SEPT 21 - OCT 23, 2016 | RITZ THEATER
345 13th Avenue NE, Minneapolis
# Table of Contents

## FEATURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Outlet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Election season means it's the right time for Ragtime</td>
<td>Rohan Preston, <em>Star Tribune</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td><em>Ragtime</em> the musical is a period piece for the present period</td>
<td>Chris Hewitt, <em>Pioneer Press</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>With <em>Ragtime</em>, Latte Da puts down new roots</td>
<td>Euan Kerr, <em>Minnesota Public Radio News</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## REVIEWS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Outlet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td><em>Ragtime</em> gives heart to a powerful American parable</td>
<td>Graydon Royce, <em>Star Tribune</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td><em>Ragtime</em> by Theater Latté Da</td>
<td>Dave and Chelsea Berglund, <em>How Was The Show</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td><em>Ragtime</em> by Theater Latté Da at the Ritz Theater</td>
<td>Jill Schafer, <em>Cherry and Spoon</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>A powerful <em>Ragtime</em> at the Ritz</td>
<td>Pamela Espeland, <em>MinnPost</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>History repeats: 'Ragtime' is a timely classic with modern urgency</td>
<td>Jay Gabler, <em>City Pages</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>REVIEW: Still Resonant <em>Ragtime</em></td>
<td>Bev Wolfe, <em>Twin Cities Arts Reader</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## 2016 “BEST OF” HONORS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Outlet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Rohan Preston's picks for the best theater shows of the year</td>
<td>Rohan Preston, <em>Star Tribune</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>A look at Graydon Royce's 10 favorite theater shows this year</td>
<td>Graydon Royce, <em>Star Tribune</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>The 25 best things we saw and heard in 2016: A year in the arts</td>
<td>Pamela Espeland, <em>MinnPost</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>2016 Favorites in #TCTheater</td>
<td>Jill Schafer, <em>Cherry and Spoon</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Latvian man with an unusual name and even funnier accent faces scorn as an interloper, even as he imagines making it big in America. An African-American family longing for justice and truth has an encounter with the police that ends tragically. And a family of white suburbanites despair about the state of the nation.

These are not people being held up for discussion in this year of presidential politics and Black Lives Matter. They are characters in “Ragtime,” the big musical by composer Stephen Flaherty and librettist Lynn Ahrens being revived this weekend by Theater Latté Da.

The show is set a century ago, but its animating questions seem as urgent as ever as some folks question whether the American experiment is being torn beyond repair.

“Even though the show is historical fiction, we’re reminded that history repeats itself,” said Sasha Andreev, who plays Tateh, the Jewish immigrant.

“I wish certain scenes didn’t remind me of things I’ve recently seen on the news,” said Traci Allen Shannon, who plays Sarah, a young black mother.
The sweeping 1996 musical, based on E.L. Doctorow’s 1975 novel, is a forbidding project to tackle, not least because of its scale. On Broadway, it had a massive cast of 30-plus.

Director Peter Rothstein has changed things up for this “Ragtime,” which opens Friday for a five-week run at the Ritz Theater in Minneapolis. Originally, the show suggested the segregation of early 20th-century life by having three ensembles represent the black, white and immigrant worlds.

Rothstein has distilled the cast to 11 adults and three children. The change is made not by economic necessity but by aesthetic considerations. He hopes to show the promise of the nation even as he blurs the lines between these cultures.

The actors welcome this integrative approach, in which all are onstage in supporting roles.

“It’s a reminder that in our country we do have the opportunities to lend our voices to the telling of each other’s stories,” Shannon said. “In some ways we’re seeing some ugly moments in the show, as we are in the world, but there’s a lot of beauty and promise there.”

The cast includes David Murray, a native of Jackson, Miss., and New York transplant who is much buzzed about in the Twin Cities. (He will play Prince Charming opposite Shannon in “Cinderella” at Children’s Theatre later this fall.) Murray plays Coalhouse Walker, Sarah’s love.

“If you’re an African-American man, this is one of those bucket-list heroes,” Murray said. “But beyond the personal level, he’s someone with character and strength who is always seeking justice.”

Some of the “Ragtime” actors have found parallels between their lives and those of their characters.

Andreev, who emigrated from Russia in 1990, recalls that, like Tateh, he was mocked for his accent. “I spent many years trying to escape that accent, to assimilate and blend in,” he said. “I wanted to pass as an American. That’s what I share with a lot of immigrants.”

But his kinship to the character goes beyond that obvious commonality: Tateh becomes a successful film director. “In my own family, there was a lot of pressure to do something else that my family would see making money,” he said. “I pride myself on the fact that after 26 years in this country, I make my living as an artist.”

For Shannon, the connection is motherhood.

“Sarah is a new mother with a tragic story — I’m a new mother with a lot of joy and love in my life,” she said. “In some ways, it’s challenging because the show has an autobiographical style. A lot of the characters are narrating themselves and telling their own stories. So, you identify deeply with your character.”

She invoked the song “Wheels of a Dream,” a song that Coalhouse sings to his new son, to express the sentiments shared by all parents:

I see his face, I hear his heartbeat, I look in those eyes. How wise they seem. Well, when he is old enough, I will show him America. And he will ride on the wheels of a dream.
“All these characters have children — that right there is a sign of hope, of believing that there’s a future,” Shannon said, alluding to the issues roiling this election season. “I have a child. I have no choice but to be hopeful.”
The cast of "Ragtime," performs the title song at Theater Latte Da through Oct. 23. (Dan Norman photo)

The musical drama *Ragtime* opened on Broadway 18 years ago, but it’s not much of a stretch to call it a show for the Black Lives Matter era.

Based on the novel by E.L. Doctorow, *Ragtime*, which Theater Latté Da opens Saturday night at the Ritz Theater in Minneapolis, connects three stories in the years leading up to World War I: Latvian immigrant Tateh and his daughter try to make their way in America; a wealthy New York family (the youngest has the same first name as Doctorow, Edgar, but the others are known as Father, Mother, Younger Brother, etc.) faces choices that may rip it apart; and an African-American ragtime pianist named Coalhouse Walker embraces anarchy after he is sent over the edge by a series of tragedies. It’s that last segment that makes *Ragtime* feel timely (or timeless, since you could say the 1831 Nat Turner rebellion was the first Black Lives Matter event, albeit with much different methods). Although *Ragtime* is fictional, protest is real today.

Set at a time of enormous change, *Ragtime* turns many real-world things into the stuff of musical drama, using music — something people of different ethnicities and classes share — as a metaphor for revolution. In fact, one song in the show, called “New Music,” promises that “the world is changing.”

Here are a few of the big changes signaled in *Ragtime*:
Flip book — Called “movie books” by Tateh (the show seems to credit him with inventing them, although they predate the character), they’re a forerunner of animated movies. When you quickly flip the pages of the book, silhouetted drawings on their edges appear to spring to life.

Rag — Doctorow’s book connects the characters to different meanings of the term. Tateh and his daughter come to America on a “rag ship,” an oceanliner bringing European immigrants to America (many of them to work in the rag trade, or clothing industry). Coalhouse plays rags on the piano. And Father’s business turns rags of fabric into American flags.

Ragtime — A form of music that began to appear in the late 1800s. Scott Joplin, whom “Ragtime” indicates was a friend of the fictional Coalhouse, is its most famous composer and “Maple Leaf Rag” is probably his most famous song. Or it was, until Marvin Hamlisch used Joplin’s music in “The Sting” and made “The Entertainer” a hit. (A side note: “The Sting” is set in the mid-1930s, when Joplin’s music had dipped in popularity.)

“Ragtime” — Doctorow’s National Book Award-winning novel, inspired by his ancestors and turn-of-the-century history, was considered groundbreaking for incorporating real people such as Harry Houdini, Booker T. Washington and Emma Goldman into its fictional universe. The book is substantially altered for the musical. Father, for instance, is a smaller character in the show than in the book, and Coalhouse, who doesn’t appear until the book is half over, is a much larger character.

Suburbs — New Rochelle, where much of Ragtime is set, was one of the first American suburbs, its growth made possible by commuter railroads and wide ownership of automobiles. One particular auto, Coalhouse Walker’s Model T, leads directly to the action of the musical and the Model T’s producer, Henry Ford, is a character in it.

World War I — No spoilers on the ending of Ragtime, but it encompasses both the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand, which helped touch off WWI, and the sinking of the Lusitania, which convinced the United States to enter the war that changed the face of the world.

IF YOU GO

What: Ragtime

When: Through Oct. 23

Where: Ritz Theater, 345 14th Ave. N.E., Mpls.

Tickets: $48-$35, 612-339-3003 or theaterlatteda.com
The cast of Ragtime on stage at the Ritz Theater in Minneapolis. While the company has had offices at the theater for some time, this is its first production since its recent purchase of the building. Dan Norman | Theater Latte Da

Theater Latté Da will be launching a new era when it opens its production of Ragtime this weekend. The longtime nomadic company recently bought the Ritz Theater in northeast Minneapolis.

