

Unsinkable? Unthinkable!

by Jon Lipsky

a twenty-minute play produced in conjunction with the showing
of the Omnimax movie, Titanica

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by Jon Lipsky

A Play about The Titanic
For Boston's Science Museum

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Introduction

Crab

(singing) Come on along, come on along, to Alexander's Rag Time Band.
Come on along, come on along.....

Oh, human beings! My favorite species! You must have come to see me in the movie. I'm playing the third crab from the left on the first class promenade.
--the one with the colorful claws.

They asked me to be in the movie because I know more about the Titanic than any creature alive. They may have picked over the facts, but I've picked over the real thing.

Ask me anything about the Titanic. Anything. The name of John Jacob Astor's dog? Kitty. The Christian name of the Unsinkable Molly Brown? Margaret. Or my favorite: which of the Titanic's four smoke stacks was fake? The fourth one. The designers made a fake to make the ship look more impressive.

Ah, vanity, vanity.

But that is why we crabs are just as obsessed with the Titanic as you are. We consider it a laboratory for the study of the human mind.

After all, this is not just any old hulk. The name Titanic has become synonymous with fate's fickle hand. "Moving the deck chairs around the Titanic" has become an expression of the ultimate in absurdity. This shipwreck has become a legend.

sings

Oh they built the ship Titanic
For to sail the ocean blue
And they thought they had a ship
That the water couldn't get through
It was on its maiden trip
when an iceberg hit that ship

It was sad when that great ship went down.

The point is, even our kids know the story.

MAN ON THE BRIDGE

(bell) April 14, 1912. Fred Fleet is up in the crow's nest.

It was a crystal clear night in the North Atlantic. Not a moon in the sky. Not a swell on the sea. Not a breath of wind. Only a billion eyes of God twinkling from the dome of heaven.

I have my eagle eyes peeled for icebergs. I know there might be icebergs, because the water temperature has dropped and numerous reports have come in over the Marconi sighting ice in the area.

(Crab)

Unfortunately, not all the reports have gotten through to Captain Smith.

The new technology of radio has not caught up with practices at sea. Jack Phillips, the wireless operator, knows nothing of navigation and has the same status on board as a bellboy or a steward. On this night, he is busy, *I am busy*, sending messages from the passengers, *messages from the passengers*, about the arrival, *about their arrival*.

A nearby ship breaks in over the wireless: "Say old man, we are stopped and surrounded by ice." Phillips replies: "Shut up! Shut up! I am busy working Cape Race." What was the important message he was sending to Cape Race? "Your Aunt and her entourage docking at 14:00 hours. Meet with carriages."

If Phillips had been capable of putting all the messages from other ships together, he could have told the Captain that dead ahead of them was a huge impenetrable ice flow.

(bell) 11:30 pm. Fred Fleet in the crow's nest. I could feel the hum of the Titanic's three giant turbines, propelling the ship forward full speed ahead. We are going full speed ahead despite the ice warnings, because the night is clear and the ship is sound.

My company, the White Star Line, done everything for safety's sake. Constructed out of the toughest steel plates, with 16 watertight bulkheads rising

ten feet above the waterline. This ship is virtually unsinkable.

(Crab)

Well, actually not. If they had wanted to make an “unsinkable” ship, they probably could’ve done it. Fifty years earlier they had designed a boat that was sure to float.

(Northeast Accent)

She was called the Great Eastern and she had a double hull. It was like a ship inside a ship. And she had watertight bulkheads not ten feet, but thirty feet above the waterline.

(Crab)

Unfortunately, the Great Eastern was described by one and all as a “floating tea kettle.” She was a clunker. Unacceptable.

(bell) This was the age of steam. The Atlantic crossing had been cut down to almost a week, and the race was on for domination of the lucrative passenger trade. Engineers had to strike a balance between speed, beauty, cost, and safety. The Germans were building boats for speed. The White Star Line opted for safety and luxury. But still, double hulls were expensive and cut into the time of the crossing. And watertight compartments thirty feet high would have made it just impossible to have a grand staircase amidship from which the Astors, and the Wideners, and the Strausses might make their entrances.

