

Rags – History, General Info, Songs

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RAGS Book

Question:

What do you think was the problem with the Rags book? Are there any lessons to be learnt from how you wrote the piece. (Because I have only heard the recording but the score and lyrics are dynamite!)

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

It's interesting you should ask about RAGS, since a revival is taking place this fall at the PaperMill Playhouse, where CHILDREN OF EDEN was presented so successfully a couple of years ago. This production is essentially one that was done to great acclaim last winter at the Coconut Grove Playhouse in Florida, but Charles Strouse, Joe Stein and myself are doing a little further rewriting, since this will be an important revival. It will be interesting to see if whatever problems existed in the original have been solved.

Rags Revived...

Question:

"Rags" has always been a favorite in mine. I truly believe it has some of the best moments in all of musical theater.

I was very curious to hear about your work on the revival of Rags done at the American Jewish Theater. How did that come about? How much work did you personally do on it? Why did the creators decide to go back to work on the piece? Are you satisfied with it now or do you still want to tinker? I had the good fortune of seeing the off-broadway production and thoroughly enjoyed. I also saw the Lincoln Center video of the original. You must have been very proud of your work.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

There is much I am very proud of in RAGS, and I think Charles Strouse's score for it is actually his best, which is saying a lot. But for me, despite the fact that there have been several very successful and even award-winning productions of the show, I still think it has some structural and story-telling problems. From time to time, my collaborators and I have attempted to address (or rather, re-address them), and many of them were improved for the lovely American Jewish Theatre production, which came about because the artistic director of the AJT wanted to do the show. The biggest problem with building off the AJT production is the size of that particular theatre, which kept the cast size to 9 (not really big enough for the epic vision of the show.) I keep waiting for a first-class director to come along and help dramaturgically, the way Trevor Nunn did for BAKER'S WIFE. Maybe someday ... Anyway, thanks for your Email and your enthusiasm for RAGS. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Stephen Schwartz's Comments on RAGS posted on the licensing site

RAGS began as a project initiated by Joseph Stein, the book writer. He had been asked by producer Lee Guber to write a sort of sequel to his show FIDDLER ON THE ROOF, describing what happened to Tevye and his family after they left Anatevka and came to America (hence the fact that the characters are

Russian immigrants). As Joe worked, the show gradually evolved into being about a different family. I believe it was Lee Guber's suggestion to focus the show on a woman character, and Joe came up with the idea for Rebecca, a young woman who arrives to join her husband and then is thrown back on her own devices when he isn't there to meet her. The inclusion of the rise of labor unions was always a part of the story, as it was so integral to the history of that era and something that Joe cares about socially and politically.

I wouldn't say that there was anything going on nationally that particularly affected this production. Perhaps people were a bit more interested in their heritage then, and America was less imperial in its attitude, so we looked to our European backgrounds with more of a sense of continuity. But that's speculative and generalizing. I know for me personally, working on the show made me more interested in my own family heritage, and I learned for the first time more about where my parents' families had come from and some fascinating stories about the experiences of their parents and grandparents. I always do a great deal of research for a show such as RAGS. I did an enormous amount of reading about the Lower East side and the immigrant experience of that time, making note as always of specific details that would help give verisimilitude and visual evocativeness to the lyrics. I went out to Ellis Island and looked around there (it had not yet been opened to the public), did walking tours of the Lower East side, visited museums such as the Jewish Museum in New York, etc. I read novels of the period such as *The Rise of David Lavinsky*. There is of course a rich photographic record of the time, which was also very useful. I always enjoy the research part of a project, and working on RAGS was perhaps my most enjoyable and enlightening research experience.

RAGS is big story-oriented musical with a non-self-referential non-ironic score and serious and somewhat sentimental subject matter. For myself, I remain extremely proud of the score for RAGS. I think it is Charles Strouse's best music, and that's saying a lot, and I feel good about my lyrics.

The full Q and A on RAG

Question:

What prompted you to write Rags, and how did you come up with the concept for it? Was there any particular inspiration behind why you chose the subject of Russian immigrants or labor unions?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

RAGS began as a project initiated by Joseph Stein, the book writer. He had been asked by producer Lee Guber to write a sort of sequel to his show *FIDDLER ON THE ROOF*, describing what happened to Tevye and his family after they left Anatevka and came to America (hence the fact that the characters are Russian immigrants). As Joe worked, the show gradually evolved into being about a different family. I believe it was Lee Guber's suggestion to focus the show on a woman character, and Joe came up with the idea for Rebecca, a young woman who arrives to join her husband and then is thrown back on her own devices when he isn't there to meet her. The inclusion of the rise of labor unions was always a part of the story, as it was so integral to the history of that era and something that Joe cares about socially and politically.