Ragtime is an epic tale of America at the dawn of the 20th century. It's a time of change, of new ideas, industrial innovation and, of course, new music.

"Giving the nation a new syncopation, the people called it 'Ragtime!'" the cast sings in the prologue.

Based on E.L. Doctorow's 1975 novel, the musical version of Ragtime hit Broadway in the late 1990s. It follows the story of a middle-class white family, an African-American musician and a Jewish immigrant from Latvia, all living in New York. Their tales unfold and entwine amidst the famous and the infamous of the time: Harry Houdini, Henry Ford, J.P. Morgan and Emma Goldman. It was also a time of unrest.

"Ladies with parasols, fellas with tennis balls! There were gazebos! And there were no Negroes!" sings the cast. "And everything was Ragtime!"
Demands for equality in the face of violent racism and anti-immigrant sentiment led to riots.

"I began reimagining it primarily because I was trying to find the right story to tell right now," said Peter Rothstein, artistic director of Latté Da.

Rothstein had been scouring the musical theater canon. With a new building to fill and a local community to serve, he had to meet many needs. He was "looking for shows that would work in an intimate space like the Ritz Theater, that were looking at issues of national identity around the election season," he said. "Looking towards our more immediate community around the role of civil disobedience towards racial justice.

"And I just kept coming back to Ragtime as the perfect show for now."

Let's go back to that word "reimagining," through. The Broadway production of Ragtime was huge, with a chorus and dancers. For all its charms, the Ritz is no Broadway theater. Rothstein's Ragtime has been pared way down.

"Yeah, I think the original Broadway production has around 48 people, and we are doing it with 14," he said.

Artistic Director Peter Rothstein leads the Theater Latte Da "Ragtime" cast through a technical rehearsal at the Ritz Theater. Euan Kerr | MPR News
All while maintaining every big song and the show's epic span. Actor Sasha Andreev plays the Jewish immigrant Tateh. He said the Ritz is so intimate, performers are often just inches from audience members.

"I have to constantly remember to be as authentic as I can be on stage, because when the audience is right there, they can see you lie," he said.

Fellow cast members David Murray and Traci Allen Shannon agree. Murray plays Coalhouse Porter, a musician making a name in the Harlem nightclubs. Shannon plays Sarah, his lost love. He doesn't know she's had his child, and has been taken in by a wealthy white family.

Shannon said the show's intensity is heightened by the small size of the cast. She and David Murray said the depictions of police brutality are especially upsetting.

"These are some of the things that my parents and their parents talked about, and explained to us," he said. "The same stuff we learned in school, you know, black history. It just repeats, over and over and over."

Shannon agreed, but said while *Ragtime* explores historical ugliness, it also offers the hope that future generations will find a way forward. "Because that, I actually believe, is the promise of America," she said. "The coming together of these cultures and backgrounds and experiences and every voice being heard."

For Rothstein, *Ragtime* is just a beginning. He wants to use the Ritz as a hub to continue Latté Da's work of developing new musical theater. The company committed two years ago to developing 20 new musicals by 2020. He laughed and said he needs to get through opening first.

"The stakes feel high," he said. "I think we have been so fortunate to have this building and call this building our home that there is now a responsibility to shepherd it well."

But Rothstein is confident that *Ragtime* is the show that will declare the Ritz to be Theater Latté Da's home.
Reviews
America needs to see this musical.

America the beautiful, fragile, ugly bully needs to peer into the reflection that is *Ragtime* and contemplate how it is that a nation so full of hope and good heart has become so mean and angry.

*Ragtime* asks us to pause and consider why we are so fearful of the future as we are losing confidence in our past.

Theater Latté Da opened its 19th season Saturday in its new permanent home, the Ritz Theater in northeast Minneapolis, with a poignant revival of this musical adapted from E.L. Doctorow’s sweeping novel. Though set in fin de siècle New York, *Ragtime* is concerned with the same triumphs and tragedies that are in today’s headlines.

Director Peter Rothstein has scaled this once massive show into a stripped down ritual that makes what might have been nostalgia feel current and urgent. Eleven adults and three children tell the parable of our nation’s fraught psyche on a bare stage defined by a back brick wall (Michael Hoover’s set) and a
rolling grand piano that represents ragtime, that syncopated music so full of the rhythms and contradictions in Terrence McNally’s script.

*Ragtime* follows three families through the wrenching transitions of turn-of-the-century America. Father (Daniel S. Hines) is rich enough to seek adventure elsewhere, leaving the home to Mother (Britta Ollmann). Coalhouse Walker Jr. (David L. Murray Jr.) seeks reconciliation through music with his beloved Sarah (Traci Allen Shannon). Tateh (Sasha Andreev) is fresh off the boat from Eastern Europe and seeking his fortune.

*Ragtime* does not pretend these are terribly complex portraits. The show, with music by Stephen Flaherty and lyrics by Lynn Ahrens, is a pageant of metaphor — a string of vignettes stitched together to tell a larger parable that feels relevant: how the avarice of great wealth seeks its own adventure and comfort; how the aspirations of people of color denied justice can be radicalized into protest, and how immigrants ironically are the greatest believers in the American dream.

And there on the periphery are the celebrities who distract us from what is important.

Ollmann is the pure heart of this show as the sympathetic Mother who takes in an abandoned baby and comforts the child’s mom, played by Shannon with many layers of hurt.

Murray’s face changes into hard disillusionment as Coalhouse turns to terrorism. Andreev as Tateh and Andre Shoals as Booker T. Washington do excellent work, as do Hines and Riley McNutt as a disillusioned man of privilege. Kelli Foster Warder’s choreography uses silhouette to great effect.

Latté Da opened last season at the Ritz with the masterful Sweeney Todd. The cool virtuosity of that work can’t be matched by *Ragtime*, but what this musical illustrates so well is the heart that Rothstein and music director Denise Prosek have always brought to Latté Da. And it is more than mere sentiment. Rothstein convinces us that these are the raw and honest emotions of people caught in hard times. This elegant staging provokes and comforts.

America needs provocation and comfort right now. Desperately so.
David: It is easy to see why Theater Latté Da chose this moment to mount their own production of *Ragtime* (running through October 23rd at their newly acquired Ritz Theater home). In times of civil unrest and political uncertainty, its themes of racial injustice and immigration anxieties resonate strongly with our contemporary realities.

Chelsea: So strongly, in fact, that it’s hard to believe that the show was written nearly 20 years ago. Intersecting and intertwining three quintessentially American stories from the turn of the twentieth century, *Ragtime* follows a few characters from each of three major people groups as reflections of that group’s experience: African Americans, Eastern European immigrants, and wealthy white families.

David: Sadly, it highlights that this country has yet to overcome many of the struggles it has always faced. And yet, despite the aptness of the themes, I can say with confidence after having now seen three productions, including this very inventive and astute rendition, that I am not a big fan of the show itself. Condensed from a sizeable novel by E.L. Doctorow, it is simply too noisy with plot, emotion, and characters to hit as deep a chord as it needs.

Chelsea: I definitely see what you mean, as *Ragtime’s* book by Terrence McNally is broad, with a number of primary characters each with involved arcs, but it generally really works for me. Despite a couple of odd character shifts and some unnecessary bits, I still find myself getting involved in the story every time I see it. Some of this may have to do with the incredible score (music by Stephen Flaherty and lyrics by Lynn Ahrens) and timely themes, and some may result from the arc of Mother, whose character most organically interacts with all of the other storylines and helps tie things together for me.

David: Her character is definitely the heart of the show and has the most fully fleshed transformation. And it doesn’t hurt that Britta Ollmann imbues this figure with subtle and nuanced shifts throughout. Her showstopping, second act rendition of “Back to Before” is exquisite and utterly heartbreaking.

Chelsea: Ollmann is fantastic in this part, and generally speaking, Latté Da’s production boasts fabulous performances all around from its fairly stripped down cast (most of the non-principal actors play multiple roles). Sasha Andreev beautifully captures the plight of the immigrant in Tateh’s every labored movement and seems to feel every wrenching note of his early song, “Success.” Traci Allen Shannon’s Sarah is warm, tentative, and expresses pain with poignancy in “Daddy’s Son.”

David: The show’s set (scenic design by Michael Hoover) is also stripped down and mostly bare, which somewhat counteracts the show’s busyness, utilizing a striking lighting design (by Mary Shabatura) to isolate moments and performances, making the occasionally bombastic plotting more personal. Most of director Peter Rothstein’s decisions indeed work for the best, stemming from a keen sense of space that creates some memorable vignettes along the way. That said, I did think that some of the ideas, such as wheeled scaffold staircases, created for some at times awkward movements despite their visual flair.
Chelsea: I thought the staircases worked well and their inauspicious nature focused attention on the actors and music rather than the surroundings—something I found extremely effective, especially considering the vocal talent on stage and Denise Prosek’s rich musical direction. As far as direction is concerned, I loved the ways Rothstein staged many scenes, from the use of silhouette throughout to echo Tateh’s artistic profession to a beautiful choice of timing to end Act I. Ultimately, that choice, like so many in this particular production, underlined the way this story mirrors contemporary America. Ragtime simply feels important.

