exciting was choosing clothing that defined the Immigrants, People of New Rochelle, and the Citizens of Harlem as they were presented in *Ragtime*. The parameters of the musical required that the design stay true to the time frame of the play and the style of the era while giving the audience specific clues to the characters’ social status. Achieving this separation required varying the color palette, texture, and style lines for each diverse group; as well as putting historical detail into the costumes while remaining within budget.

In E. Turner Stump Theater the closest audience member is approximately twelve feet away and the furthest about 250 feet away. Visually, this meant that small scale details went unseen and even large textures and patterns appeared flat or solid. This was particularly important when attempting to balance historical accuracy with the reality of what an audience would see.
I began research in June of 2011. I had only heard of *Ragtime* in passing when I received this project. Since the final version of the script would not be available until several months later, I started by looking at video clips of the Broadway production on the video streaming website YouTube.com. Watching these videos gave me a feel for the grandeur and scale of the play and introduced me to how the costume designer of the 1998 Broadway production as well as the 2009 revival Santo Loquasto dealt with the show’s challenges. I did this because it was important to know what had been done before in order to take audience expectations into account during the design process. With this imagery in mind, I listened to the Broadway soundtrack and read the original book *Ragtime*, by E.L. Doctorow.

Doctorow strove to be evocative with the subject matter and poignant in the tone and structure of his novel. Within *Ragtime* historical figures are prominently featured, often significantly affecting the lives of fictional characters. In the novel, real life anarchist Emma Goldman mentored Younger Brother as he struggled with his unrequited love of Evelyn Nesbit, an actual vaudeville sensation, who hid from her society life to take care of Tateh’s sickly but beautiful little girl. Doctorow included enough real history for his fictional history to feel plausible. For example, the real Emma Goldman did call for support for the strike at Lawrence, Massachusetts during a speech at Union Square in 1912, but there is no evidence that she ever met Evelyn Nesbit, much less encouraged her to cast off her corset and gave her a liberating orgasmic rub-down with body oil. Doctorow had no issues picking and choosing history to make a point. Evelyn Nesbit’s fictional liberation serves as a direct contrast to the life of Mother, whose own transformation is more slowly achieved. This method of melding the facts with fiction makes history feel real and closer to the reader. I was able to understand this concept clearly after having read *Beauty in Disarray*, a biographical novel written by Harumi Setouchi in
1989, translated by Sanford Goldstein and Kazuji Ninomiya. It helped me understand what Doctorow was trying to do by writing fiction in between history. *Beauty in Disarray* follows the lives of several prominent Japanese historical figures who Setouchi researched heavily. She made a conscious decision to write only in the blank spaces between the historical facts, while Doctorow wrote over, under, and around the historical facts.

The themes of the novel are telling of the 1970s: women’s liberation resurfacing, a general dissatisfaction with the ‘American Ideal’, and the earth-shaking effect of war and revolution on society. Often it is easy to see the ‘Aughts’ as being a beautiful, innocent, simpler time before the Great War destroyed many of those illusions. Doctorow forces the reader to look at the dirtier, grittier side of turn of the century life. The characters who show adaptability, willingness to change, and who let go of those idyllic illusions are the ones the author allows to find happiness at the end of the story. By adopting a more modern view, namely a view more congruent with the 1970s, his characters are prepared to survive the tumultuous times to come.