And making an entrance was what crossing the Atlantic was all about for some people, and certain compromises in safety were inevitable. The engineers were satisfied that she was sea-worthy, because they had built in back-up safety systems. But as far as the general public was concerned, it was the appearance of safety that made her seem unsinkable.

She had electric door to seal the watertight bulkheads, no matter that only half were connected to the electric circuit, and a French cafe with real French waiters. How could anything that looked so permanent, be anything but... Ah, humans, so cute.

sing

“When you wish upon a star, makes no difference who you are...”

The fact is, passengers and engineers alike knew there were risks involved with any transatlantic crossing. But the technology had proven sound so far, and the risks were considered necessary and acceptable.

sing

“When you wish upon a star, your dreams come...”

(bell) (as Fred) If only there had been a moon, or a swell or a wind to make the ice more visible with flecks of foam. But no, I only spotted the looming shape when I saw a few stars wink out behind it.

“Iceberg Dead Ahead” I cried, “Hard Aport”, “Full Speed Astern”

If only I had seen nothing at all. We might have hit the iceberg dead on and damaged only the first two compartments and not the five on the side. With only two compartments damaged, the Titanic would have stayed afloat.

But nooo.....Rrrrrrrrrriipp.

That iceberg opened up a gash the size of a football field. Not by cutting the hull of the ship, but by bending it. Running up against the ice below the waterline, the Titanic’s iron plates buckled under the pressure, popping rivet after rivet.

Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop.

It was like a wall of water coming at you.

(Crab)

But wasn’t the Titanic built of the finest steel? Not really. Again the technology had run ahead of itself. Unknown to the shipbuilders, the steel they used had too much sulfur in it. This made it brittle. If better steel had been used, the hull of the ship might have bent more, but not broken, or it might have even caused the ship to bounce off the iceberg.

But it was not meant to be. The builders were as sure of their design as they were sure that the sun would never set on the British Empire: (singing) Rule Britannia, Britannia rules the waves.

(bell) As the iceberg struck, Thomas Andrews of Belfast, the designer of the

Titanic, was in his stateroom working on small improvements to this, his ultimate triumph. Captain Smith asked him to go below and assess the damage. He took one look around, made a few quick calculations and said, "We have an hour, maybe an hour and a half." We can only imagine what he must have been thinking as he felt his life's work sinking out from under him.

When he was last seen, Thomas Andrews was standing alone in his stateroom with his lifebelt off staring vacantly at a picture of the harbor in Plymouth, England.

singing

Oh, they set the lifeboats out
On a dark and dreary sea,
And the band struck up with
Nearer My God To Thee...

(Crab)

Actually, they probably didn't play "Nearer My God To Thee." That was a funeral hymn and the band was trying to keep up everyone's spirits. What they mostly played was ragtime.

sing

Come on along, come on along, to Alexander's Ragtime Band....

And this is the other thing I like about humans. While you're silly and you're vain, you're also capable of some nobility. The band played to the very end... and all were lost. The stokers in the main boiler room kept the electric lights burning to the very end... and all were lost. The bellboys kept circulating through the ship to make sure everyone had a lifebelt on... and all were lost.

And Mrs. Ida Strauss, when asked to board a lifeboat without her husband replied, "No. As we have lived, so shall we die. Together."

And when it was suggested to her husband that no one would object to him joining his wife in the lifeboat because of his age, he replied: "No, I do not wish any distinction bestowed upon me not granted to others."

Singing

Would we like heroes and cowards then
If we were there when that ship went down
Would we like heroes and cowards then

Save ourselves or nobly drown.

(bell) (as Fred) Women and children first! That was the cry! But it was all confusion. The Titanic was bigger than the Empire State Building. In the dark, you couldn't tell from one end to the other what was going on. If there were no women around, some men jumped in and grabbed a seat.