David: Well, with its many emotional and musical crescendos, it certainly wants to feel important. And while I may personally desire more focused plotting, this production nevertheless managed to induce goosebumps at several key moments. In these moments, the show indeed felt essential and the strength of the production far overshadowed any flaws in the writing.

Chelsea: It’s absolutely worth seeing. Latté Da manages yet another first-rate musical experience, even if the book may not be as clean as some would want. But then again, neither is the American story.

David and Chelsea Berglund review movies on their site Movie Matrimony.
Theater Latté Da is opening their 19th season (and their first season in their new home, the Ritz Theater in NE Minneapolis, where they have been in residence for a few years but only recently purchased) with a Tony-winning musical written nearly 20 years ago, set 110 years in the past, that is perhaps the most timely and relevant musical for the America we’re living in now. Ragtime (book by Terrence McNally, music by Stephen Flaherty, lyrics by Lynn Ahrens) deals with the two biggest social issues of the day - anti-immigrant sentiment and racism (not to mention issues of class and gender). Based on the 1975 novel by E.L. Doctorow, Ragtime explores the tension that arose from the clash of cultures in New York City in the early 20th Century. When viewed through the lens of the present time, in which black men are repeatedly killed for no reason other than the color of their skin, the clothing they're wearing, or being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and businesses in our own small towns put up signs that say "no Muslims allowed," this already powerful story, beautifully told through words, characters, and music, becomes even more meaningful and important. Director Peter Rothstein and his incomparable team of actors, singers, musicians, and designers have brought this story to life in a way that's aesthetically pleasing, highly entertaining and engaging, and most importantly, clearly delineates the parallels with our own world.

Ragtime tells the story of three families - an upper class White family, an African American family, and an immigrant family. The three families' lives become intertwined with each other, as well as with several historical events and figures, such as anarchist Emma Goldman, magician Harry Houdini, and chorus girl Evelyn Nesbit. The hero of our story is Coalhouse Walker, Jr., a ragtime piano player in love
with a poor servant named Sarah. Coalhouse's journey takes a drastic turn when he's faced with discrimination and tragedy. Sarah lives with the seemingly perfect well-to-do family consisting of a father, a mother, and a son, as well as mother's younger brother and father. Curiously, these characters (with the exception of the son, Edgar) don't have names, so that they could be anyone or everyone. Mother keeps the home fires burning while Father explores the world, and Younger Brother is on a journey all his own, always looking for something to cling to and finding it in unfortunate places (or persons). Finally, at the center of our third family is a poor immigrant trying to make a better life for his daughter. Tateh's path crosses with Mother's several times; in fact all of the characters in this story are connected somehow, and what each does affects the others.*

Several moments in the show clearly spoke to me about today's world, and sound like they could be heard on the news on any day. Struggling to find a way to support his daughter and facing opposition at every turn, Tateh cries out, "I'm not 'you people,' I'm Tateh!" *Ragtime* shows us that immigrants are not "others," they're people, most of whom are coming here to make a better life for their children, the same reason that all of our ancestors came to America. After his car is vandalized simply because he dared to drive into a white neighborhood, Coalhouse demands, "I'm not some fool, I'm not their n***er, I will have what's fairly owed me," which sounds very much like the demands of the Black Lives Matter movement. All Coalhouse is asking for is to be seen as a worthy human being, to be fairly treated, and to live his life with his family unencumbered by discrimination and violence.

As usual with Theatrer Latté Da, the show is perfectly cast. Just 14 actors play all the roles, which is a fairly small number for a show this epic (in listening to the score again and reading about the show, it seems there are a few minor characters that were cut or combined to make the small cast feasible). Many of the actors also double as chorus members, and while there are a few moments of "What's Tateh doing in this scene? Why is Emma Goldman there?" you quickly learn to let that go and see them as players in the story. The small cast really works to accentuate the intimacy of this epic story.

Highlights in the cast include, well, everyone:

David L. Murray, Jr.** is a welcome new addition to the Twin Cities theater scene (thank you Yellow Tree Theatre!), and one we can hopefully keep for a while. Firstly he has a gorgeous voice, and secondly he imbues Coalhouse with all of the strength, rage, desperation, and humanity required for the character.

Traci Allen Shannon** is a lovely Sarah, making the audience understand and empathize with the choices she makes.

Britta Ollmann sings with a voice so clear and pure it cuts right to the soul and makes you feel all of the sadness and joy that Mother feels.

Sasha Andreev brought tears to my eyes every time he opened his mouth, so passionate and believable is he as the immigrant Tateh, desperate and determined to care for his daughter. Perhaps being himself an immigrant who came to this country as a child with his parents brings a first-hand knowledge and authenticity to his portrayal.

All of the supporting players are truly wonderful too, including Andre Shoals as the wise and distinguished Booker T. Washington; James Ramlet as the grumpy Grandfather; Benjamin Dutcher pulling double duty as the heroic Houdini and the despicable fire fighter who destroys Coalhouse's car; Daniel S. Hines, almost making the absent and unyielding Father sympathetic; Emily Jansen as Evelyn Nesbit, "the girl on the swing;" Riley McNutt, so good as the lost and searching Younger Brother that I
wish he had a bigger role; and Debra Berger, whose Emma Goldman is so convincing I'd follow her to the picket lines!

Finally, the smallest members of the cast are the most charming. Soren Thayne Miller as Edgar bravely opens the show alone on stage, and is adorably precocious throughout the show ("warn the Duke!"). Georgia Blando is a sweetheart as Tateh's thoughtful and sad daughter, and Julia Fé Foster Warder creates some beautiful lines as the silhouetted skater.

_Ragtime_ is one of my favorite musical theater recordings to listen to, featuring that distinct and rhythmic ragtime sound, as well as sweeping anthems. The offstage band directed by Denise Prosek sounds much richer than it should with just five members. I didn't miss a thing not having brass or strings. And the cast sounds gorgeous, individually and particularly in harmony.

The staging and every element of design is just stunning. Latté Da continues to make good use of its new home at the Ritz, fitting the shows into the gorgeous bones of the old theater rather than trying to cover them up. For this show, scenic designer Michael Hoover has created a false back wall on the otherwise open and empty stage, a wall that so closely matches the actual walls of the theater, with the exposed brick and mottled paint, that it looks like it's always been there (and I'm still not entirely convinced it hasn't). A floor-level door and two elevated doors, accessed by moving staircases of bare metal, are used for entrances and exits, and a well-placed piece of furniture or two is all that is needed to set the scene. The all important piano has a dual purpose, also representing Coalhouse's car as he sits on top of it. Not only is this an economic use of set pieces, but it somehow makes the destruction of the car more devastating as the piano is closely tied to the musician Coalhouse's identity. Recent Ivey Emerging Artist honoree Trevor Bowen has designed the authentic period clothing in a muted palate, saving a few pops of color for Coalhouse and the wealthy. Completing the picture is Mary Shabatura's lighting design, creating some beautiful silhouettes and shocking moments of terror.

I have no doubt that _Ragtime_ will take its place on many year-end best-of lists. It deeply affected me in a way theater, or anything, rarely does. Not only is this show beautiful to look at and listen to and chock full of incredible performances, it does the thing that theater at its best is supposed to do. It provides thoughtful and meaningful commentary on the world we live in. I had tears behind my eyes for most of the show, and had trouble holding back sobs as it came to its intense conclusion. But the tears were not for Coalhouse, Sarah, Tateh, or Mother. The tears were for the Coalhouses, Sarahas, Tatehs, and Mothers of our own world, the ones we see suffering injustice on the news every day. In his final song, Coalhouse sings, "make them hear you." It's easy to feel frustrated and helpless at all of the injustices of the world. But there's one easy way to "make them hear you" - vote. If the issues illuminated in Ragtime are important to you, look at the candidates' stand on these issues. Look at their track records in fighting for justice and equality for all genders, sexual orientations, races, classes, and nationalities. And then vote. Make them hear you! Because "we'll never get to heaven 'til we reach that day," when every child can "ride on the wheels of a dream."

_Ragtime_ is not just an exquisite piece of music-theater, it also shines a light on the issues of the day, issues that were never more crucial to consider than now in this election season. Thank you Peter Rothstein and Theater Latté Da for recognizing the brilliance of _Ragtime_ and bringing it to us now when we need it most. Go see Ragtime between now and October 23, and then vote on November 8. Make them hear you!
*Plot summary borrowed from what I wrote about Park Square Theatre's 2012 production of *Ragtime*.  
**Sarah and Coalhouse will get a second chance at a happy ending; Traci Allen Shannon will play Cinderella and David L. Murray Jr. will play her price in Cinderella at the Children's Theatre Company, opening in November.
Traci Allen Shannon as Sarah and David L. Murray Jr. as Coalhouse Walker Jr. in Theater Latté Da’s “Ragtime.”