In addition to reading and researching the book, I listened to the 1998 Broadway soundtrack recording of *Ragtime: the Musical*. It was the next best thing to having the libretto on hand. I was able to get important information from the lyrics about the structure of the play. The musical continued the episodic structure and the epic nature of the novel. The voice of the novel was mostly third person omniscient, allowing for abrupt transitions chapter to chapter. Each scene of the musical tells a different story, the same way each chapter of the novel does. As a result of my research, I gained an understanding of blocking issues, size of the cast, quick-change issues, the use of historical characters, and which characters had been cut in the transition from book to play.
The title of something is often the author saying what he or she believes to be most important about the work. The title *Ragtime* refers to a style of music that became popular in America at the turn of the century. A truncation of the phrase ‘ragged time,’ it referred to the choppy, changing time signatures throughout the music.\(^4\) The Little Boy says in the beginning of the Epilogue that “The era of ragtime had run out, like the tune on a player piano.”\(^5\) The player piano analogy indicates a sense of inevitability because the only notes it can play are those predetermined by the music roll. Eventually, the music must come to its set conclusion. When I read the Kennedy Center Libretto of *Ragtime* in October 2011, it was clear that the audience would be lead to certain conclusions and be able to foresee danger for Coalhouse and Sarah, for Mother and Father’s ideal life, and for Tateh’s hopes and dreams. The characters can make no choices other than the ones they do, negating the possibility of any other conclusion to their stories.

I approach the art of costume design by asking what a character would wear if they were to choose from what was available to them in their given circumstances. All information I collected through research gave me specific details, shapes, and fabrics to choose from when it came time to design. I created the feel and look of a period without getting trapped in stereotypes and caricatures.

I went to the nearly infinite sources of information on the internet to collect historical imagery I would not otherwise have access too. An example of this is a YouTube.com user named “Aaron1912”, who uploaded short movies filmed in England during the time period.\(^6\) Instead of stiffly posed portraits, I was able to see how people moved and stood in their cumbersome clothes. This was important because in order to make *Ragtime* both realistic and
accessible, the costumes had to move, fit, and feel like real clothing, not just stage décor. I confirmed accuracy by cross referencing and checking for reputable sources.

Two sources that were easily accessible were the Kent State Fashion Museum and Fashion School Library. During the summer of 2011 I was able to go to the Fashion School Library and check out several books which included visual sources depicting clothing at the turn of the century. The most informative of these included The Kyoto Costume Institute’s anthology *Fashion: A History from the 18th Century the 20th Century* and Joseph Schroeder’s *The Wonderful World of Ladies’ Fashion 1850-1920*. In September I had an appointment with the curator of the Kent State Fashion Museum Jean Druesedow. She took me into their stock and allowed me to closely inspect actual women’s garments from the time period. I was permitted to look closely at the closures, decorations, style lines, inside structures, and to touch the garments. This afforded me an understanding of the period that I could not possibly have gotten from a two-dimensional resource.

The main family in *Ragtime* is comprised of Mother, Father, the Little Boy, Grandfather, and Younger Brother. They live a privileged life in New Rochelle, New York, along with a number of ensemble members. The New Rochelle characters are WASPs: White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestants. They look wealthy, clean, crisp, stagnant, and are without passion. They represent the epitome of what success meant in America at the turn of the century. They wanted for nothing; passion was unnecessary and ugly. Men and women had their respective roles in society. Mother’s self-sufficiency broke from her traditional role and thus troubled her husband. The color palette for New Rochelle was white, cream, and hints of pastels; they were washed out and lifeless. Their silhouettes were romantic, close to the body, and well tailored because conspicuous consumption was a sign of money and taste.
The Harlem cast included the principle characters Coalhouse Walker, Jr. and Sarah and an ensemble of African American actors. They represent hope for a better future. They ‘dance and revel’ at the hall, enjoying the freedom their ancestors did not have. The people of Harlem are young and impressionable, full of energy and dreams, and are passionate for life. The injustices they suffer daily do not dampen their spirits. Their lively nature lends itself to a brighter, richer color palette of rusty reds, oranges, and browns. Occasionally historical accuracy was less important than the needs of the production; the women’s skirts I chose were fuller than was typical of the time to facilitate dancing and dramatic movements. Their blouses were designed to be more of the period, with lower necklines and shorter sleeve lengths. I designed the men’s look in more of a jazz style, sleeker than the New Rochelle men but not out of period. These looks foreshadowed future fashions, indicating that these are the people are going to influence that future.

