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Dramaturging *Murder on the Titanic*:
Americana and Palimpsestuous Pastiche in a Danish Opera

In May 2025, Matias Vestergård's opera *Murder on the Titanic* had its U.S. premiere at Chicago's Windy City Playhouse, produced by North Park University and directed by my long-term collaborator George Cederquist. *Murder on the Titanic* offers a European perspective on Americana, reproducing narratives about class and capitalism that are typical of *Titanic* adaptations, while adding a murder mystery and commentary on climate crisis. As the dramaturg for this production, I was primarily tasked with making sense of its approach to speculative historical fiction. While none of the characters in this opera actually sailed on the Titanic, most were alive in April 1912. Vestergård and co-librettist Lea Marie Løppenthin have created a *Titanic* fever-dream, featuring characters from history and fiction including poets Anna Akhmatova and T.S. Eliot; British aristocrats inspired by *Downton Abbey*; and the castrato singer Domenico Mustafá. The characters focus on solving a murder while mostly ignoring the larger crisis of the sinking ship until it is too late.

For this presentation, I intended to focus on the opera's American characters: President William Howard Taft and his wife (named Rebecca here, though she was really named Nellie); Atticus Finch (from Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*) and his wife Louise, along with his client Leo; Lady Katherine Grantham (inspired by *Downton Abbey*);

and the Ghost of Edgar Allan Poe. How does a Danish perspective on Americana come across in a production in Chicago for an American audience? How can a dramaturg help to contextualize this for a production team and audiences?

In reflecting on my role as dramaturg for this production, I find it helpful to invoke Theresa Lang's framing of the mindset and skillset, with the dramaturg engaging in acts of curation.¹ For me this project raises a number of interesting questions that fall into different categories:

1) Long-term and short-term collaboration. I have worked with George Cederquist on 9 productions, beginning in 2005 with *Catch-22* at Steep Theatre and including productions of *Amadeus* and *Sweeney Todd* at Northwestern University. I had previously worked with no one else on this production team.

2) Long-distance collaboration: all design and production meetings took place via Google Meet or Microsoft Teams. I attended one of these from Seattle and the rest from Milledgeville, Georgia. Had I been at home in Michigan, I would have planned visits to Chicago to attend rehearsals or at least to see one of the performances. As it worked out, I was unable to attend the show.

3) Curation of materials: I created three slide decks during the design process to help with decision-making and script analysis. The first slide deck primarily presented the characters, divided into class categories as shown in the libretto. The second explored the

¹ Theresa Lang, *Essential Dramaturgy: The Mindset and Skillset*. London and New York: Focal Press, 2017. Passim.

murder mystery genre. A third offered suggestions for presenting lyrics for the audience to sing along with the final lines of the score. Further down the line, I curated program materials including a standard dramaturg's note and a timeline of the various characters' lives.

Among Other Titanic Adaptations

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. Two prominent American adaptations appeared in 1997: James Cameron's film won 11 Academy Awards, and the musical by Maury Yeston and Peter Stone won five Tony Awards. (I just learned that James Cameron is Canadian, but it was still a Hollywood blockbuster.) Both of these versions depict characters who are immigrating to the United States, presenting a mythology of a better life in America whether through increased prosperity or greater freedom. This is most explicit in the Yeston and Stone musical, which features a song titled "Lady's Maid" that repeats the line "In America, the streets are paved with gold" as characters express their various hopes for finding success.

Vestergård and 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. British and American are the two most-represented nationalities, with the libretto identifying 9 characters as British and 7 as American.² (T.S. Eliot is categorized as British here, but was born in the U.S., so we might consider revising that tally to 8 and 8 or 8.5 and 7.5.) 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 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.

² Matias Vestergård and Lea Løppenthin, *[Murder on the] Titanic* libretto. Manuscript. 2019. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

Vestergård and Løppenthin challenge the conventions of the murder mystery genre in other ways, offering a remarkably unsatisfying motive for the murder (spoiler alert): the Ghost of Edgar Allen Poe convinced Anna Akhmatova to kill Atticus Finch because she was a true artist and “the perfect vessel for [his] last great mystery” (24). The opera also notably refuses 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.

Americana

The libretto engages with Americana primarily through the character of President Taft, who cites the western folk song “Home on the Range” at his first appearance:

PRESIDENT TAFT:

We’re off to New York!
Home sweet Home
where the buffalo roam
only that’s further West, of course... (*Murder on the Titanic* Libretto p. 4)

Based on Brewster Higley’s poem “My Western Home,” set to music by Daniel E. Kelley, “Home on the Range” engages with the ecological themes of *Murder on the Titanic* that Cederquist identified as central to the production concept. (“Oh, Give me a home where the buffalo roam, where the deer and the antelope play...”) Taft and his wife Helen were

both born in Cincinnati, Ohio, but the opera associates them with the west and the south,
later expanding on the citation of “Home on the Range”

PRESIDENT and 1st LADY TAFT

when we are back home
we will retire with our hearts at peace
knowing we have done everything we can
for this country of ours
oh give me a home
where the buffalo roam! (13)

The connection with the American west would be more appropriate for Taft’s erstwhile
running mate and later opponent Theodore Roosevelt.