Theater Latté Da makes more magic with less than almost any theater we know. We first saw this in 2005, when director Peter Rothstein staged Puccini’s La Bohème in the tiny Loring Playhouse. Bohème is a warhorse opera, with a large cast and chorus, 80-piece orchestra, grand costumes and sets. Rothstein pared down the cast and used a five-piece band: piano, accordion, guitar, violin and woodwinds. People who saw it still rave about it.

And now there’s Ragtime, a lollapalooza of a musical written for a large cast and chorus, dancers and orchestra. At the Ritz Theater, Latté Da’s new home in northeast Minneapolis, Rothstein tells the sweeping, epic story with 14 actors and four musicians. Michael Hoover’s sets are minimalist: gray walls and floors, three doors, a curtain, some crates, a few sticks of furniture and a pair of rolling metal ladders. There are rarely more than two props on stage at the same time. The rolling ladders become, among other things, gangways on ships and stands at a baseball game. A grand piano on wheels doubles as a Model T. Don’t worry, it works.
Everything about this *Ragtime* works, including the timing. The musical is based on the award-winning book by E.L. Doctorow, published in 1975 and set in the years 1902-1912. In 18 scenes and nearly 40 songs, this historical pageant tells the stories of three groups: upper-class white Americans, African-Americans and Eastern European immigrants.

Except for the costumes (by Trevor Bowen, who last week won the Emerging Artist Award at the Iveys), some of the events, and the famous characters who thread through the story – anarchist Emma Goldman, Harry Houdini, showgirl Evelyn Nesbit, Booker T. Washington – *Ragtime* could be set in 2016. It’s way more contemporary than it should be. In our world right now, and our country, and our political climate, it’s impossible to experience it solely as a period piece. Not when police officers shout “She’s got a gun!” before beating a black character. Or when wealthy white people sing of a once-ideal world where “there were no Negroes and there were no immigrants.” Or when they dream that “everything will be like it was – the same as it was before, when we were happy.”

The prosperous white family are Mother (Britta Ollmann), Father (Daniel S. Hines), Younger Brother (Riley McNutt) and Little Boy (Soren Thayne Miller). The African-Americans are Sarah, a poor washerwoman (Traci Allen Shannon), and the father of her child, ragtime pianist Coalhouse Walker Jr. (David L. Murray Jr.). The immigrants are Jewish-Latvian artist Tateh (Sasha Andreev) and his daughter, Little Girl (Georgia Blando). The cast are all terrific singers and utterly convincing in their roles, performing with clarity and passion.

As Mother, Ollmann is the story’s moral center, the character with the most accepting, color- and class-blind heart. Her performance of “Back to Before” toward the end of Act II is tremendous and shattering. So is Murray’s “Make Them Hear You,” the cry that echoes today in “Black Lives Matter.” That one caused a lot of sniffing in the theater. Have tissue handy for the end of Act I, for “Wheels of a Dream,” for the epilogue. Latté Da should leave the lights down just a few moments longer at the end, for the audience’s sake and the cast’s, because everyone needs time to pull themselves together.

This is such a powerful show. By peeling away the pomp and excess of a Broadway production, Rothstein gets to the core of *Ragtime*, a tale of family, humanity, and more hope than we probably deserve.

*Ragtime* continues at the Ritz Theater through Oct. 23. FMI and tickets ($35-$48, student rush $20, rush $24).
Ragtime is about “a nation on the cusp of great change,” states Peter Rothstein, director of Theater Latté Da’s new production in a program note. Seen today, though, Ragtime makes American history feel less epochal than cyclical. From racist cops to frightened immigrants, the musical’s vision of American life in the early 1900s is painfully resonant with the reality we face over a century later.

For an epic historical pageant encompassing figures both factual and fictional, this musical adaptation of E.L. Doctorow’s 1975 novel has proven surprisingly amenable to chamber-sized productions. Ten Thousand Things staged an acclaimed, intimate take on the show in 2005, and now Latté Da is presenting an only moderately less minimal Ragtime as the company’s first Ritz Theater production since it purchased the northeast Minneapolis landmark.

In the 20 years since its premiere, Ragtime — written by Terrence McNally, with music by Stephen Flaherty and lyrics by Lynn Ahrens — has started to look increasingly like a contemporary classic.
McNally preserves Doctorow’s sweeping tone while reining in his sprawling structure, sharpening the focus on the black pianist Coalhouse Walker (David L. Murray Jr.) and the affluent white Mother (Britta Ollmann) as twin moral centers around which the story revolves.

Rothstein’s precisely choreographed production honors that concentration on character, with a Michael Hoover scenic design that’s so subtly integrated with the Ritz’s unpolished interior that sometimes the set hardly seems to exist at all. Two rolling stairs carry actors in and out of twin doors positioned in the middle of the stage’s rear wall, with a piano doubling as Coalhouse’s shiny new Ford. A band, led by music director Denise Prosek, is completely hidden.

The story weaves several plot threads together, in a manner that could seem contrived if this stellar cast didn’t feel so organically connected. The child of Coalhouse and his lover Sarah (Traci Allen Shannon, luminous) ends up being cared for by Mother, whose husband (Daniel S. Hines) has just taken off on a polar expedition. Meanwhile, a Jewish immigrant of artistic bent (Sasha Andreev) is struggling to provide for his daughter (Georgia Blando).

Rothstein’s production has enough of the ol’ razzle-dazzle to carry off showboating numbers like Coalhouse’s “Gettin’ Ready Rag” and the darkly comedic “Crime of the Century” (with Emily Jansen, as Evelyn Nesbit, glibly singing on a swing). Then, however, the show clears the decks for poignant ballads that soar — notably the climactic “Back to Before” and “Make Them Hear You,” which Ollmann and Murray, respectively, perform with strong clear voices and rock-steady sureness of purpose.

It’s hard to imagine a more apt show to open Theater Latté Da’s new season. Highly entertaining and deeply moving, this Ragtime makes a case not only for itself but for musical theater as a means of communion and as a catalyst for action. Just in case you didn’t get the message, there are voter registration forms in the lobby.
Is musical theatre relevant or mere entertainment? The musical Ragtime deals with immigration, economic disparity, and the killing of unarmed blacks by police. Although Ragtime is a period drama set in the United States near the start of the 20th century, the issues at its heart are unfortunately very much alive today.

Ragtime is an adaptation of the 1975 novel of the same name by E.L. Doctorow; its 1998 Broadway debut garnered nominations for 13 Tony awards and 4 Tony Award wins. The original Broadway show had a cast of 30, but Director Peter Rothstein smoothly uses a slimmer ensemble cast to convey Theatre Latte Da’s rendition of this musical, which opens Theatre Latté Da’s new season in its newly purchased home, the Ritz Theatre in Northeast Minneapolis.

The needless murders by police of the two main black characters give the show a very chilling relevance today. The central storylines follow three families: a well-to-do traditional couple with a mother, father and son; a ragtime black musician by the name of Coalhouse Walker and Sarah, the mother of his newborn son; and a newly arrived impoverished Jewish immigrant by the name of Tateh and his young daughter. The characters are connected by association with several better known names of the era including Harry Houdini, Evelyn Nesbit, Henry Ford, J.P. Morgan, Emma Goldman, Admiral Perry, and Booker T. Washington. A central character, Mother, interacts with all three families.
Director Rothstein’s casting of a very enthusiastic and talented ensemble elevates this production. Chief among these are Britta Ollmann as the Mother character. Ollmann successfully conveys a woman who, after her husband leaves for a trip to the North Pole with Admiral Perry, finds her opportunity to break out of her traditional role to become independent, assertive, and compassionate. Her passionate rendition of the ballad “Back to Before,” is one of the highlights of the show.

David L. Murray, Jr. as Coalhouse charmingly plays an idealistic young man who is proud of his ability to buy a brand new Model T Ford and who truly seeks to reform his tomcatting days to win back Sara. Traci Allen Shannon as Sarah creates another of the show’s highlights with her heartfelt song “Your Daddy’s Son.” Sasha Andreev as Tateh conveys a nobleness in his efforts to bring his daughter a better life. Debra Berger as Emma Goldman brings out the real fire of Goldman’s socialistic preaching to the people in the lower-depths of American society. The entire ensemble stands out in both the prologue and epilogue renditions of the title song “Ragtime.”

Scenic designer Michael Hoover uses sparse set pieces such as two moveable scaffold stairs, a piano and the use of two existing stage doors to effectively create multiple locations. Lighting designer Mary Shabatura’s incredible lighting works well with the sparse set to lift the scenes outside of the three warehouse type walls that create the stage.

I have seen four outstanding shows so far this year; *Ragtime* and Theatre Latté Da’s earlier *C.* are two of these four. This production is not only very entertaining, its glaring relevance to today’s America reaches to the very heart.
Theater Latté Da, now the proud owner of The Ritz Theatre, is inaugurating the stage with a breathtaking production of Ragtime. It is hard to imagine a musical that better draws upon Latté Da's gift for finding the beating heart of a show, offers meaty lead and supporting roles to an immensely talented cast, and carries the banner of the traditional musical while striking a contemporary chord in its themes of justice and dignity across race, national origin, economic status and gender. The opening night audience could not leap to its feat fast enough to offer a standing ovation as a tribute to the cast as well as a response to Ragtime's portrayal of American history that, with updated names and nationalities, might be mistaken for current events.