The Immigrant characters are made of European immigrants leaving the depressed and tension filled old country for the American Dream. They are poor and tired, but they have hope that life would be better elsewhere. As Tateh and the Little Girl discover, the promise of America is not as advertised. I made the immigrants fit a cool toned color palette that was mostly blue, grey, and black. They were the overworked and the downtrodden. The script listed Jewish, Haitian, and Italian immigrants. Early in our discussions my advisor Suzy Q. Campbell had suggested that we include more nationalities than those in the script. Though this appealed to both the director and me, I discovered that we had too few actors to make further ethnic divisions readable for the audience. Instead, I indicated a slight range in social class within the immigrants with the use of a few richer colors and tailored ladies coats to contrast with the distressed shawls and shabby skirts.
To research each of these groups, I searched for specific photographic sources. Besides the previously mentioned printed sources, the best included Old-picture.com, TurnoftheCentury.Tumblr.com, and Flickr.com. It was easy to find good photographs of the wealthy and of the historically famous.\(^{10}\) I found photographs of real people at the turn of the century as they walked along the beach in Atlantic City and photographs of Harry Houdini doing his death-defying stunts.\(^ {11}\) I also found photos of different style lines and cuts of clothing on many different body types. This was especially helpful in costuming Mother, played by Therese Boyich. Although my initial designs for Mother used the silhouette of a tall, very thin woman, Miss Boyich is five foot two and curvy so I chose a style better proportioned for her body type.\(^ {12}\)

I discovered fewer photographs of immigrants and African Americans as they looked in their everyday lives. There were a plethora of photographs of the poor working in sweatshops, sewing and weaving as Tateh did.\(^ {13}\) The immigrant workers appeared to be on their best behavior and wearing their best clothes. The same was true of the African American workers. There was a wide variety of style lines similar to those I had seen in the images of the upper class.\(^ {14}\) I hypothesized that the lower class styles varied due to circumstance, station in life, and availability; not just for the sake of fashion. Because of this, my design could incorporate a wider range of styles to create the ‘huddled masses’ of the immigrant crowd.

**Chapter III: Production Process**

Understanding that the living art of theatre is collaborative, I was as present in the production process as possible. To our advantage, the design team had worked together before on other Kent State productions. A level of trust had already been established which made the
process more efficient and effective. I also had three invaluable design assistants who helped me with research and organization.

Part I: Logistics

I attended callbacks and began going to rehearsals in December. After spring semester started I attended many run through rehearsals. Attending rehearsals gave me an understanding of how Director van Baars envisioned the final product and what things were important to the bigger picture. Through watching rehearsals I was able to get a feel for the energy of the crowd scenes and grand sweeping motions the blocking made across the stage.

Early in the design process, Director Eric van Baars and I decided to remain with costume designer Santo Laquesto’s original Broadway color scheme because it was the most effective way to visually divide the three groups: the New Rochelle cast, Harlem cast, and Immigrant cast.

By beginning my preparation for *Ragtime* during the summer of 2011 and by attempting to adhere to a very optimistic production calendar, the shop was able to keep the show on schedule. It was clear that time management would be extremely important. In November, Suzy Q. Campbell, Robin Ruth, Marti Coles, and I sat down to create a calendar of likely due dates and responsibility lists. This way we were able to visually lay out what the available manpower could accomplish in the allotted time with quality results.