Taft is presented as a pompous buffoon, offering a crass assessment of the
celebration for the castrato singer Mustafá, referring to him as “this Italian guy without
balls” (12). He later criticizes explorer Robert Conrad:

You remind me of that Atticus Finch
always trying to save some scum from justice
that man hates the South
But he was born and bred there
in the heart of Alabama
most ungrateful (13)

Rebecca Taft responds to this by suggesting that they invite Atticus to their home in Virginia
for pie.

Design and Dramaturgy

As I mentioned earlier, my main interventions as dramaturg occurred during the design process. Initially, I gathered historical, literary, and visual research on characters because the collection of various figures made character research the easiest way into this world for me. This research ended up being more useful than other avenues I explored. We talked about a color palette informed by aesthetics of the murder mystery genre—particularly Scandinavian Noir, Arctic Noir, or Nordic Noir. But these considerations were outweighed by the production’s focus on the Anthropocene: costumes especially drew more on repurposed materials that might currently be found as part of garbage islands in the ocean. (I recognize that the major “Great Pacific Garbage Patch” is in the Pacific Ocean, which is not where the Titanic sailed. But this feels like it falls within the opera’s spirit of pastiche to me.) One design meeting inspired specific research about Joseph Conrad and about Géricault’s painting “The Raft of the Medusa.” I was also asked to think about possibilities for audiences singing along with the opera’s final lines, which fall into the musical vocabulary of a religious hymn: “Yes, we shall face apocalypse face-first.” I pulled research images for sing-along references from eighteenth-century French fairground theatre, the musical *Pippin*, and the Scottish company 7:84. None of these were really right, and the sing-along idea did not make it into the production.

Curation for the audience

I wrote a standard dramaturg’s note for the program, situating this opera among other theatre and film adaptations of *Titanic* history, which was oddly salient in Chicago in spring 2025 with a productions of the Yeston musical and the Céline Dion jukebox musical *Titanique* both running around the same time as the May time slot for the opera. I was also

asked to develop a timeline of the characters to be printed in the program, indicating the sinking of the Titanic in 1912 and how long the historical and literary figures lived afterward (as well as the two who died before).

I didn't think much about production history. Vestergard was commissioned to write this opera for the Royal Danish Academy of Music as a showcase piece for singers studying there. Two different casts performed the opera in Copenhagen in 2019. Vestergard wrote the following program notes:

I always wanted to write a big ensemble opera for the yearly opera productions at RDAM - the Royal Danish Academy of Music, and thought a murder mystery in the style of Agatha Christie would be the perfect subject. I asked the writer Lea Marie Løppenthin if she would be interested in writing the libretto, and fortunately, she agreed, providing me with the funniest libretto I have ever come across.

Setting the story on the Titanic meant that we could solve the dramaturgical problems of a detective opera - when the story starts to lose steam, we just make it about a shipwreck instead! It also meant that we could balance the comical absurdity of the first act with the human tragedy of the second. We decided to populate the ship with a mixture of historical and fictional characters with very different backgrounds. I have tried to distinguish the characters with the music too - ethereal music for the poets, earthy music for the Southerners, bel canto for the old

opera singer, and so on. Along the way, there are little musical homages to Sciarrino, Strauss, Gudmundsen- Holmgreen, folk music, and above all, Mozart.³

The Chicago premiere happened because Cederquist saw potential in making connections with the Scandinavian heritage of North Park University, which was founded by Swedish immigrants and is affiliated with the Evangelical Covenant Church. The Danish consulate got on board and funded a residency with Vestergard, who offered dynamic pre-show conversations. The title of the opera was changed from *Titanic* to *Murder on the Titanic* – partly to distinguish from the Yeston musical in the U.S. but also I suspect because of the resurgence of Sophie-Ellis Bextor’s song “Murder on the Dancefloor” due to its use in the 2023 film *Saltburn*.

Though I was unable to attend the production, I am told it was a rousing success. However, administrators at North Park gently suggested to George that he should choose a “normal” musical for 2026. He decided on *Jesus Christ Superstar*. At a university affiliated with the Evangelical Covenant Church. Which I’m also dramaturging.

³ <https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/81581/Murder-on-the-Titanic--Matias-Vesterg%C3%A5rd/> Last accessed 1 March 2026.