

## **Why choose to do *Ragtime* at DSHA?**

Over the past year I have gotten a lot of questions about why I chose to do such a serious show this summer in contrast to the usual children's-based musicals CTW produces year after year. Aside from the fact that I think *Ragtime* has one of the most beautiful scores ever written in musical theatre, it is DSHA's mission to expose our students to a diverse repertoire of shows. Educationally, I want the students to understand that theater has many purposes. Sometimes its purpose is to entertain. Sometimes its purpose is to challenge and make you think. Sometimes a show can enlighten and educate an audience on parts of our history. In our production this year, we will not just learn music and dance steps. We will take time to explore the struggles that existed during the turn of the century and how they paved the way for change in our country. In order for this show to be successful, we will set aside time to educate the cast on the oppression of the time period so they are able to understand and connect to the pain and hope told in this moving story. "To continue to change the future we must continue to learn from our past."

## **A Brief History: African American and Immigrant Life in 1907**

In 1907, the plight of African Americans in the South was bleak. The average life expectancy of an African American was 33 years — a dozen years less than that of a white American.

Forty-two years after the abolition of slavery, the overwhelming majority of African Americans toiled in agriculture on land that they didn't own. Nine out of ten African Americans lived in the South (almost the same proportion as in 1860), and three out of four were tenant farmers or sharecroppers. At the beginning of the 20th century, some 44.5 percent of all African American adults were illiterate.

Increasingly, African Americans in the South were subject to a degrading system of social segregation and deprived of the right to vote and other prerogatives of citizenship. This system of racial discrimination based on law and custom was called "Jim Crow," after a mid-19th century black-faced minstrel act. Beginning with Mississippi in 1890, every Southern state (with the exception of Kentucky and Tennessee) had disenfranchised the vast majority of its African American population by 1907 through the use of literacy tests and poll taxes.

The situation in the North was not much better. At the end of the 19th century, large numbers of African Americans began migrating North to look for better job opportunities and living conditions, as well as to escape Jim Crow and racial violence. The Great Migration, as it was called, spanned the 1890's to the 1970's. African Americans faced two major problems in the North: racial discrimination (leading to urban segregation) and employment, which was both dangerous and poorly paid. In the early 1900's, the United States had the highest rate of industrial accidents in the world. Long hours, poor ventilation, hazardous fumes, and unsafe machinery threatened both the health and lives of workers. Authors such as Upton Sinclair and Theodore Dreiser related the despair of the brutal urban worlds of Chicago and New York. Public outrage from their novels led Progressives and labor unions to call for reforms, but their success in these areas was slow and limited.

## **Derogatory Language Found in *Ragtime*.**

During this time period, the term "nigger" was used to refer to African Americans, however the term did not always have a negative connotation. Deriving from the Latin word *niger* (meaning the color black), variations of the term were used to describe black people. It was not until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century/early 20<sup>th</sup> century that "nigger" became a derogatory word in the South and other places in and outside of the United States. Today, complexity to the term has been added. Although the word still has largely negative connotations when people of Caucasian descent use it in reference to blacks, within the black community certain sectors use it to highlight companionship and community. *Ragtime* uses the term to accurately portray the time period in which it is set. Its use is small, but strategically placed to demonstrate the extreme prejudice and growing tensions in the country as African Americans began expecting equality. We will educate and address this term delicately with the cast before its use.