The musical is based on the 1975 novel "Ragtime" by E. L. Doctorow. Doctorow's novel has an epic scope, and such tomes rarely transform successfully into musicals. For every Les Misérables, a dozen Doctor Zhivagos crash and burn out the gate. Ragtime's creative team was more than up to the challenge. The achingly beautiful music was written by by Stephen Flaherty, the highly literate lyrics by Lynn Ahrens, and the coherent book that manages to seamlessly move among multiple plotlines is by Terrence McNally. All three won well-earned Tony Awards for their efforts.

Set in the first decade of the twentieth century, Ragtime revolves around three families. Father, Mother, their son Edgar, Grandfather, and Mother's younger Brother compose an upper class white family in New Rochelle, a safe, leafy New York City suburb. Father's wealth is derived from the manufacture of patriotic paraphernalia such as flags, bunting, and fireworks. He further fulfills himself as a hobbyist explorer, accompanying Admiral Robert Perry on his final attempt to reach the North Pole. Younger Brother works in the family business but is in search of a deeper purpose for his life.
The second family comprises Coalhouse Walker, Jr., a well-spoken ragtime pianist in Harlem; Sarah, a woman who fell deeply for Coalhouse but flees when she becomes pregnant with his child; and their infant son. Coalhouse's belief in the promise of America is epitomized by his purchase of a Model T Ford. Tateh (the Yiddish word for papa) and his young daughter form the third family. They are Jewish-Latvian immigrants fleeing pogroms that cost Tateh's wife her life. They arrive in America full of hope in the land of opportunity, unprepared for the destitution of Lower East Side tenement life.

Into the lives of the fictional characters, Doctorow inserted key historical figures of the era: financier J. P. Morgan, industrialist Henry Ford, educator Booker T. Washington, femme-fatale celebrity Evelyn Nesbit, firebrand anarchist Emma Goldman, escape artist Harry Houdini, and both Admiral Perry and his African-American first mate Matthew Henson. These iconic individuals impact the families' fates and fortunes in ways that might feel contrived if history did not bear out that such unlikely things indeed occurred. Their stories include the killing of innocents, unfathomable racial hatred, riots in pursuit of a living wage, tawdry amusements, a woman's conscience awakened, and a taste of the American dream.

The genius of Peter Rothstein's direction is to make this show, so enormous in its inception, as small as possible without losing plot, characters or feeling. Where the original 1998 Broadway production had 44 cast members, Rothstein has 14, with several smaller parts double-cast, and without an ensemble of singer/dancers. By making the show smaller, Rothstein maintains focus on the human dramas rather than spectacle. Everything in the show contributes to the journeys taken by this cast of characters, as they traverse the changing landscape of the American dream.

In keeping with this sharp focus, the stage at the Ritz is bare, with two industrial-style movable stairs serving as ships passing at sea, bedroom quarters, podiums for union rallies and other locales. A grand piano marks the era's ebullient creative spirit and doubles as Coalhouse's car, symbol of his place in the propulsive forward progress heralded by the new century.

The entire cast does wonderful work, making this truly an ensemble piece, but Britta Ollmann's performance as Mother is a revelation. She brings to life Mother's awakening from subservient wife to an independent woman. With her beautiful soprano, she delivers such character-driven numbers as "What Kind of Woman?" and especially, the 11'o'clock powerhouse "Back to Before" with emotion that holds the audience in a thrall. She sings the lovely "Our Children" with Sasha Andreev, as Tateh, and the two fill our hearts with hope in their vision, and sorrow for its unfilled promise. Andreev depicts the depth of Tateh's fear, hope, anger and love for his precious daughter. He and Daniel S. Hines, as Father, beautifully share "Journey On," as their two ships pass in the night—Tateh's to America, Father's to the North Pole, and joined by Mother in a sublime meditation on the yearning that drives the human heart.

David L. Murray also shines brightly as Coalhouse. He conveys the dignity and honorable intentions of a man who has seen the world and is ready to stake his claim on life, only to have it stripped away by the brutality of racism and a justice system that is stacked against him. When he sings "New Music," "Sarah Brown Eyes," and the stirring anthem "Let Them Hear You," our spirits soar with his. "Wheels of a Dream," sung with Sarah, played by Traci Allen Shannon, is one of the most beautiful works in the score, and in it Murray conveys Coalhouse's enormous faith in America. Shannon is lovely as Sarah, and beautifully sings the haunting "Your Daddy's Son" to her newborn child. Though she does not fully convey a radiance to render Coalhouse's yearning for her as inevitable, she projects the fears of a poor black woman in the world of white wealth. Other notable performances come from Riley McNutt as Younger Brother and Debra Berger as Emma Goldman. In their two shared numbers—"The Night that Goldman Spoke" and "He Wanted to Say"—they lay bare the turmoil in Younger Brother's heart.
With the elimination of a larger ensemble, the show has only modest dancing, choreographed gracefully by Kelli Foster Wader. Denise Prosek, resident music director at Theater Latté Da, works magic drawing rich and varied sounds from a five-person band. Trevor Bowen's costumes are perfectly attuned to each character's station. Mary Shabatura's lighting works wonderfully to create places upon the bare stage, and makes effective use of silhouettes to frame the opening sequence. Simply put, everything in this production works.

Ragtime is a triumph. If you have seen it before, Theater Latté Da's production will provide a new lens to appreciate the power of its narrative. If you have not seen it, it will be a musically glorious, emotionally rewarding experience. As stated in the title number that opens the show, "It was the music of something beginning, an era exploding, a century spinning." That was 1906, but Ragtime is also 2016, and calls us to watch, listen, and reflect now more than ever.

Ragtime continues through October 23, 2016, at the Ritz Theater, 345 13th Avenue NE, Minneapolis, MN. Tickets: $35.00 - $48.00. For tickets call 612-339-3303 or go to theaterlatteda.com.

Music: Stephen Flaherty; Lyrics: Lynn Ahrens; Book: Terrence McNally, based on the novel "Ragtime" by E. L. Doctorow; Director: Peter Rothstein; Music Director: Denise Prosek; Choreography: Kelli Foster Wader; Set Design: Michael Hoover; Costume Design: Trevor Bowen; Lighting Design: Mary Shabatura; Sound Design and Engineer: Nik Tranby; Properties Master: Abbee Warmboe; Facial Hair Design: Tricia Stogsdill; Dialect Coach: Keely Wolter; Fight Director: Annie Enneking; Technical Director: Stein Rosburg; Stage Manager: Tiffany K. Orr; Assistant Director: Eric Norton; Assistant Stage Manager: Amanda K. Bowman

Cast: Sasha Andreev (Tateh), Debra Berger (Emma Goldman), Georgia Blando (Little Girl), Benjamin Dutcher (Harry Houdini/Willie Conklin), Daniel S. Hines (Father/J. P. Morgan), Emily Jansen (Evelyn Nesbit), Riley McNutt (Younger Brother), Soren Thayer Miller (Little Boy), David L. Murray, Jr. (Coalhouse Walker, Jr.), Britta Ollmann (Mother), James Ramlet (Grandfather/Henry Ford), Traci Allen Shannon (Sarah), Andre Shoals (Booker T. Washington), Julia Fé Foster Warder (Skater), Noelle Renae Hunter/Dominic Tidmarsh-Kilander (Coalhouse Walker, III).
2016 “Best Of” Honors
The Twin Cities is growing by leaps and bounds, as evidenced by construction cranes dotting the landscape. That kinetic vitality was reflected onstage in 2016 in ambitious, well-crafted works that grappled with essential and elemental issues, including what it means to be human, to have grace, to walk in another's shoes. It all made for a thrilling year in the footlights.

“Ragtime,” Theatre Latté Da. Casting may not be everything, but it counts for a lot. That was clear as newcomer David Murray joined Britta Ollmann, Traci Allen Shannon and Sasha Andreev in Peter Rothstein’s deft production of this Stephen Flaherty/Lynn Ahrens musical about families pursuing the American dream. The show was deeply felt and painfully resonant. Traci Allen Shannon and David L. Murray Jr.
“Disgraced,” Guthrie Theater. Director Marcela Lorca’s revelatory production of Ayad Akhtar’s Pulitzer-winning drama was the must-see event of the summer. The show managed to remain personal even as it reached for expansive themes, including terrorism and immigration, that animated the national elections. Lorca’s fine cast was led by Bhavesh Patel as a South Asian immigrant whose dreams get shattered. The cast of DISGRACED in a dinner party scene in the home of two of the characters, Amir and Emily. They are, from left, Bhavesh Patel, as Amir, Caroline Kaplan as Emily, his wife, Kevin Isola, as Isaac, and Austene Van as Jory, Isaac’s wife.