The budget for the costumes in this production was $3,500, and the original cast number was thirty-three people. With the addition of an understudy actress and two children (to play Coalhouse Walker III on different days), the final number was thirty-six people and the budget was raised to $3,700. Overall, there were about sixty costume changes. Counting addition or
removal of outerwear, the number of total looks achieved was over ninety. I approximate that sixty-five percent of the costumes were pulled from stock, twenty percent rented, and fifteen percent purchased or built. Specifically, the costume shop built five women’s blouses, three period dresses, three matching velvet skirt drapes, one walking skirt, and one maid’s apron. The Introduction to Costuming Lab built eight red sashes and six black mourning bands. Several costume pieces were reworked, the most significant being Father’s arctic coat which was accomplished by Suzy Q. Campbell.\textsuperscript{15}

The costume shop facilitated all of the costume builds and alterations. Robin Ruth, Costume Shop Supervisor; and Marti Coles, Assistant Shop Supervisor, directed the practicum and work study students who worked in the shop. In addition, Costume Lab students during the fall 2011 and spring 2012 semesters assisted with construction, supervised by their instructor David Burrington.

\textbf{Part II: Pulled Stock and Rentals}

I began pulling costumes from stock after the first design meeting in October of 2011. I began with ladies clothing, pulling everything available in the color palettes and styles appropriate for the three groups. I had stock on hand as I began to organize, size, and choose looks for different characters. Because I was given the cast list before Thanksgiving break, was able to get cast members in for measurements quickly. This gave me the time to pull shoes for them before the first music/sing-through rehearsal. It was very important for the cast members to try shoes on before winter break so any rubbering or fixing for dance purposes could be done in time for the first rehearsal in January. During winter break I pulled petticoats, parasols, corsets, and hats for the cast to rehearse in. Having rehearsal clothing facilitated the actors’
understanding of what it meant to live in the clothing of the period. This understanding helped them develop period movement and a physical awareness of what they wore, which gave production an overall feeling of reality.

During the first week of winter break, my fellow Graduate Assistant David Burrington, my assistant Katie Burkett, and I drove to Michigan University to pull costumes to rent. Because there were more men than women in the cast, I pulled men’s suits and coats to supplement Kent’s stock. I found several dresses that would add historical detail to the look of the production, including jumper dresses for two of the Harlem women and Sarah’s Act II pink dress.\(^{16}\) The most influential find was a pair of matching red, white, and blue 1770s military style ladies jackets from a production of *Daughters of the Regiment* at Michigan State University. This rental influenced the design of the musical number “Crime of the Century”, which became an Americana themed vaudeville act.\(^{17}\) We rented specialty pieces from two local theaters that had done *Ragtime* in previous seasons: a straight jacket for Harry Houdini from the Canton Players Guild and a box of prayer shawls for Tateh and a Hassidic Jewish character in the ensemble from Weathervane Theater.

**Part III: Built Costumes and Alterations**

It was necessary to build the blouses for Sarah and the Harlem women because I was unable to find garments in the correct color or style for them. Three of the five actors were larger than the size pattern I based the designs on. Marti Coles, Assistant Costume Shop Supervisor, worked the week before the spring semester started in order to adjust the patterns and cut the fabric, preparing projects for the costume shop personnel. The blouses were cut from basic cotton quilting fabric with medium to small patterns, which gave them a comfortable and
homemade quality as would have been the case historically. I imitated the bodice of Sarah’s Act II pink dress in the red blouse we built for Act I referencing her innocence in Act I when the audience saw the dress. The construction of Sarah’s red blouse was not as straightforward as it appeared and thus took the longest to complete. To emphasize the romantic quality of Sarah’s character, I chose a rose motif for her costumes. Roses symbolize love, romance, and dreams; all of which Sarah gained and lost within the story of the play. The rose theme in her blouse fabric was repeated in her shawl, her brooch, and the pink dress with matching cummerbund. The Properties Coordinator and I discussed using the roses as a through line. Coalhouse Walker, Jr. brought Sarah red roses when he visited her in New Rochelle.