BRUCE ISMAY STORY

He did not look back. He did not look back.

As the Titanic broke up, one man sat in the stern of a lifeboat and did not look back. This was Bruce Ismay, general manager and part-owner of the White Star Line. We only wonder what was going through his mind.

A year earlier, he had been told directly of a recommendation to add more lifeboats but turned it down. He was under no obligation. He had more lifeboats than the law required. No matter that the regulations were obsolete, written ten years earlier for ships a quarter the size of the Titanic.

He did not look back. He did not look back.

If anyone was responsible for the Marconi operators, the quality of the steel, the safety of the ship, he was it. And yet, here he was, unlike the Captain, unlike most of the crew, saving his own skin while the cries of the drowning were heard all around him.

Many of the lifeboats, including Ismay's, left only partly-filled. Many of the lifeboats, including Ismay's, never turned to pick up survivors from the water. The lifeboats set out with over four hundred seats empty. At the last minute, on the sinking ship, a door flew open and hundreds of third class passengers swarmed onto the deck only to be swept into the icy water.

He did not look back. He did not look back. Was he heart-broken, grief-stricken, guilt ridden...? Or was he paralyzed by the notion that even the best laid plans of mice and men...

singing

Deep Blue Sea Willy, deep blue sea

Deep Blue Sea Willy, deep blue sea
Deep Blue Sea Willy, deep blue sea
It was Willy what got drowned in the deep blue sea

But that was long ago, right? That couldn't happen now, right? Ahh, humans. I can always count on you to repeat yourselves.

(bell) It was January 28, 1987, in another part of the ocean a tragic vehicle fell from the sky with seven human beings aboard, all dead.

The Challenger's fate was also sealed by ice, and a trust in risky technology. You humans all thought the Challenger was safe. Why President Reagan said so publicly. And NASA would never send a public school teacher into space if they didn't think the shuttle was reliable. You all knew there were risks, but as with the Titanic, engineers and passengers alike considered the risks necessary and acceptable.

There were warnings. An unusual cold snap in Florida would make the o-rings inside the booster engine frigid and rigid. But the managers at the Marshall Space Flight Center had gotten used to minor o-ring problems in successful launches, and the engineers were relying on the back-up systems they had built into the engines. And no one could have predicted the violent winds that hit the Challenger a minute into the launch.

"This is mission control...mission control. We have no down link. No down link. Obviously a major malfunction. Obviously a major malfunction." Obviously.

Even the best laid plans of mice and men....

This sort of thing has happened since the dawn of time. The Hindenburg, (bell after each one), Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, Bo-Pal, the tanker Valdez. Will you humans never learn?

Oh, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, if only you had been in charge, you wouldn't let all these things happen. Vanity, vanity. Before you get all smug about this, you should look to your own Chevrolet. Why there are risks you take every day when you drive in your Honda Civic. And the engineers who built your Toyota Corolla were no more callous or negligent than the builders of the Titanic or the Challenger.

The fact is that neither ship nor shuttle nor your family car was built with adequate means of escape in a catastrophe, and back up systems fail when too many things go wrong. When was the last time you had your emergency brake tested, or checked the tread of your tires? These are the risks you take for granted living in modern times.

Let me tell you one last story.

Once, long ago, in ancient Greece, there was a man named Daedalus, who built the labyrinth at Crete. Later, he was imprisoned in his own labyrinth and escaped by the use of a great new invention: mechanical wings. The golden wings were glued together with wax. His son, Icarus, despite his father's warnings, was so enamored of Daedalus's new invention, that he forgot his father's warnings and flew too close to the sun. And the wax melted. And the golden wings shredded. And the father watched helplessly as his boy fell to his death into the wine-dark sea.

singing

Lower him down on a golden chain

Lower him down on a golden chain

Lower him down on a golden chain

Ah, but here's the irony of it all. If Daedalus had not invented his golden wings, he and his boy would have remained imprisoned forever in the caves of his own labyrinth.

singing

It was Willy what got drowned in the deep blue sea.

The End

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