“Jitney,” Penumbra Theatre. Penumbra is rightly seen as the gold standard for August Wilson, and Lou Bellamy proved it again in this masterful staging with a veteran cast. Terry Bellamy, James Craven, Abdul Salaam El Razzac, T. Mychael Rambo and Kevin D. West, alongside relative newcomers Jasmine Hughes, Marcus Naylor and Darrick Mosley, brought Wilson’s aching poetry to lyrical life. Cast members, from left, Abdul Salaam Ex Razzac, James Craven and Marcus Naylor in “Jitney”.

“Diary of a Wimpy Kid – The Musical,” Children’s Theatre Company. The stage adaptation of Jeff Kinney’s graphic novel series got a buzzy premiere under director Rachel Rockwell. Pocket-sized star Ricky Falbo brought winning charisma to the title character in a nonstop production with music and lyrics by Michael Mahler and Alan Schmuckler. The production had the energy of a live film. In Red Tank top, Greg, played by Ricky Falbo, with the cast during the playground scene with the moldy cheese found on the ground.

“The Oldest Boy,” Jungle Theater. Sarah Ruhl’s play about a reincarnated lama was also about parental loss and divine duty. Director Sarah Rasmussen got gorgeous performances from lead actors Randy Reyes and Christina Baldwin — and a moving turn from puppeteer Masanari Kawahara. Tsering Dorjee Bawa, puppeteer Masanari Kawahara and Eric iPodi Sumangil in “The Oldest Boy” at the Jungle Theater.

“Nina Simone: Four Women,” Park Square. Director Faye Price teamed with a sterling quartet of singer-actors — Regina Marie Williams, Shannon, Aimee K. Bryant and Thomasina Petrus — in the premiere of Christina Ham’s play about the music and civil rights icon. The singers, led by Williams, delivered with truth and supple emotion as their characters struggled for dignity and citizenship. Nina is played by Regina Marie Williams and the other in the play are, Aimee Kay Bryant, Thomasina Petrus, Traci Allen Shannon.

“The Last Firefly,” Children’s Theatre. Naomi Iizuka’s epic retelling of some Japanese fables was tightly directed by Peter Brosius and featured taut, larger-than-life performances by Sun Mee Chomet, Luverne Seifert, Joy Dolo, Stephanie Bertumen and Ricardo Vasquez, as a boy who goes on a quest to find his never-met father, Thunder. Luverne Seifert as AxE pursuing Ricardo Vazquez as Boom during a rehearsal of a scene.

“Sunset Baby,” Penumbra. Jasmine Hughes won a richly deserved Ivey Award for her feverishly magnetic performance in Dominique Morisseau’s drama about dreams that have turned rancid. Hughes played Nina, a hardened daughter of 1960s revolutionaries who now sells drugs. The production asked big questions and the cast, including James Craven and Ronnel Taylor, vividly embodied them. Actor Jasmine Hughes

“The Lion in Winter,” Guthrie. Actor Laila Robins dug deep and found the gusto and glory of Queen Eleanor in this revival of James Goldman’s classic about a couple in the Middle Ages parrying for power. Savoring the language, Robins, opposite Kevyn Morrow as Henry II, carried the show. Laila Robins and Kevyn Morrow.
“Camelot,” Chanhassen Dinner Theatres. Speaking of the Middle Ages, Michael Brindisi sprinkled a bit of fairy dust on this Lerner and Loewe musical and got some magical performances from his love-triangle cast: Keith Rice as idealistic Arthur, Helen Anker as love-torn Guenevere and Aleks Knezevich as muscle-bound Lancelot. Keith Rice as Arthur and Helen Anker as Guenevere.
These are 10 favorite shows from 2016 in no particular order. In some cases, they’re grouped shows that had relevance for each other — a few noteworthy musicals, social issues, classics and small creations.


“The Shining,” Minnesota Opera. Speaking of opera, the adaptation of Stephen King’s novel by composer Paul Moravec and librettist Mark Campbell had its world premiere last May. It was spare and dynamic. Brian Mulligan sang the crazed Jack Torrance, Minnesota’s Kelly Kaduce was frazzled Wendy, his wife, and Alejandro Vega played Danny. Kelly Kaduce portrays Wendy Torrance.
“Trouble in Mind,” Guthrie Theater. This is such a good script. Director Valerie Curtis Newton’s ear was perfectly tuned to Alice Childress’ backstage story about race, role playing and privilege. Margo Moorer led the good cast and it all sang with that 1950s style of well-made plays. Actors, Margo Moorer and Cleavant Derricks.

“The Christians,” Walking Shadow Theatre Company. Amy Rummenie directed with sincerity and respect and it was absolutely the right choice for Lucas Hnath’s play about a megachurch pastor who has a crisis of faith. Actors Andrew Erskine Wheeler, Bonni Allen and Kory LaQuess Pullam played it honestly. Andrew Erskine Wheeler as Pastor Paul.

“Bad Jews,” Minnesota Jewish Theatre Company. Miriam Schwartz and Michael Hanna chewed every bit of furniture on stage and it was delicious to watch. Again, playwright Joshua Harmon’s tale was about loaded religious issues — whether piety or family traditions matter most — and these two young actors tore it up. From left to right, Miriam Schwartz, Michael Torsch, Adelin Phelps, and Michael Hanna.

“Disgraced,” Guthrie Theater. It is noteworthy that three shows on this list have to do with religion. This one is in many ways the most compelling because it strikes so close to a man’s identity. Ayad Akhtar writes about a Muslim-American lawyer who finds himself defined by others as the stereotype he has been fleeing. Director Marcela Lorca worked with Bhavesh Patel, as Amir, and Caroline Kaplan as Emily, Amir’s wife.

“A Raisin in the Sun,” Park Square Theatre. You can do this show in a church basement with kid actors and I would go see it. Lorraine Hansberry gave theater this one beautiful gift and director Warren Bowles took care of it. Darius Dotch loved playing one of the greatest roles ever written; Aimee K. Bryant and Greta Oglesby were there, too. It was an event. Darius Dotch and Greta Oglesby.
“C.” Latte Da. This was both a slight piece and a substantial accomplishment. Bradley Greenwald adapted Cyrano (with composer Robert Elhai) and played the lead in a very muted but present musical treatment (solo voice accompanied by solo guitar on stage). Greenwald was his funny and noble self in a role that fit him well. Bradley Greenwald as Cyrano.

“Happy Days,” Open Eye Theatre. This little production of Beckett was perfect for Open Eye’s space. Amy Warner portrayed the bravest kind of Winnie, a generous and friendly survivor. Michael Sommers’ spidery Willie was a great presence. Amy Warner in the role of Winnie. Michael Sommers plays her husband Willie.

“The Story of Crow Boy,” In the Heart of the Beast. I had not been to HOBT in years but how could you not like the lineup of artists? Sandy Spieler, Steven Epp, Masanari Kawahara and Momoko Tanno told the story of Taro Yashima, an artist who triumphed over his suffering in World War II. Elegant and uncompromising in its slightly ragged, homemade charm. Masanari Kawahara with puppet.
First, it must be said: A lot of musicians died in 2016. One grim announcement followed another until you just wanted to cover your ears and squeeze your eyes shut and curl up into a ball. It began when David Bowie succumbed to cancer – and most people didn’t even know he was ill. Then, in April, Prince died at Paisley Park. We will never, ever get over that. A partial list of other punches to the heart: Leonard Cohen. Bobby Hutcherson. Mose Allison. Paul Bley. Merle Haggard. Glenn Frey. Sharon Jones. Neville Marriner. Rudy Van Gelder. Ralph Stanley. And sweet Toots Thielemans. Bah to you, 2016.

But we saw and heard some wonderful things during the year. We’re grateful to live in such an arts-rich community, and to the artists, makers, staffs, administrations, organizations, corporations, nonprofits, donors, audiences and other supporters who create and sustain it, including the many Minnesotans who voted “yes” for the Legacy Amendment in 2008: Thanks again, each one of you.

Our usual disclaimer. We see and hear as much as we can, but we can’t get to every concert, play, exhibition, performance, reading, opening, happening and event. We kick ourselves a lot for missing
things we should have gone to. (“Le Switch” at the Jungle! Kick!) We do our best, and we’ll keep trying to walk through as many doors as possible.

Here’s what we really liked in 2016.

1. January’s Beethoven Marathon at Orchestra Hall. All the symphonies, all the piano concertos, with Osmo Vänskä on the podium and Yevgeny Sudbin at the keys.

2. “Pericles” at the Guthrie. The Guthrie’s new artistic director Joe Haj made his directorial debut with a rarely-seen Shakespeare play, and actor Wayne T. Carr swam in a sea of blue silk.

3. “A Prairie Home Companion” with Chris Thile at the Fitzgerald. We saw two of Thile’s shows, one in January and one in October. Garrison Keillor chose a worthy successor.

4. Charles Lloyd and Bill Frisell at the Dakota. When their early-morning flight to Quebec City the next day was canceled (winter storm), they settled in and played for more than two sublime hours.