Question:

Did anything in the national consciousness at the time aid or impede your creation and presentation of the production?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I wouldn't say that there was anything going on nationally that particularly affected this production. Perhaps people were a bit more interested in their heritage then, and America was less imperial in its attitude, so we looked to our European backgrounds with more of a sense of continuity. But that's speculative and generalizing. I know for me personally, working on the show made me more interested in my own family heritage, and I learned for the first time more about where my parents' families had come from and some fascinating stories about the experiences of their parents and grandparents.

Question:

What kind of research did you do in order to write lyrics that accurately depicted the feel of America at that time?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I always do a great deal of research for a show such as RAGS. I did an enormous amount of reading about the Lower East side and the immigrant experience of that time, making note as always of specific details that would help give verisimilitude and visual evocativeness to the lyrics. I went out to Ellis Island and looked around there (it had not yet been opened to the public), did walking tours of the Lower East side, visited museums such as the Jewish Museum in New York, etc. I read novels of the period such as THE RISE OF DAVID LAVINSKY. There is of course a rich photographic record of the time, which was also very useful. I always enjoy the research part of a project, and working on RAGS was perhaps my most enjoyable and enlightening research experience.

Question:

Why do you think the changes to the book over the past years have been necessary? To be perfectly honest, I think that my fellow writers and I have never really solved the structure of the show.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

As an inveterate re-writer, who keeps fussing over my shows until I feel I have gotten them as right as I can, I would expect there may be further changes to RAGS to come at some point. We have no plans right now, but I for one would be very open to the sort of thing that happened with THE BAKER'S WIFE, where a brilliant dramaturg (Trevor Nunn) came up with an approach that greatly improved the show. Because there has remained interest in RAGS over the years, I wouldn't be surprised if eventually a talented director came up with a solution. Your question may imply that you are wondering if external social or political changes have affected decisions about the show. They have not. The problems in the show, as I see them, are structural, having to do with focus and story-telling, etc., and whatever changes we have made and may continue to make are about trying to effect improvements in those areas.

Question:

Is there any difference in today's culture versus the culture of the 1980s that could make a Broadway production of Rags successful today?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I think there's far less chance for a successful Broadway production today, even if we got the structure of the show right. RAGS is big story-oriented musical with a non-self-referential non-ironic score and serious and somewhat sentimental subject matter. That certainly does not seem like what is being welcomed by current Broadway critics and audiences. I would not be holding my breath for a Broadway revival. But that doesn't mean that the show can't be done successfully in other venues, such as the American University production that left such an impression on you.

For myself, I remain extremely proud of the score for RAGS. I think it is Charles Strouse's best music, and that's saying a lot, and I feel good about my lyrics. I appreciate your interest in the show and your enthusiasm for it, and I hope your research paper turns out well. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

RAGS SONGS

A question about Rags "Children of the Wind"

Question:

I recently got a collection of music by Charles Strouse. It's wonderful! However, as I played the song Children of the Wind, the music just sounds a lot more like Stephen Schwartz than Charles Strouse. Did you do a bit more than write the lyrics? This is by no means to demean Mr. Strouse; his music is truly wonderful. It's just that this song just matches your style more than his, to my ear. Thanks, Jonah

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Jonah: Thank you for the compliment, as I think it's a gorgeous tune, but Charles solely wrote the music for "Children of the Wind". In fact, I had to take three passes at the lyrics to come up with something that measured up to the music. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

RAGS: Lyrics to Yankee Boy

Question:

Can you explain the meaning of the use of "splay-shus guys" rather than spacious skies near the end of the song. I haven't been able to figure this one out .

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Neither can I. I have no idea who wrote that or where you heard it. What I wrote was "Oh, beautiful for ... dum da dum", indicating that the immigrant character singing it didn't know all the words to the song ("America the Beautiful"). Some other lyricist who apparently considered him or herself far more clever than I (and indeed, probably was) substituted the "splay-shus guys", I suppose trying to make the same point. But as far as I know, it's not in the script, and if it is, it shouldn't be. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Writing for Female Characters

Question:

Your song from "Rags," which I understand was cut, "If we never meet again," is a gut wrencher! How do you so fluently, in your lyrics, delve into the female psyche so skillfully?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

When I write, I try to become the character in the situation and approach the song from that point of view. I don't consciously think about whether the character is male or female, but I guess there may be an inflection or attitude that changes depending on the gender of the character I am trying to "channel".

"For My Mary:

Question:

In an interview with Carol de Giere, you say that "For My Mary" is a take-off on a George M. Cohan song. We studied him a lot in this particular class, so this comment really interests me. Which song are you referring to, and what about the song inspired you to write "For My Mary"? (The interview on your website gets cut off at that point, so you may have offered more information previously than I am currently able to read.)

