

Echoes From the Titanic

A 1-act based on the
1912 *Titanic* Disaster Senate Hearings

Dramatized by Pat Cook

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Echoes From the Titanic

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*Dedicated to those who lost their lives on that tragic night,
and to those who survived to tell the story.*

*The playwright,
Pat Cook*

STORY OF THE PLAY

What really happened on board the *Titanic* when it struck an iceberg and sank in the North Atlantic? The survivors, both passengers and crew, tell you in their own words in this adaptation of the 1912 Senate hearings into the disaster, begun literally one day after they arrived from their fateful trip. The re-enacted testimony gives witness to the events surrounding the rush to the lifeboats and rescue of the survivors. As they testify one by one, pieces fall into place and we begin to see the full story. A gripping tale of honor, valor, sacrifice and suffering which makes us ask ourselves, "How would we act under such horrific circumstances?"

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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A HISTORICAL NOTE

Even before the survivors had landed in New York on April 18, 1912, Senator William Alden Smith had already set up a committee to investigate the tragedy. And on the very next day, the hearings began at the Waldorf Astoria, the hotel owned by John Jacob Astor, one of those who perished in the disaster.

The newspapers had literally run wild with misleading and sometimes totally false stories after the sinking of the *Titanic* — some even stating that no one was lost! And foremost on their list of scapegoats was White Star Lines Managing Director, J. Bruce Ismay, who had, controversially, managed to get into one of the lifeboats. He was savaged in print even before he had arrived with the other survivors to tell his story. Yet two witnesses stated at the hearings that Ismay had been ordered into the boat by the officer in charge. Ismay resigned as managing director a year later and lived out the rest of his life, a virtual recluse.

The third-class passengers, now believed to have been forgotten or locked below during the catastrophe, gave testimony that makes little mention of that aspect. There were only three “steerage” passengers who testified, and all stated they were shown up to the deck. Two of them did mention “gates being shut,” but both further stated that they believed all below had a chance to get out. But, again that was only three testimonies. It should also be stated that, while third class suffered the highest rate of casualties, even more men of the *Titanic's* crew lost their lives that night.

Sometimes it seems the hardest thing to nail down is an absolute fact. Some of the passengers' later reports would prove false with the passage of time. In one of the many, quickly published books on the sinking of the great ship in 1912, one proclaims that he saw tons of ice on the *Titanic's* crushed bow. But, even today, in pictures of the wreck resting on the ocean floor, we see no damage to the bow as she sits proudly upright, her railing intact.

And so she is at rest. Some see her as a tomb, some a monument. One thing is clear: she is an enigma and will stir in the hearts of all who hear her story a sense of empathy, of grief and as such, she will never be forgotten. In our hearts she still sails on.

Pat Cook

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(15 m, 6 w, extras, doubling possible)

Senator: A member of the investigating committee.

Bruce Ismay: Managing Director of the White Star Line, English, 50.

1st Officer William Murdoch: Deck officer, Scottish, 39.

Capt. Edward Smith: English captain of the *Titanic*, 59.

2nd Officer Charles Lightoller: Deck officer, English, 28.

Harold Bride: Telegrapher, English, 24.

Mahala Douglas: Passenger, American, 48.

4th Officer Joseph Boxhall: Deck officer, English, 28.

3rd Officer Herbert Pitman: Deck officer, English, 34.

Col. Archibald Gracie: Passenger, English, 53.

Olaus Abelseth: Passenger, Norwegian, 28.

Maj. Arthur Peuchen: Passenger, Canadian, 52.

Capt. Stanley Lord: Captain of the *Californian*, English, middle-aged.

Lucian Smith: Passenger, American, 24.

Mrs. Lucian Smith: Passenger, American, 18.

Helen W. Bishop: Passenger, American, 19.

Daisy Minahan: Passenger, American, middle-aged.

Mrs. J. Stuart White: Passenger, American, 55.

5th Officer Harold Lowe: Deck officer, Welsh, 29.

Emily Ryerson: First-class passenger, American, 48.

Capt. Henry Rostron: Captain of the *Carpathia*, English, middle-aged.

Stewardess: A ship's stewardess.

Extras: As passengers, officers, crew, etc. as needed.

PROPS

SET: placards

OFFICERS: blankets, note

ISMAY: handkerchief, notepad

SENATOR: notepad

CREWMEN: canvas bags

NOTES ABOUT THE PLAY

This play is a condensation of the actual Senate hearings, begun on April 19, 1912, four days after the catastrophe. This is the story of the aftermath of the sinking of the *Titanic* as set down by the people who lived through it. These are their actual words. Some juxtapositioning with regard to order of testimony has been exercised to give a more linear story line.

