

"From the Chair"

Column by Honey Kessler Amado

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I took my nine-year-old daughter, Gabrielle, to see *Ragtime* some weeks ago. Someone asked me at intermission whether it had a happy ending. The play, quite true to E.L. Doctorow's classic book by the same name, explores the relationships at the turn of the twentieth century between America's established white, Anglo-Saxon population, the Black community, and the immigrant communities from various parts of Europe. A Black man's late model car is desecrated by a group of white firemen who are offended to see a successful Black man. The man, Coalhouse Walker, Jr., is ignored by the police and finds access to the courts too costly. All he wants is his car restored; it had become a metaphor for his dignity. Ultimately, radicalized by the police assault on his fiancée, he and others, Black and white, form an armed resistance group. In the end, his car is restored, and he offers to surrender in exchange for the free passage of his followers, whom he exhorts to "go out and tell our story to your daughters and your sons. Make them hear you." Upon surrender, he is shot dead by the police. So, does it have a happy ending? I answered that *Ragtime* is the story of modern America, so the question is, does America have a happy ending? Will we live happily ever after?

America is a great experiment in democracy and in the coexistence between diverse cultures, histories, and value systems. Our Constitution is a contract between us and the government. We have seen breaches within the system. Slavery was one such breach. The internment of Americans of Japanese descent and Japanese immigrants during World War II was another such breach. Claiming police power to protect the populace cannot mask that our government proceeded against an *identifiable* group of our citizens out of fear, anger, and racism. (Recall that Americans of German descent and German immigrants suffered no such humiliation and breach of rights.) The Constitution is singed by such modern indignities as racial profiling. And people of good will throughout the country were reviled by the horrific murders of James Byrd, Jr. simply for being black, of Matthew Shepard simply for being gay, and of Joseph Ileto simply for being Filipino, and at the attack on the North Valley Jewish Community Center simply because it was Jewish.

But, still, we live in extraordinary times, where those committed to the Constitution and to the success of this experiment called America can feel excited and take heart that we are struggling toward success. We have recently seen a jury hold Aryan Nation, a white supremacy group, accountable for its words of hate and liable for its attack on a woman and her son. We have seen a judge excoriate the government for its treatment of Wen Ho Lee, the Chinese scientist accused of spying, whose treatment during the investigation seems to have been motivated by the fact that he is Chinese. We have seen Johnny Spain released from prison after two decades, whose trial was tainted by his unwarranted shackling and which shackling had been imposed, not because he was some dangerous accused murderer, but because he was a *Black* accused murdered. In each instance, it was an attorney who argued for accountability and justice; in each instance the principles in our Constitution finally prevailed.

We in the judicial system are the third branch of government – and the success of the American experiment hinges in large part on how we attorneys and judges execute our roles. We set the standard. When we demand justice from the government and from the people, we are leading the march forward toward greater realization of our Constitution and the country envisioned by our Founding Fathers. When we demand justice for all peoples – we are, in essence, telling the story of the American potential to our daughters and our sons and creating the ending.

Your thoughts, ideas, and concerns regarding this magazine are welcome. You can reach me through the Los Angeles Lawyer magazine offices (213/896-6503) or at my e-mail HoneyAmado2@gmail.com.

I hope Los Angeles Lawyer is and continues to be a valuable tool to you in executing your duties as one able and entrusted to advocate in our government of law.

Honey Kessler Amado's professional website is archived and may be accessed at AmadoLaw.com.