5. “Dracula: The Musical” at the Ritz. With jazz dance on the stage, perfectly chosen pop songs as the music and vampire chases through the aisles, this Collide production was a lot of fun.

6. “Nina Simone: Four Women” at the Park Square. There aren’t many second chances in life, but if you missed this terrific play last March, it’s returning in February 2017, with even more music.
From left to right: Aimee K. Bryant, Thomasina Petrus, Regina Marie Williams and Traci Allen Shannon in “Nina Simone: Four Women.”

7. Patricia Kopatchinskaja and the SPCO at the Ordway Concert Hall. In May, the SPCO and artistic partner PatKop showed once again that when you combine old music with new, the old becomes newer and the new less strange.

8. “Diary of a Wimpy Kid” at the Children’s Theatre. Bursting with energy, song and dance, the CTC production seems destined for Broadway.

9. Chick Corea and Bela Fleck at the Guthrie. Brought in by the Dakota, the two superstars played an ethereal made-up-on-the-spot songlist on a stage set for “Harvey.”


11. “ROOTED: Hip Hop Choreographers’ Evening” at Intermedia Arts. A strong sense of community and powerful dancing by performers of all ages. This is an annual event; we’re going back.
12. “The Marriage of Figaro” at the James H. Hill House. On a steamy summer evening, we followed the cast around the Hill House, hearing Mozart, and were happy. Bob Neu directed this site-specific production.

13. Ethan Iverson in the Dunsmore Room. The pianist for The Bad Plus rarely plays a solo concert. He took us on a chronological journey through jazz, from Scott Joplin to the present moment.

14. “Ragtime” at the Ritz. In their new home, Peter Rothstein and Theater Latté Da gave us a perfectly timed, superbly cast and staged production that left everyone – audience and cast – wrung out.

15. “Seeing Nature” at Mia. This spectacular show of 39 landscapes from Microsoft billionaire Paul Allen’s personal collection had something for everyone. That Hockney! Those Monets!

16. Cantus and Chanticleer at Orchestra Hall. An impromptu performance in a Virginia bar led to a viral video that led to a sold-out concert featuring America’s two best male choruses.

17. Rinde Eckert’s “My Fools: A Life in Song” at Nautilus Music-Theater. Part of Nautilus’ “Rough Cuts” series of works-in-progress, this riveting one-man show was Eckert up close and personal.

18. August Wilson’s “Jitney” at Penumbra. Many in the cast had acted in this play before. This production was a reminder of what a treasure Penumbra is, and how very good it can be.

19. Poet Billy Collins at the Hopkins Center for the Arts. Why is Collins “the most popular poet in America”? Because of readings like this one, part of the 2016-17 Pen Pals season.

20. Amir ElSaffar’s “Rivers of Sound” at the Walker. Seventeen musicians, 90 minutes, and one of the most transcendent performances of the year, rising higher and higher to a joyous cacophony.

21. “Pericles” at Open Book. Ten Thousand Things’ nimble, pared-down production stood in sharp contrast to the Guthrie’s big season opener in September, and we’re glad we saw both.

22. Stanislaw Skrowaczewski conducts Bruckner at Orchestra Hall. The 93-year-old maestro led the Minnesota Orchestra in the massive 90-minute Bruckner’s Eighth without benefit of a score. We wish him the very best as he recovers from a stroke he suffered in November.

23. Colin Stetson: “Sorrow” at the Walker. We went to this Liquid Music show to hear Gorecki’s Third but were blown away by Stetson’s opener: a long, continuous improvised solo on bass saxophone.
24. TU Dance at the O’Shaughnessy. Surely, strongly, and meaningfully, they danced about justice, humanity, injustice, violence, race, identity, grief and love.

25. Happy Apple at Icehouse. In an all-too-rare reconvening, Michael Lewis, Dave King and Erik Fratzke, a trio since 1996, peppered their usual playfulness with wistfulness and delicacy.
My dear theater friends, here we are again at the end of another year. Time to reflect and look back on the amazing year that 2016 was... in terms of theater anyway, if not in other areas. And now is the time, when we are faced with crises on many fronts, that we need to look to our artists to lead the way, to shine a light on the problems in the world and start a conversation. Thankfully we have an unparalleled pool of theater artists in the Twin Cities, whose work I will be looking toward and sharing in the year to come.

2016 was filled with some exciting firsts for Cherry and Spoon as I passed six years of writing about theater. I finally had my own original logo designed, and joined Instagram. But the most exciting new development of 2016 is the emergence of the Twin Cities Theater Bloggers, representing more than a dozen unique voices. We started meeting privately in 2015, and went public in January of this year with the announcement of the First Annual TCTB Awards. Since then we've held blogger events at several theaters in town, produced videos with interviews and behind-the-scenes looks, and regularly shared review roundups on our Facebook page and the TCTB blog. Being a part of this community of theater writers, sharing theater, drinks, meals, road trips, and chats together, and watching TCTB grow and become a part of the #TCTheater (our Twitter hashtag) community, has been my favorite thing about 2016. Be sure to watch for the announcement of the Second Annual TCTB Awards in the next week or two, and join us for a very special episode of our monthly Twitter chat on January 9.

In 2016 I saw over 250 shows (counting the 54 Fringe shows I saw in 11 crazy days in August) by over 80 companies at over 60 venues. Unlike most of the past 15 years, I did not make it to NYC this year. But I did venture out of the Cities to see some great theater outstate, including a beautifully tragic Cat on a Hot Tin Roof in St. Cloud, a hilarious Urinetown in New Prague, and a fantastically dark and quirky Assassins in Duluth. Here in Minneapolis/St. Paul, there were very many shows that I loved, too many to include in this post. What follows are the shows I'd like to share with you. Please share your 2016 #TCTheater favorites in the comments below or on social media.

Ten shows that I really really loved in 2016 (in alphabetical order):
Ball: A Musical Tribute to My Lost Testicle was not only a highlight of the 2016 Minnesota Fringe Festival, it was a highlight of the 2016 #TCTheater season. Max Wojtanowicz's auto-biographical one-man musical about his cancer diagnosis, treatment, and after-effects was so beautifully and painfully real, so funny and heart-breaking and moving, that it brought the entire audience to tears and to their feet. And the songs (composed by Jason Hansen, Michael Gruber, and Andrew Cooke) are really great too. As I wrote then, "When you can take a painful and difficult experience and turn it into something that's entertaining, engaging, and moving, that's a true gift."

Walking Shadow's The Christians was one of those plays that challenged me and made me think as it explored ideas of faith, belief, and relationships. With the entire play structured as a sermon in one of those mega-churches, it featured a strong ensemble and one of the best performances of the year - Andrew Erskine Wheeler. "There is no pretense here, no sign of acting, he just is this sympathetic, frustrating, humble, egotistical, selfish, giving, complicated, magnificent man known as Pastor Paul. I was with him the whole way in this journey and felt his every emotion, from rapture to devastation."

Any one of Jungle Theater's five plays this year could have made this list (an all-female Two Gentleman of Verona, the modern rom-com with substance Le Switch, the intense and lyrical Bars and Measures, or the quietly lovely The Oldest Boy). But if I have to pick a favorite among them, it's Constellations, the alternate universe story of a romance starring the stunning duo Anna Sundberg and Ron Menzel in overlapping repeated scenes brilliantly directed by Gary Gisselman. "It's an incredible feat by the entire team to not only jump through all the hoops of this challenging script, but in doing so to create a piece of theater that is both intellectually stimulating and emotionally fulfilling."

Nautilus Music-Theater's full productions are few and far between, but well worth the wait. The inspired casting of #TCTheater vets and married couple Wendy Lehr and Gary Briggle as the young (at heart) lovers in The Fantasticks brought a whole new life to the longest running musical in the world. The terrific six-person cast (which also included the fabulous Baldwin sisters) and two-person orchestra were unmiked and performed in Nautilus' tiny study space, creating a truly special and intimate music-theater experience unlike any other this year.

Christina Ham's new play-with-music Nina Simone: Four Women at Park Square Theater hit all the right notes as it showed us who this incomparable woman was, while sharing her music with us. An incredible cast of four women, anchored by yet another strong performance by Regina Marie Williams in the title role, bring one of Nina's songs to life, in what was "a powerful and important play about a powerful and important woman who used her incredible musical talents to fight for justice for her people and all
Americans. Her music, written 50 years ago, is just as meaningful today, and this play brings her music and her message to the forefront. (If you missed it you're in luck - it's coming back to Park Square in February). P.S. Christina Ham brought us another fantastic new play in Pillsbury House Theatre's Scapegoat.

I've been a fan of New Epic Theater since their beginning just a few short years ago, but they've never lived up to their name more than in the epic pairing of The Normal Heart and Coriolanus, performed in rep this spring in a feast of blood, beards, and abs, and really great theater. Each one of these plays is a challenge in itself - the gut-wrenching story of the early days of the AIDS crisis, and Shakespeare's story of war and death. To perform these plays together with the same small (and brilliant) cast and similar design aesthetic is a Herculean task, one that New Epic pulled off brilliantly. I went back to see the plays a second time, back-to-back on one glorious day of theater, and was even more impressed with the way they spoke to each other, the pairing truly much more than the sum of the two impressive parts.