This play may be produced as written or can be done in a reader's theater format or as a radio play. Also, this play may be done as a second act to **Voices From The *Titanic*** thereby presenting a full-length play. In that case, the production may be called ***Titanic: Tragedy and Trial***.

One minor note: during the course of the dialogue, the word "forecastle" occurs. This is pronounced fo'c'sle (fok-sil) by the seamen.

SETTING

The stage is set up as an assortment of set pieces. A witness chair placed DSR facing the audience. Near the chair rests a small wooden table UPS and two more chairs. USR there is a rectangular platform, two feet high, running at an angle from SR to US, with a white railing on its audience edge. There are step units on both sides for access.

The front half of a lifeboat rests USC between that platform and the SL platform. Its bow faces DS. (A series of short benches may be used in lieu of the boat.) A second two-foot high platform is situated in the USL corner of the stage, mirroring the first platform in color and construction. DSL is witness chair #2 from which other witnesses give their affidavits and testimony.

There is an easel set up DSR, perhaps on the apron. As the play opens, the card legend reads: "Senate Hearings on the *Titanic* Disaster. Opened Friday, April 19, 1912."

SOUND EFFECTS: Gunshot, crashing and grinding, people screaming and yelling.

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(Before the LIGHTS come up, we hear an emerging sound of people yelling and cargo crashing. Over the cacophony the following voices yell out:)

MEN'S VOICES: Boiler Room 5 is flooded! Please, get back now! Don't rush the davits!

OFFICER'S VOICE: All right, just stand back there! One moment, sir! Just over on the other side now, if you please!

WOMAN'S VOICE: We have to get in that boat!

MAN'S VOICE: There's no others left!

WOMAN'S VOICE: They're all gone!

MEN'S VOICES: The corridors are flooded! Water is up to the bow! But she can't sink! There are still men down there! Did my wife get off, did she get off the boat?!

(The turmoil builds until finally a GUNSHOT is heard! Then the pandemonium stops suddenly. AT RISE: After a slight pause, the LIGHTS come up on the DSR witness chair where BRUCE ISMAY sits. The SENATOR is sitting at the table.)

ISMAY: *(Speaking to the audience.)* In the first place, I would like to express my sincere grief at this deplorable catastrophe. I understand that you gentlemen have been appointed as a committee of the Senate to inquire into the circumstances. We have nothing to conceal.

SENATOR: State your full name, please. *(HE rises and moves to ISMAY.)*

ISMAY: Joseph Bruce Ismay, Managing Director of the White Star Line.

SENATOR: *(Indicates the audience.)* Will you kindly tell the committee the circumstances surrounding your voyage, together with any circumstances you feel will be helpful to this inquiry?

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ISMAY: The ship was built in Belfast, Ireland, the latest thing in the art of shipbuilding; absolutely no money was spared in her construction. The accident took place on Sunday night, the exact time I do not know. I was in bed asleep.

SENATOR: You do not know the time?

ISMAY: The ship sank, I am told, at 2:20. I understand that it has been stated that the ship was going at full speed. The ship had never been at full speed, as far as I am aware. She had not all her boilers on. It was our intention, if we had fine weather on Monday afternoon or Tuesday, to drive the ship at full speed.

SENATOR: *(Moves behind ISMAY.)* Will you describe what you did after the collision?

ISMAY: I presume the impact awakened me. *(LIGHTS come up USR on the platform. CAPT. SMITH and MURDOCH are standing looking out and talking furiously but we cannot hear them.)* I lay in bed a moment or two, not realizing, probably, what had happened. *(HE rises and looks at the platform, still giving his testimony.)* Eventually, I got up and walked along the passageway and met a steward. *(HE looks out.)* I asked him what had happened. He said "We have struck ice." I said, "Do you think it's serious?" He said, "I am afraid it is." *(ISMAY, as if in a dream, moves slowly to the platform.)* Then I think I went onto the bridge. *(LIGHTS fade out on the witness chair.)*

SENATOR: Was the captain there at the time?

ISMAY: The captain was there, yes...

(MURDOCH exits off the platform, passing ISMAY.)

MURDOCH: Mr. Ismay?

ISMAY: What has...? *(MURDOCH exits SR. ISMAY looks back at the committee.)* I met one of the officers.

SENATOR: What officer?

ISMAY: That I could not remember.

SENATOR: How long after the impact?

End of Freeview

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