



Writer David Thompson

It's been said that it is never a good idea to meet your heroes. I suppose that's true, especially in the theater. But not when it comes to the masterful Joseph Stein. Joe was one of the most gracious librettists who ever worked in the theater. He was a true gentleman, who knew how to retain an air of humor and civility, even in the rough and tumble world of writing musicals. He was also generous and

encouraging to young writers, inspiring them to find their way in an art form without rules. I had the opportunity to meet Joe in the early days of my career. He had come to see a show I had written, and to my surprise, he followed up on our post-show conversation with a hand-written note—a note I still have. The years passed, and every time I would see Joe, he treated me like a peer, sharing stories about his latest projects. When Joe died in 2010, the theater lost “one of the good guys” who knew what it took to balance life—and art.

When Michael Gennaro asked me to rework the libretto to *Rags*, I jumped at the opportunity. I thought of it, in an odd way, as a chance to finally collaborate with Joe. By spending time with the countless drafts he had written and the characters he had created, I could better understand how he approached his craft.

*Rags* began as a screenplay Stein had written in the early 1980s. It was a cinematic story about the Jewish immigrant experience in the early part of the last century. Joe wanted to explore what might have happened to the families who had come to America from Anatevka—not necessarily Tevye and his daughters, but the other families whose lives had been uprooted by the Russian pogroms. Set on the Lower East Side in 1910, the story followed Avram and his three children, trying to find their way in America.

After Stein finished his first draft of the screenplay, he determined it wasn't a film after all, but the book of a new musical. And so the journey of *Rags* began. Some of the characters receded into the background. Others, like the character of Rebecca, were added. I never saw the original production of *Rags*, although I know it was a stormy process that ran aground on the shoals of Broadway.

The fact that *Rags* failed in its original outing in no way diminishes Joe's original desire to write a story about the immigrant experience in America. In fact, in the years since Joe wrote his initial treatment, the story has become even more relevant,

more important and, in many ways, more needed. There isn't a day that passes we don't read another headline about an immigrant family coming to America, hoping to find a better life. Or even more sadly, an immigrant family who is turned away because of growing xenophobia.

For this reason, I was determined to rediscover the original idea that sparked Joe's imagination when he first sat down to write his initial treatment. What was the flash of inspiration? As I read several of Joe's early drafts of the script, different themes kept emerging. One of the most powerful themes was the struggle of cultural assimilation. As a stranger in a new country, what do you keep? What do you leave behind? And how far are you willing to go to hold onto what is important to you. This conflict is at the core of *Fiddler on the Roof*. But it's an idea that Joe explored in nearly all of his work—starting with one of his first musicals, *Plain and Fancy*, where he wrote about the struggles of the Amish in 20th Century Pennsylvania.

It's a theme that is also at the core of *Rags*. Every character must decide what's to be gained—and what's to be lost—in the New World. In this new version, I have followed Joe's example from other projects he has written and reduced the size of the story, making it much more intimate and personal. Instead of focusing on an entire tapestry of characters on the Lower East Side, I have chosen to write about a single “melting pot” family living in a small three-room tenement. In other words, big characters in small spaces—think Tevye in the small town of Anatevka. And I have given them the universal challenge: what would I do for my child in a new world? How would I guide them in a world full of unknowns? What can I bring to America that is uniquely my own?

When I was doing some initial research for the show, I read this passage in one of the guidebooks immigrants were given at Ellis Island: “Holdfast, this is most necessary in America, forget your customs and your ideals. Select a goal and pursue it with all your might... You will experience a bad time, but sooner or later you will achieve your goal. If you are neglectful, beware the wheel of fortune turns fast. You will lose your grip and be lost. A bit of advice for you: Do not take a moment's rest. Run, do, work and keep your own good in mind. A final virtue is needed in America – called cheek. Do not say, 'I cannot, I do not know.'" For me, this is so much of what the immigrant experience was about at the turn of the last century. It defined the lives they lead, the dreams they pursued, and the contributions they made to America.

As this new production of *Rags* is about to make its debut, I hope we have found the story Joe set out to write when he put that first piece of paper in his typewriter. It's been an honor to work on this script and to rediscover Joe's initial inspiration. After all, as Joe was known to say, “In the beginning, there's always the story.”