Mother’s first and last outfits were also built. Originally David Burrington was to build both, but due to his other responsibilities as Properties Coordinator, he took charge of the last outfit, a three-piece pink linen shirtwaist set. The first outfit was patterned by Burrington and my advisor Suzy Q. Campbell. I purchased a pale aqua colored crêpe-back satin for the three piece walking suit which included a ‘jacket’ bodice, waist cincher, and skirt with a tier. We used the crêpe side out, alleviating the need to line the bodice. The skirt was lined in china silk to prevent petticoat seams from showing through the watery satin. I chose the pale aqua color knowing that the warm lights in the “Prologue” would neutralize the color, creating a very cool-toned white which would gradually become more saturated as the lighting became blue toned later in the act. The lighting designer David Krupla and I discussed this effect to ensure a seamless collaboration. I made sure he had a swatch of the fabric, and he was able to program the lights for the “Prologue” on stage using the actual skirt fabric. This outfit also had cotton ribbon lace trim, which I dyed a medium teal color using MX dyes. The original design for both the silk and linen outfits included fairly complex hem designs based on diamond shapes, a
motif I chose to represent Mother’s ‘diamond in the rough’ character arc. I cut this element from the designs because they clashed with the geometric scenic elements and added visual weight to the actress in the wrong way.

Mackenzie Malone, one of my assistants, was responsible for the build of Emma Goldman’s blue dress. The design was based on the understructure of an Edwardian period pattern, giving Emma the correct silhouette without extraneous details. The dress was a last minute addition to the build list because I was unable to find a garment that would change the silhouette of the tall, curvy actress into the angry pillar of strength that the character demanded. I chose navy linen-look polyester for the dress. Initially it creased stiffly and looked awkward, but once the fabric settled onto the actress’s body and the actress herself got used to it, it gave her the strong silhouette I was looking for.

The three matching skirt drapes worn by Evelyn Nesbit and her two back-up girls in “Crime of the Century” were a complicated build. The design was based on the showgirl costumes in the movie Charlie Chaplin. Each girl had a fully boned under-bust corset purchased from CorsetDeals.com, to which we added one inch vertical strips of ribbon. Evelyn’s corset was white with red ribbon; the backup girls had blue corsets with white ribbon. Because the corsets were an under-bust style, it was necessary to purchase front-closure, sapphire blue, and underwire-less bras which I bought from J.C. Penny. I had planned to attach the bras to the corsets for convenience and comfort because the girls intended to wear them under all of their subsequent costumes, but this was cut early in tech week. Mirroring Evelyn Nesbit’s infamous red velvet swing, the skirt drapes were made out of red velvet, cut on the bias, bag-lined in navy lining fabric, and trimmed in red, white, and blue fringe. The fringe was fairly straightforward: blue two inch chainette fringe stitched on top of white four inch fringe stitched on top of red six
inch fringe. The striped fringe was then stitched to the edges of the velvet drapes. The complication came from trying to make the drapes have the correct finished length while maintaining the ‘swag’ look. In order for the girls to under-dress their corsets, the drapes also had to be removable. Evelyn’s chintzy Americana act made a mockery of the American justice system. She makes fun of the American Dream while enjoying the benefits of it.

An understudy for Emma Goldman was added after the initial cast list went up. The actress was not a stock size and her addition to the cast required built or purchased pieces. Because of the large cast the budget was tight, so I created a cost breakdown based on suggestions by Suzy Q. Campbell and Robin Ruth. I estimated that this actress would require about $650 to costume. The cost included the purchase of a long-line bra and tights, as well as fabric and labor for building a blouse and skirt. I presented this breakdown to the department, who approved a $200 addition to my budget. I found a blouse in stock we could alter for her, and we built the skirt with the additional budget.