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

As a kid, I saw the movie YANKEE DOODLE DANDY a few times on television and, probably since I was already interested in musical theatre, it made a real impression on me. I was always charmed and amused by the corniness of the songs, and the girls in them always seemed to be named "Mary" ("For it was Mary, Mary, plain as any name can be", etc.) And everybody was always white and blonde and squeaky clean in the songs -- there was never a hint of ethnicity, despite Cohan's immigrant heritage. I wanted to contrast the idealized girl in a song like that with the reality of a young girl like Bella in RAGS, and that's where the idea for the song "For My Mary" came from

QUESTIONS FROM PERFORMERS

"Bella" Character Information

Question:

I am involved in an acting workshop and they are having me sing the song "Rags" from the musical 'Rags.' My problem is that I need to do a character interpretation for Bella, the girl who sings the song, but I can't find any information about her. All I know is that she is an immigrant who came to America with her father. If anyone could tell me a little bit about Bella and her part in the show I would really appreciate it! Thank you very much!

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Bella is a seventeen-year-old- girl who has been brought to America by her father. She arrives with high hopes and unrealistic dreams -- everything will be beautiful, she will wear lovely dresses, there will be a piano in her parlor she can learn to play, etc. Her image of America has been based on pictures she has seen in magazines. Needless to say, when she is confronted by life on the filthy, teeming streets of the Lower East Side, and dealing with tenement living and doing piecework all day, she quickly becomes disillusioned. The song "Rags", which occurs towards the end of the first act, is an expression of her disappointment and her rage at her father for what she perceives as his deception of her. During the song, she runs away and, after wandering through the streets of the Lower East Side, arrives at 14th Street, where she sees the glamorous Americans she had expected to encounter. The end of the song ("Here's where the beauty is ...") is about seeing them, perceiving or imagining their disgust towards her, and feeling trapped by her circumstances. I hope this is helpful to you, and that your performance of the song goes well. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Rags Auditions

Hi Stephen, I am going to be auditioning for Rags at the Dallas JCC in November. What are the age and vocal ranges and types for the female leads in the show? I attended the Tony Awards this year and I am looking for to hearing Wicked announced as Best Musical at the 2004 Tony Awards . Best of luck to you. Are you planning a trip to Dallas to see the production of Rags?

Answer from Carol:

I'll give you links to two websites that have some RAGS info although not vocal ranges. The lead female character Rebecca was original played by an opera soprano – so that's your clue for that. Bella was played by Judy Kuhn.

You'll also find cast album and sheet music sources.

Check down the page at: <http://www.musicalschwartz.com/rags.htm> and also http://www.rnh.com/show_synopsis.asp?id=RA&s=1

Vocal Selections for Rags

Question:

Help. I am trying to locate the vocal selections sheet music for Rags. I called Colony Records in NYC and they said it was out of print. I need the music for "Blame it on the summer nights", "Brand New World", "Children of the Wind". Any suggestions or can anyone loan it to me if it is out of print. Thank you.
Sincerely, Hopefully "Rebecca" in the Dallas production

Answer from Carol:

Rags Vocal Selections is on sale online. It includes

Contains 10 vocal selections from the Strouse/Schwartz musical: Blame It on the Summer Night + Brand New World + Children of the Wind + Dancing with the Fools + For My Mary + Penny a Tune + Rags + Three Sunny Rooms + Wanting + Yankee Boy. (Hal Leonard Corporation)

<http://www.musicalschwartz.com/rags.htm#sheetmusic> lists a source.

BLAME IT ON THE SUMMER NIGHT is also in THE STEPHEN SCHWARTZ SONGBOOK, which you can get through this site or <http://www.musicalschwartz.com/schwartzsongbook.htm>

Need help with "Children of the Wind"

Question:

hey! I am preparing "children of the wind" from rags for auditions and I need some help with situation and want to know anything about rebecca! who could help??? thanks a lot!! especially stephen for this wonderful song!! vanessa

Answer from Carol:

Hi Vanessa. There's a synopsis of the show on http://www.rnh.com/show_synopsis.asp?id=RA&s=1

The song comes towards the beginning of the show. Rebecca, her son, and other Russian Jews are escaping from Russia around 1910, crossing an ocean to an unknown land. It's a very epic sort of song and needs to be sung with a kind of heroic nobility that the music will lead you to anyway.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The complete history of *Rags* is covered in "Defying Gravity: The Creative Career of Stephen Schwartz, from Godspell to Wicked." www.DefyingGravityTheBook.com

For more info including the CD and sheet music

<http://www.musicalschwartz.com/rags.htm>

For Broadway show data including length of run and cast, see

<http://www.ibdb.com/production.php?id=4420>

For Licensing see

http://www.rnh.com/show_synopsis.asp?id=RA&s=1

Video

The New York City Library for the Performing Arts has a video recording of the original Broadway production. Directors and scholars may inquire about viewing this archived recording. It is not available outside the library.

<http://www.nypl.org/locations/lpa/theatre-film-and-tape-archive>