

Murder on the Titanic

Dramaturg's Note

Chicago theatre is experiencing something of a *Titanic* renaissance this spring, with the 1997 musical by Maury Yeston and Peter Stone in production at the Marriot Theatre in Lincolnshire and the comedic *Titanique* (inspired by the James Cameron film and Céline Dion's iconic "My Heart Will Go On") at Water Tower Place. Fictional adaptations of the *Titanic* sinking tend to focus on individual and collective tragedy, framing the doomed April 1912 voyage as the consequence of hubris on the part of reckless capitalists who sacrificed safety precautions in favor of speed and luxury. Because passengers held clearly-defined first-class, second-class, or third-class tickets, *Titanic* adaptations often depict a mixture of historical figures and fictional characters through the lens of social class.

This opera by Danish composer Matias Vestergård and his co-librettist Lea Marie Løppenthin takes a somewhat different approach, adding an "Artist" class and engaging with the murder mystery genre. The opera develops its cast of characters by drawing on both historical and fictional sources, but without a clear and necessary relationship to the *Titanic* passenger registry. Aside from the ghost of Edgar Allan Poe and Domenica Mustafà (who died just a few weeks before *Titanic* sailed), these characters were alive in 1912 and could have been on the ship. But only a few were directly affected. William Howard Taft was president of the United States at the time and lost a close friend who was aboard; he supported changes in maritime law that resulted from the *Titanic* sinking, notably signing the Radio Act of 1912 to regulate telegraph communications. Lady Grantham and other characters inspired by *Downton Abbey* learned of the *Titanic* disaster in the first episode of that television series. While Virginia Woolf developed a particular interest in the *Titanic*, this does not appear to be the case for the other modernist writers on board this version of the ship, Anna Akhmatova and T.S. Eliot. However, Akhmatova did write about her affinity for Eliot and acknowledged his influence on her own work. Middle-class lawyer Atticus Finch (from Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*) is presented as a threat to the upper class, while other members of the middle class participate in a service economy with roles similar to the lower class waitstaff.

Though Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot would fit in with this group, the investigative work is left to a more inexperienced and reluctant amateur detective. Vestergård and Løppenthin challenge the conventions of the murder mystery genre in other ways, notably refusing to allow the moral satisfaction of seeing the guilty party punished. This moral complexity extends across themes and events. Several characters demonstrate nonchalant racism and transphobia as part of their efforts to connect with others and the world. An impromptu funeral combines with a scheduled anniversary celebration, leading to further awkward interactions. Ultimately, this production invites us to reflect on climate collapse as the ill-fated characters vow to "face Apocalypse face-first" after marveling at the beauty of the universe.

--Daniel Smith