The Introduction to Costuming Lab in the fall of 2011 made some essential accessory pieces. They created the red structured sashes for the Ragtime Band in Atlantic City. The three ladies in the band wore red skirts, white vests with red ties, white spats, and small straw boaters with patriotic trim. The men wore blue striped vests, white spats, and Styrofoam boaters with the same patriotic trim on it. These accessories were worn over their base costumes. The red sashes made them look like they were all part of the same band and not cobbled together. The Lab also created black mourning bands for Coalhouse Walker, Jr.’s gang in Act II. In the novel, E. L. Doctorow says the gang takes to wearing black bowlers like Coalhouse does, creating a signifier for their members. Onstage, black bowlers would not be enough to identify the gang members because bowlers were very popular among the working classes at the turn of the
century. Wearing mourning bands signified Coalhouse’s grief and visually tied the gang to him. The mourning bands for Coalhouse’s gang were worn around the men’s right bicep.28

The shop was able to shape the bottom corner of many of the men’s suits. With twenty-two men in the cast, it was impossible to acquire historically accurate suit jackets for all of them. Instead, the shop took the jackets that we owned and curved the front corners to match the shape of a true 1911 coat we had in stock. They also added one or two higher buttons to the front of some jackets to imitate the Edwardian style while narrowing the lapel as was fashionable at the time.

**Part IV: Wigs and Hair**

Considering the large cast size, there were few wigs used, but they were essential to the look of the show. Mother, Evelyn, the Little Girl in Act II, and Sarah’s Friend wore wigs.

Mother wore a wig because she had several hat changes and the actress’s natural hair would not have easily held the Gibson Girl style. This style generally included a pompadour and a loose top-knot. Originally, her wig was strawberry blond color. Under the lights it was too bright, and I changed it for a pre-made Gibson-style wig from stock that was a darker honey blond. In order to make it look less prefabricated and fake, Suzy Q. Campbell suggested that we add a hairpiece to the back, making the bun larger and less regular. This solved the problem and from stage it read like the style was the actress’s natural hair.29

The real life Evelyn Nesbit was the original sultry red head with auburn curls. Our actress was blond. There were few wig options in stock that were long enough in the right color to facilitate the style I wanted. The one I chose was very frizzy and did not take well to styling. Suzy Q. Campbell and I were able to coax it into a shape resembling Charles Dana Gibson’s
famous sketch of Evelyn Nesbit. It was tall, wide and probably the most historically accurate hair in the production, but it was difficult to hide when the actress had to become an immigrant. The headscarf I provided did not entirely hide the towering style, but it did not quite matter because in *Ragtime* the novel, Evelyn did spend quite a bit of time on the Lower East Side doing good works. The choice to add the actor playing Evelyn as an ensemble member in several scenes became a happy accidental nod to the book.

A line in the song “Our Children” describes the Little Boy and the Little Girl as “One so fair/ And the other lithe and dark”. As our Little Boy was actually ten years old, we did not dye his hair and instead wigged our Little Girl, who was a fair haired Kent State freshman. She used a brown colored hairspray on her bangs for under her cap in Act I and wore a wig in Act II. The first wig I chose was very long and not quite dark enough. The final wig was shoulder length and a dark reddish brown, which worked well with the actress’ complexion and costume. I curled the bangs and a few sections in the back, twisting the rest up to build out a bit of height and width beneath the free hanging curls. Generally, children wore their hair down at the beach, but I wished to convey that the Little Girl was approaching adolescence and that some time had passed since Tateh made his fortune. His dream was to be able to dress his daughter like a princess, so I topped the more ‘mature’ hairstyle with a bow that matched her dress to indicate that she was still her father’s little girl.

The final wig, which was added during Tech week was worn by the actress playing Sarah’s friend. She was the only African American woman with short hair, which looked modern despite being historically accurate. Initially I pulled a ¾ wig, braiding the long hair around a ribbon to hide the actress’ hairline and twisting the rest into a bun. The actress, ever helpful, brought her own personal wig the next day and allowed me to style it similarly. The
addition of this wig as well as the rats and small hairpiece additions to the other Harlem ladies visually tied them together as an ensemble. They appeared to be fashionable ladies emulating the Gibson Girl style popular during the turn of the century.

