

# 'Parade' making regional debut at JCC CenterStage

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JCC CenterStage's production of *Parade* is a regional premiere, even though the musical made its Broadway debut in 1998.

There are a few reasons why, says Ralph Meranto, artistic director of CenterStage at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Rochester in Brighton.

"*Parade* is epic in scale," said Meranto, who is also directing the show. "It is such a powerful play because it tells such a powerful story."

It's also a bit darker than your average musical, has challenging music and a big cast, he says.

*Parade* is the true tale of the 1913 trial of Jewish factory manager Leo Frank. Frank, a native New Yorker and Cornell graduate, was accused and convicted of raping and murdering 13-year-old Mary Phagan in Atlanta.

Frank's trial captivated the nation and was dramatically played out in the media and political sphere. When the governor of Georgia commuted Frank's death sentence to life in prison, Frank was kidnapped by an irate lynching party and hung in Marietta, Ga.

The events surrounding the trial and murder of Frank led to the revival of the Klu Klux Klan and the birth of The Anti-Defamation League. In March 1986, the state of Georgia pardoned Frank posthumously.

"Although *Parade* is historical, it has contemporary themes like racial profiling, media bias, and the death penalty that are very relevant and timely today," says Meranto, who has wanted to stage the musical for several years. "This seemed like the right time, and the JCC is the right place."

With a 35-member cast, *Parade* (with a Tony Award-winning score by Jason Robert Brown, who studied at Eastman School of Music) marks the largest cast in JCC CenterStage's 35-year history. It is brimming with local and regional talent, many of whom are professionals.

"There are so many amazingly talented people involved," Meranto says. "There are people playing minor roles who work professionally just because they want to be a part of such an epic, important piece."

When **Janine Mercandetti**, of Fairport heard about auditions for *Parade*, she was immediately intrigued.

**Mercandetti**, who had just returned from working in Los Angeles professionally, was cast as Leo Frank's steadfastly loyal wife, Lucille Frank.

"The fact that *Parade* is a true story pulls at your heart strings," says **Mercandetti**, who is making her debut with CenterStage. "It takes the show to a whole different level because you know that people actually lived through it."

Matt Tappon, 37, of Irondequoit plays Leo Frank. He has performed with CenterStage previously, as well as with Blackfriars and Geva. Tappon is also the house principal at Churchville Chili Middle School.

"It's exciting to be a part of the show," Tappon says. "The music is so deep, the history of the story is powerful, and the magnitude of the cast is incredible."