

## Wavestage's Ragtime is more relevant today than ever



**By Brock Weir**

Growing up, Manuele Mizzi was all too familiar with the immigrant experience, but recently he started wanting to know more about his roots.

The son of a white Jamaican mother and an Italian father, he grew up knowing how different their own lives were before they settled to Canada. His research into his own family tree, however, coincided in taking on the role of a young Latvian father at the turn of the century, fighting for a new life for himself and his daughter, in the musical Ragtime.

The more he delved into the character, the more he drew parallels not only between his own family's experience and the show, but in the continuing problems plaguing the world today. To him, Ragtime, produced by Aurora's Wavestage Theatre Company, is more relevant today than ever before.

"When I first sat down with the [Company], we talked a lot about the word "acceptance," says Mizzi, who returns to Wavestage after first cutting his theatrical teeth with the company 16 years ago when it was known as the Aurora Opera Company. "It is an issue throughout history. We tend not to learn in the horror and I think Ragtime brings those issues to life. I always wanted to be in Ragtime; I have always loved the show. There are not very many musicals in the musical theatre canon like it. There are so few of them that are this grandiose and this amazing. It was a big deal for me to want to be a part of that."

Mizzi, who plays Tateh, is joined on stage by 11-year-old Hannah Billo, who plays his daughter.

Although Hanna is just 11, the Lester B. Pearson Public School student is no stranger to musical theatre. First treading the boards at the age of seven in Aladdin, she has taken on roles in Hairspray, Charlie & The Chocolate Factory, Gypsy and Peter Pan, among others, but the role of the Little Girl is her most meaningful role so far, she says.

"When they both arrive on the boat they are scared to death," says Hannah. "The girl is more scared because, at the time, she is only about six or seven, but the father is very excited and nervous and doesn't know how to think about it. When she was little, she has no identity, she has no name, she doesn't answer to her age, and she barely has no life. She's starting over and I think that is just terrible and I feel so bad for her."

"But dreams come true. It is not like other musicals where you just go home thinking it was a great musical, you think about everything that is in it," says Hannah, who has her own dreams of growing up to be a midwife. "There is so much meaning, there are so many different people that come together as one."

Adds Mizzi: ?There are those moments you can't put into words and I think having families come they are going to be able to take away something. Even if they don't take away that acceptance, they are going to take away moments of love, moments of pain, and moments of amazing singing. I have been in many shows before, but I have never been in something this big. I don't think anyone could describe this show as anything less than epic.?

Ragtime opens at the Richmond Hill Centre for the Performing Arts next Thursday, July 14 at 7 p.m. Shows continues July 15 and 16 at 7 p.m., with a 1 p.m. matinee on July 17. For more information, visit [www.wavestagetheatre.com](http://www.wavestagetheatre.com).