We scheduled a makeup and hair day the Friday before Tech week. The female cast and two of the male cast members were called. The male cast members came because one needed old age makeup and the other needed to practice deflating his afro hairstyle. I directed the women to apply makeup sparingly, due to Edwardian prejudice against women who wore too much rouge. After they completed basic makeup, my assistants and I gave hairstyle advice. We asked the girls to emulate the Gibson Girl look with creatively adjusted Victory Rolls, a style popular in the 1940s but also an easily understood technique for achieving well controlled volume and shape. Even the immigrants and sweatshop workers would have done their hair every morning, though not as ostentatiously as the well-to-do.

Part V: Tech Week Preparation

Before tech week, my assistants took care of most of the organizational paperwork, including check in sheets and garment breakdowns. I created tracking sheets to help the actors and dressers, as well as quick change sheets in order for the dressers to be prepared. Thankfully, due to the episodic structure of the play, very rarely were there any true quick changes. Many were fast changes which involved large groups changing at once. This was a good learning experience for the new dressers, and for the most part everything went smoothly.

A week before tech week we held a Dress Parade which is when the cast members put their costumes on and parade across stage to provide an opportunity for the design team to look at the overall picture, get approval from the director, and address any holes or problems.
Establishing the different color stories of the three groups was extremely important to Director van Baars. During Dress Parade I realized that one of the men had been cast not in the Immigrant ensemble as I had thought, but in the New Rochelle ensemble. I pulled him a new suit for the correct color palette. The Harlem men were too dressed down and did not look ‘finished’ compared to the ladies. I pulled vests, a new hat or two, and an ascot to make them look put together. The immigrants became my tech week challenge. The initial group of immigrants looked functional, but when the rest of the cast was added in their overlaid immigrant looks, the whole thing looked unfinished and disjointed. Many of the things I pulled for their texture or pattern went flat and smooth under the lights and thirty feet away in the audience. I added more shawls, scarves, and black aprons in order to dull down the entire palette and add more texture, which allowed the immigrants to look like they belonged in the show.  

Chapter IV: Final Evaluation

After the show closed I met with Director Eric van Baars to get his view on my design process and the production overall. He thought that overall it was a very successful production, and noted the improvement I had made in my process since our collaboration on Cloud 9 in 2011. For several production meetings, I presented a PowerPoint slideshow with photos from fittings that week with the goal of including the entire design team in a quick update on the shop’s progress. Director van Baars said that though he had not seen a designer present that way before, it was very effective. As far as the design went, his one critique had been that he wished we had the resources to costume the family, meaning Mother, Father, Younger Brother, Grandfather, and the Little Boy; in black mourning clothes at Sarah’s funeral at the end of Act I. I agreed and count it among the things that I would have changed. My incorrect assumption that
they were not physically present at the funeral was based on a stage direction in the script describing Mother singing ‘elsewhere’.

During the process I learned I need to trust my first instinct and Mother’s pink linen Act II dress is an example of this. I knew that the fabric I ordered was too light when it arrived, but I did not dye it. Though lighting designer David Krupla was able to light it and not wash it out, it was a difficulty I could have avoided if I had dyed it darker. Another is that I should have performed more focused research. I was side-tracked by portraits of Edwardian beauties and learning about the first African American to own a motorcar in Ohio. All of this was extremely interesting, but not particularly applicable. I went back and did more research after the Dress Parade because I was not as prepared to create the Immigrant looks as I was to create the New Rochelle looks.

I am proud to have been a part of Ragtime. It was a long, harrowing process but the end product was so breathtakingly beautiful that I could almost forget the design marathon it took to get there. I grew in confidence as an artist and became more accomplished at decision making. All of the parameters dictated by the script and the needs of the production challenged me to find interesting ways to problem solve. This is the most rewarding part of the design process, and the most rewarding thing about Ragtime was the journey to get to those solutions.
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9 Figure 9.

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To the best of my knowledge, all images used are within the public domain.
Ragtime
Mother Research Collage

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