



Ragtime to Riches

Composer Stephen Flaherty revives the classic musical on stage and screen.

YOUNG Stephen Flaherty, a pianist from age seven, found Broadway in the Pittsburgh library. In the early '70s, the 12-year-old would check out scores, librettos, and cast albums and diligently learn the music himself. Twenty-five years later, Flaherty is a composer in his own right, living proof that the song-driven American musical has not in fact been crushed beneath a decade of spectacle-laden stage shows.

Rather, in recent years, the tuneful musical has blossomed in sweeping animated feature films like 20th Century Fox's just-released *Anastasia*, for which Flaherty penned the songs with lyricist Lynn Ahrens, his writing partner of 14 years.

And now the American musical—and Flaherty—is flourishing again on Broadway. *Ragtime*, with a rich and melodic score also by Flaherty and lyrics by Ahrens, begins in the Big Apple on December 26, while continuing its L.A. run. "I got a lot of the tunes by walking

round New York," says Flaherty over coffee at Manhattan's Morgan Library, the setting for climactic scenes in both the musical and its source, E.L. Doctorow's panoramic novel set in the early 1900s. "The themes are soaring and the story is so large that I had to find it in me to come up with sweeping musical gestures." The show's scope is new to the songwriting team, whose previous Broadway show was the chamber-sized Caribbean fable *Once on This Island*, a 1990 Tony nominee.

"The energy of the show is that these different groups of people [WASPs, blacks, immigrants] have to find a way to live in harmony," the composer notes. It's an apt theme for Flaherty's musical tapestry, weaving together not only ragtime, but also early gospel and Tin Pan Alley, John Philip Sousa, Stephen Foster, Eastern European folk music—and Flaherty's own personal history. To write the first-act finale, "Till We Reach That Day," a defiant anthem of the disenfranchised inspired by one character's beating death, the composer remembered how he'd reacted when a friend was gay-bashed. "I'm an urban gay man who got very angry about the idea that violence can erupt in this supposedly civilized city at any given moment," he says. "And I used that as my personal emotional motor into the song."

As the composer for one of the most anticipated in a bumper Broadway season of new American musicals (*Ragtime's* pedigree includes a script by *Love! Valour! Compassion!* playwright Terrence McNally), Flaherty is poised for his major breakthrough. But as he describes the best thing about working on *Anastasia*, a modern myth about the lost heir to the Russian Romanov dynasty, he turns back into that starstruck kid from Pittsburgh. His eyes agleam, he gushes, "I got to work with Bernadette Peters and Angela Lansbury!"—GERARD RAYMOND

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