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Entertainment

Theatre Review: 'Titanic' is unsinkable at the Warner Theatre

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By JEAN SANDS
and JACK SHEEDY

What a spectacular! What a show! What a cast!

Seventy six actors perform on Torrington's Warner Theatre stage on a fantastic set and are rewarded with explosive applause from the audience. And at the end, the curtain calls seem to last forever.

The musical "Titanic" is not at all like that dreadful 1997 movie that somehow garnered every major Oscar except the ones that count — namely the ones that honor acting and storytelling. This version of "Titanic" fills those gaps. The acting is wonderful, the singers terrific and the soloists often superb.

"Titanic" the musical first opened in 1997, at New York's Lunt-Fontanne Theatre, where it ran for 804 performances and 27 previews, closing on March 21, 1999. "Titanic" won five Tony Awards in 1997, including Best Musical.

Playwright Maury Yeston was moved to write from the perspective of the great diversity of the R.M.S. Titanic's passengers and crew, from the very rich to the desperately poor. Whether in first class like John Jacob Aster (played at the Warner by Steve Sorriero), second class like Edgar and Alice Beane (Chuck Stango and Priscilla Squiers) or third class like Jim Farrell (Tyson Chamberlain), passengers on that ill-fated maiden voyage bound from Southampton, England, to New York 100 years ago had big dreams. More than 1,500 of those dreams died within three hours of a collision with an iceberg on April 15, 1912, sending the pride of the White Star Line to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean.

Ironically, it is the overreaching of a dream that leads to the ship's demise, according to the story and book by Peter Stone. J. Bruce Ismay (Walter Cramer), director of the White Star Line, demands that Captain E. J. Smith (Bob Lussier) increase speed from 19 to 23 knots so that the world will know that the Titanic can cross the Atlantic in six days. Boiler room stoker Frederick Barrett (Damon Branco) thinks such speed is dangerous for a new ship, but he complies and in his rich tenor sings "Barrett's Song."

Oblivious, the first class passengers celebrate their grand deeds symbolized by the great ship itself and celebrated in the song "What a Remarkable Age This Is."

In second class, Edgar Beane is content with his life, telling his upwardly hopeful wife, Alice, that "They want us right here where we are." He is satisfied with his market on the corner, not a corner on the market.

In third class, Kate McGowan (Janette Ireland) sings her dream of being a "Lady's Maid," believing that in America, "the streets are paved with gold."

But as the ship's fate becomes clear, the finger-pointing begins and the powerful voices of Cramer, Lussier, and Patrick Hearn (as First Officer William Murdoch) blend in singing "The Blame."

In a hopeless, helpless, final act, ship designer Thomas Andrews (Dan Porri) makes penciled changes to the ship's blueprints to fix the problem as he sings "Mr. Andrews' Vision."

It's tempting to say that the 76 actors comprise an ensemble cast, but there is one major character that puts them all in a relative shadow: the majestic R.M.S. Titanic itself. Director Rick Doyle spared no effort to make it the main character in the show and painted its likeness on a full-stage scrim as it sat docked in Southampton. The ship's bridge, the grand salon, the corridors, the stairways and the radio room are impressively big, and realistic.

"When Broadway did 'Titanic,' you never really saw the boat," Doyle said after the Feb. 4 matinee. "It was either too close or too far away. The play is really about everyone's relationship with this boat. I wanted to get a sense of 'It,' of the largest moving object in the world." And that he did. His imaginative set prompted oohs and ahs from the nearly full house.

The actors were incredibly good and they made the audience believe the Titanic was sinking right before their eyes. The authenticity was no accident. Each actor portrayed a person who had really lived, and they took time to study their lives, Doyle said. "I've never seen a cast so locked in to a show."

Highlight moments begin when the ship leaves port, the passengers waving goodbye and the audience, already knowing their fate, wiping tears from their eyes. The actors playing the main characters have such astonishing voices it makes one wonder why they aren't world famous. Hearn's soaring tenor voice, Ireland's lilting brogue and the plaintive duet "Still" by Michael Santoro as Isidor Straus and Lucia M. Dressel as his wife Ida are sweetly heartbreaking.

The large cast made choreographing dance numbers a challenge, but veteran choreographer Ronald K. Alexander was more than up to the task. The dances were exciting and entertaining and brought non-stop rounds of applause.

Stephen Spignesi, a New York Times bestselling author of 56 books, including the just-released "The Titanic for Dummies," was in the audience. The longtime Titanic aficionado said of the show, "I sobbed my heart out." He praised the singing and the sets and said, "Those songs destroyed me. The anthem 'Godspeed Titanic' — three times they reprise it — kills me, kills me every time I hear it."

This latest spectacular at the Warner is an emotional and entertaining production but not entirely watertight. Although conductor TJ Thompson and concertmaster Michelle Chang led talented musicians, the 20-piece orchestra often — excuse the term — drowned out the singers. Many fine lyrics were unfortunately cast adrift. But all in all, "Titanic" is an unsinkable production.

"Titanic" continues Friday and Saturday evenings with 8 p.m. performances. For tickets, call the Warner Theatre box office at (860) 489-7180 or order online at www.warnertheatre.org.

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