If you're looking for the future of music-theater, look no further than our very own 7th House Theater, comprised of some of the most talented young music-theater artists in town. Their third annual new original musical, The Passage, Or What Comes of Searching in the Dark, felt modern and inventive in a Next to Normal/Fun Home sort of way. With book, music, and lyrics by company member David Darrow and direction by the uber-talented ensemble, The Passage was "a beautiful, funny, and poignant piece of music-theater about nothing more and nothing less than love, grief, friendship, family, self-discovery, and growing up. In short, it's about life - the joy and the pain, the epic and the mundane, told in an innovative and modern way."
It was another stellar year for Theater Latte Da as they continue to do theater musically and brilliantly. I loved the new and emotional play-with-music Lullaby, the ingenious casting of talented mother/daughter duo Michelle Barber and Cat Brindisi in Gypsy, Bradley Greenwald and Robert Elhai’s gorgeous new musical C., and the Christmas favorites A Christmas Carol and All Is Calm. But it was the timely and topical Ragtime that stole my heart and ripped it to shreds (I think a piece of it is still lying on the floor of the Ritz Theater, which by the way Latte Da bought this year). "Director Peter Rothstein and his incomparable team of actors, singers, musicians, and designers have brought this story to life in a way that's aesthetically pleasing, highly entertaining and engaging, and most importantly, clearly delineates the parallels with our own world."

Even besides the fact that Valerie Curtis-Newton was the first African-American woman to ever direct on a Guthrie mainstage, and the incredible cast comprised of local and national talent, Trouble in Mind was a unique and special show, particularly on the heels of #OscarsSoWhite. As I wrote at the time, "it's hilarious, engaging, and entertaining, and offers a behind the scenes look at the theater world we love so well. But more importantly, it talks about racism, sexism, classism, ageism in a smart and nuanced way that has as much resonance in today's world as it did in the 1950s NYC theater world depicted in the play."

Last but not least, the Ordway’s local production of White Christmas is on this list because it just made me happy. So happy that I went back to see it a second time. My favorite Christmas movie that I’ve seen dozens of times, brought to life in a visually and musically luscious production, with a dreamy local cast and endless stunning dance numbers... yes, I will have seconds of this scrumptious meal, thank you very
A bunch more shows I loved in 2016:

Transatlantic Love Affair continues to delight and mesmerize, this year with a return of their Ivey-winning dreamy folk tale Ballad of the Pale Fisherman and the decidedly darker and more sinister Proof; or, the Killing of Mack "The Silencer" Klein.

Both of Dark and Stormy's 2016 plays were really close to making it onto my top ten list - the devastating dramedy about a family dealing with mental illness, And So It Goes, and the very Minnesotan dark comedy The Norwegians, both presented in their intimate studio space in Northeast Minneapolis with brilliant small casts and crisp direction.

Perhaps the most surprising show this year was Mixed Blood's wacky family comedy Barbecue, the surprise being that the family was played both by a group of white actors and a group of black actors, and one set of the family was actually playing the other set of the family in a movie. Every single actor in the cast was spot-on hilarious, and one of them (Thomas W. Jones II) even doubled as the director of this crazy dance.

Chanhassen Dinner Theatres made one of my favorite Disney movies Beauty and the Beast even better in "an energetic show that is flawlessly cast and beautifully designed."

The very first play I saw this year turned out to be one of my favorites, Theatre Pro Rata's devastating Irish dramedy The Beauty Queen of Leenane.

I'm not sure I've ever had a year-end favorites list that didn't mention Loudmouth Collective. Just don't make me choose which I enjoyed more - the funny and bittersweet The Best Brothers, or the screwball comedy Waiting for Godot, both featuring dream team casts.

New-to-me Red Bird Theatre presented Sam Shepard's "darkly poetic and deeply disturbing" Buried Child as part of Southern Theater's ARTshare program, and it was delicious.

2016 may very well be Yellow Tree Theatre's best year yet with four really excellent shows: the prickly new play Clybourne Park, a truly lovely production of one of my favorite musicals Violet, the beautiful and devastating American classic Death of a Salesman, and perhaps my favorite of their wacky Minnesotan original Christmas plays with heart A Gone Fishin' Christmas.

"Two one-act comedies, written by two of my favorite playwrights, about the topic of theater criticism? I'm in!" The Guthrie's pairing of The Critic and The Real Inspector Hound featured a stellar cast and hilarious commentary about the theater.

The rarely produced musical Dear World revealed itself to be perfectly charming when "reduced to it's most perfect, accessible, relatable heart" by Ten Thousand Things, as everything they touch does.
Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Musical, I still have an animal heart for you! Children's Theatre Company's original musical adaptation of the popular book series is a winner on all counts, especially the super talented young cast. Watch for this one to go far.

In one of several great performances this year (see also Gypsy and Diary of a Wimpy Kid and Teen Idol and A Christmas Carole Petersen), Tod Petersen charmed as the man in the chair, wistfully sharing his love of his favorite musical The Drowsy Chaperone, (wonderfully brought to life by the rest of the cast) and in doing so reminding the audience why we love (and sometimes love to hate) musicals.

Joel Sass reimagined the classic Dickens novel Great Expectations for Park Square Theatre, and the result was "innovative, funny, creepy, clever, suspenseful," playfully realized by the diverse and talented cast.

Even though I've only seen August Wilson as done by Penumbra Theatre, I'm fairly certain that no one does it better. Their production of Jitney was simply perfection, performed by some of the best and most experienced August Wilson actors in the country.

The Guthrie's production of The Parchman Hour celebrated the courage of the young women and men who put their lives on the line for freedom in 1961, and we've never needed their inspiration and their rousing anthems more.

Joe Chvala and Flying Foot Forum's ambulatory theater/dance/history piece Passing through Pig's Eye was sheer delight, as the audience was led from Park Square Theatre through the streets of St. Paul, witnessing fantastic dancing and learning about the history of our fair capital city along the way.

Park Square Theatre's stellar production of the classic play Raisin in the Sun reminded us that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Any play that requires reading provides double pleasure. I enjoyed reading Jane Austen's Sense and Sensibility for the first time in preparation for seeing the Guthrie's production of the fresh and exciting new adaptation - written, directed, designed, and acted by women. (Next up for the Guthrie book club - Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye.)

History Theatre's new play with music Teen Idol: The Bobby Vee Story was one that not just baby boomers could enjoy. Yes there was lots of great music from the era (energetically performed by the talented ensemble), but it also showed us the life, heart, and work of the recently departed Minnesota music legend.

The most delicious darkness of the year came in Lyric Art's thrilling and chilling production of Wait Until Dark, with spot-on design and an excellent cast.

Mu Performing Arts' You for Me for You was a completely engrossing story of North Korean sisters separated and trying to get back to each other, using magical realism to bring the audience into the world of the play.
Another thing I loved about 2016 #TCTheater is all of the site-specific theater, which may be partly a matter of necessity, as we see a number of theater spaces close. But this has resulted in some creative theater locations, my favorite being the James J. Hill House. Three very different shows utilized this beautiful historic space in different ways (the comic opera The Marriage of Figaro, the French farce Tartuffe, and the super creepy Bluebeard's Dollhouse). This year also gave us Theatre Coup d'Etat's The Crucible in a church, Frank Theatre's The Good Person of Setzuan in an abandoned Rainbow Foods, Market Garden Theatre's Public Exposure in a cold and dark warehouse basement, and my perennial favorite - TigerLion Arts' Nature in Nature.

2016 also saw the birth of several promising new theater companies that I hope to see more of in 2017 and beyond, including Underdog Theatre (with a powerful new play Baltimore is Burning), Shoot the Glass Theater (a fine production of my favorite Sondheim Company), Revisionary Theatre (a remount of Keith Hovis' fringe musical Teenage Misery), and Other Tiger Productions' ambulatory The Palabras Project in various locations in Park Square Theatre.

2016 is the year that I "discovered" the local and national treasure that is The Playwrights' Center, now in its 45th season of supporting playwrights and new plays. After a blogger event this spring at a reading of Lee Blessing's Minneapolis/St. Paul (which will receive another workshop/reading in the spring of 2017), I've attended several more readings and really enjoy being a part of the play development process as our fabulously talented local actors read a new work. PWC has seen several of the works they've helped to develop make it to the stage this year, including Kira Obolensky's The Changelings, Christina Ham's Scapegoat, Philip Dawkins' Le Switch, and more.

That about sums up this incredible year of #TCTheater. Thanks to everyone for reading, following, commenting, sharing, and otherwise supporting Cherry and Spoon, especially the theaters that so kindly offer press comps (I wish I could see everything, and I try, I really do!). Please share your 2016 #TCTheater favorites in the comments below or on social media.

Have a happy, healthy, and safe 2017, filled with incredible #TCTheater!