



Director Rob Ruggiero

Once in a while a production offers an opportunity for extraordinary collaboration. Many months ago I received an offer to direct *Rags* at Goodspeed for what would be my 10th production at the Opera House. I was told they wanted to revisit this not often produced show, which has held a special place in the hearts of musical theater fans for over

30 years. It has a spectacular score by Charles Strouse (*Annie, Bye Bye Birdie*)—arguably one of his best; lyrics by the incomparable Stephen Schwartz (*Wicked, Pippin, Godspell*); and an original book by the brilliant Joseph Stein (*Fiddler on the Roof, Zorba*). Yet, when *Rags* opened on Broadway in August of 1986, it was sadly very short-lived. Perhaps something wasn't solved completely? Or perhaps it just wasn't the time for this musical? Who really understands these things?

## THE IDEA

As artists, there are projects that remain alive within us—stories that still need to be told, or told better, or that feel unfinished. I give Stephen (Schwartz) the credit for his brave and inspired condition for producing this revival of *Rags*: Goodspeed could produce it only if we really pulled it apart and re-visited everything. He was not interested in what he called a “rearranging the deck chairs” revival (meaning strategic edits, a few small changes or cuts, rearranging things, etc.) He wanted something more profound and meaningful: a complete re-working and re-examination of the piece. Originally, *Rags* had all the elements of a great musical, but for some reason the show hadn't been fully solved. Goodspeed and I agreed to take it on, and here we are on this exciting new journey (Deep breath!).

## GETTING STARTED

Early in the process, there were many meetings with the original creative team (Charles, Stephen, and Joe's wife Elisa Stein who witnessed the development of the original production) sharing their feelings and notes about the original production, focusing on what issues might or could be addressed. Everyone was fully onboard for the exploration, but there was one clear obstacle—the great Joe Stein was no longer with us. How can you revise a musical without its book

writer? Enter the talented David Thompson (*Steel Pier, The Scottsboro Boys, Prince of Broadway*). With the endorsement of Elisa and the Stein Estate, David would join the creative team and represent the interests and intentions of the original writer, creating a revised book for *Rags*. With the full support of Goodspeed, David, Stephen, Charles and I have been working for months setting a course for this “brand new” *Rags*. Songs have been repurposed or cut, lyrics have been changed, new scenes written, and we explored all these changes in a developmental reading in NYC this past spring. As the show evolved, our goals became clear: This new version of *Rags* would be anchored by a bold refocusing of the story. It is unquestionably centered on Rebecca's journey as she struggles to build a new life in America. The character of Rebecca has been deepened and expanded to better serve who she was intended to be: a strong woman with aspiration, courage and a great capacity to dream.

## THE INSPIRATION

On a cold December weekend, I was holed up in a New York studio with our book writer David. My associate Michael Fling was frantically taking notes on his laptop, as David and I began hashing out the outline of what we thought this “new” *Rags* could be. After a long weekend of work, David suggested Fling and I journey down to the Tenement Museum (he had already been) to research the world that we thought could be the basis for our *Rags*. With snow flurries coming down, we hopped into a cab and trekked down to the Lower East Side having booked the last two spots on a 4:00pm tour. As we walked through the cramped apartments with the other members of our small tour group, we began to experience a series of “ah-ha!” moments that validated everything we had been discussing all weekend—the oldest male in the “sweatshop” tenement apartment was traditionally the presser (Jack!); young boys would be the “schlepper” (David!); the men would run the sewing machine (Ben!); young girls would baste the garments (Bella!); and though there was little room for individual creativity, the “finisher” would be a woman with great needlework (Rebecca!)—could this be a sign we were onto something? This tenement apartment and how these immigrants lived, created a special “family” of workers that would become critical to our new approach. Over and over again, Fling and I looked over at one another with a sparkle in our eyes. This was our story. These were our characters. Our *Rags* would be honest and authentic and would give voice to the immigrants that became the fabric of America.

## THE DESIGN

One of the biggest challenges in directing *Rags* is the design. How do we honor the specificity of that time and place in

our history, but also allow us to experience the play with contemporary sensibilities that could highlight its universal message? Longtime collaborator, set designer Michael Schweikardt and I have pushed ourselves to take risks, and he has created a design which has great specificity, but also liberates the story in new and inventive ways. We tried to find a solution that provided the opportunity for BOTH great confinement and a sense of openness in places where we need to feel that. In our set design for *Rags*, the tenement apartment is uniquely articulated, and clearly becomes another character in our story. The journey of the immigrants from the ship, through Ellis Island, to their landing in the lower East Side tenements is one of great meaning. The tenements provided a safe haven for new Americans as they found their way, and established themselves here in America. Leaving these tenements was also very meaningful—and the fact that our show ends in the empty tenement is not only symbolic, but also tremendously hopeful.

Inspired by the adventurous spirit of the writers, our entire creative team has contributed beautiful, imaginative work—there are new musical arrangements by David Loud, original orchestrations by Dan DeLange, and musical direction by Michael O’Flaherty. The clothes designed by Tony Award-winning designer Linda Cho, the expressive lighting by John Lasiter, the sound design by Jay Hilton, projection by Luke Hegel-Cantarella and the choreographic support by Parker Esse all support this powerful story and the new places we’ve taken it. These collaborators are supporting the life and talents of this spectacular cast (including many Broadway actors) to bring something extraordinary and new to Goodspeed.

### THE OPPORTUNITY

The story of American immigrants—of all ethnicities—is a profound reminder of the challenges and privileges we share as Americans. When you tell a story like *Rags* in 2017, you can’t ignore the opportunity (and responsibility) this musical provides to offer insight into the immigrant experience. Our hope is that this compelling story of courage and self-affirmation will remind us that this great country was built by generations of immigrants, and enriched by the gifts they contributed to a young nation. Like the many immigrants before her, our heroine Rebecca came to America hoping to find a better life, make a home for her family, and to realize her very own American dream.

Here is where our journey begins again—with you. I am excited to share our re-worked and re-imagined version of this remarkable musical in this magical place on the river. Goodspeed audiences will experience this new version of *Rags* through a more intimate and personal lens, exposing a powerful story of the American immigrant experience.