

“Ellis Island/the American Dream” follows the lives of immigrants travelling to the United States during the year 1907. We begin in Naples, Italy, Hamburg, Germany and Queenstown, Ireland simultaneously. People from all over Europe are purchasing “one-way tickets” to the “land o’ the free” – America. The immigrants board their respective ships...the “Bel Italia”, the “Deutschland” and the “King James”. They are then faced with a terrible storm and “Neptune Furies”. “Don’t turn back! Keep on course! This North Atlantic storm will put us to the test!”

With the end of the storm comes the first sighting of “Ellis Island” and the prayer, “Island of Hope”. “Island of hope, save me from a life of fear. Take me in now that I’m here. Give me a new beginning and we’ll both be winning, you’ll see.” The immigrants pin on their landing tags and board the ferries. Meanwhile, the Ellis Island staff is preparing for another busy day. The inspections begin with “Nine AM to Seven PM”. “The River never stops till it gets to the sea, a never-ending stream of humanity!” The immigrants plead, “Take a chance on me! If you send me back, a broken soul is what I’ll be!” Sammy Tate, the crooked baggage handler, expounds his philosophy...“with a little bit of smarts, a man can get ahead; ‘long as you’re American, born and bred!”

After Intermission, Act II opens with Commissioner Watchorn taking photos of immigrants for posterity... “A Picture’s Worth Thousands Words!” Then, it’s back to the inspections, with many immigrants being sent to detention for further examinations or to wait for their relatives. Commissioner Watchorn tells Miss Anderson, a reformer, that “You Can’t Change the World,” when she makes suggestions for improvements at Ellis Island. The immigrants left in detention are suffering from homesickness until Nicolai, the Russian anarchist, reminds them of the pogroms and life “under the boot of the Tsar.” Sylvia Bonet, a woman of color from Guadeloupe, also longs for her Island home after suffering indignities at the hands of the authorities in her song, “Another Island”.

Inspector Winston, meanwhile, has set up a trap for the unscrupulous Sammy Tate, who has been stealing money from the baggage of the unsuspecting “greenhorns”. With the help of Miss Buckley and Inspector Washington the criminal is caught in the act of exchanging Italian lire for dollars.

In the hospital, Jutka Haraszti is given the bad news that her daughter, Ildiko, who has scarlet fever, might not make it through the night. She sings of the “End of a Dream”. “No new beginning for us, no happy endings for us. To America, she’s one of many, to a mother, she’s all I have. They won’t miss her in this land of plenty. To America...what’s one more child?”

In an empty room, Mrs. Elsworth and Brigitte Anderson have set up a private audition for the ballerina, Ludmilla, with Mr. Gorky of the Metropolitan Opera Ballet. The bossy Mrs. MacArthur discovers them and reminds them of “A Woman’s Place”.

At the Special Inquiry hearings Nicolai Goldovsky and some of the immigrants express their disappointment with the “American Dream”. “So, this it? I’ve traveled half way across the world, I’ve gone to extremes. ‘Cause I believed in a vision I had in my mind of a land that I heard of where life could be kind to a man with the will to succeed with the sweat of his brow! Where he didn’t have to bow to no one or nothing, unless he chose to of his own free will!”

In the final moments of the play, we learn who is accepted and who is rejected. The immigrants sing “Let us belong! We’ll make you strong!” Give us the American Dream! It’s not too late, we’ll carry our weight! Give us the American Dream!”