

# Unsinkable

Launched in a  
Chelsea basement,  
*Titanique's* world  
cruise docks on  
Broadway

By: David Barbour



Evansohn says, “We had a kind of music-box, music-video set for the previous productions, which had been stretched as far as it could go. It had kind of run its course, and it was as big as it was going to get.” For the vast St. James stage, he adds, “We needed a reinvention.”

When *Titanique* opened in 2022, occupying The Asylum, a tiny theatre under a grocery store in Manhattan’s Chelsea district, it was the definition of niche entertainment. A no-budget spoof of James Cameron’s film, it quickly attracted a cult following, enough for it to transfer across town to the Daryl Roth Theatre in Union Square, where it clocked a two-and-a-half-year run. It was the beginning of an around-the-world voyage

In no particular order, *Titanique* played The Grand Electric in Sydney, Australia; London’s Criterion Theatre, where it continues to run; and the Théâtre du Lido, where the scenic design accommodated a fountain and elevator built into the 40’ thrust stage. Other ports of call have included Chicago, Montréal, and São Paulo. Along the way, it has undergone innumerable upgrades and tweaks.

Written by Tye Blue (who directs), Marla Mindelle, and Constantine Rousouli (both of whom co-star), *Titanique* recycles its source material’s plot, adding Celine Dion as narrator and presiding diva, endlessly trying to horn in on the action. It’s pure sketch comedy, spiked with plenty of inside-Broadway references and gay-friendly gags. In this version, Ruth, the grasping mother of Rose, the heroine, is played in drag by Jim Parsons with two stuffed birds on his head. The iceberg that sinks the Titanic, played by award-nominee Layton Williams, is rendered as Tina Turner, delivering a scorching rendition of “River Deep, Mountain High.”

The ever-morphing production has kept the design team busy for several years, but the call to Broadway came as a surprise. Following the December closing of *Queen of Versailles*, the St. James became available, and *Titanique*’s producers decided to rush in. The designers had to step lively to be ready for an April opening on Broadway, to scale up and keep the show’s sense of fun.

### Scenery

Scenic designers Gabriel Hainer Evansohn and Grace Laubacher are members of Iron Bloom Creative Production. Evansohn, one of the firm’s founders, says, “We’ve been working in non-traditional performance, across theatre, corporate events, music festivals, live music, and art installations for the last ten years, trying to develop a non-traditional, integrated approach to production design.

“Iron Bloom allowed us to build a team of artisans and collaborators,” Evansohn adds. Speaking about the company’s integrated approach, he notes, “Rather than drawing something and sending it to a scene shop, we can create things that are more like sculptural art installations. It’s a different methodology, working with wonderful artists and empowering them to be good at what they’re good at.”

Regarding the history of *Titanique*’s design, Evansohn says, “We had a kind of music-box, music-video set for the previous productions, which had been stretched as far as it could go. It had kind of run its course, and it was as

big as it was going to get.” For the vast St. James stage, he adds, “We needed a reinvention.”

Evansohn notes that the challenge in all venues has been the same: “How do we engage with the conceptual ideas—Titanic architecture, high camp, and a diva pop tour—to fit in a downtown theatre, a West End theatre, a very odd Paris cabaret?” He adds that he and his colleagues find themselves “in conversations with each space, what it demands and gives you.”

“It has been interesting and useful to do it in so many different venues,” Laubacher says, “because we’ve had to elaborate our concepts and, at certain moments, find new ideas. The germ of the Broadway design, in some ways, came from Paris because it was the first space that had a massive thrust, and initially, we didn’t know what to do with it.” For example, she says, “There were very specific technical limitations with the thrust that meant we could do only one thing with it: We covered a 1” level of it with LED tape. It became this idea of lines, taken from the architecture of the ship in an abstracted, collaged form.

“We went through several versions of that,” Laubacher adds. “It helped with the blocking, giving us a fresh idea of

how the space works: We have all these shapes from the Titanic, mashed together to make a collage of the ship.”

Evansohn adds that, in the St. James, “We were concerned about diminishing the performers, and allowing them to pop in and out; the show is like a ball running down a mountain; once it gets going, don’t get in its way.”

The Broadway transfer required close collaboration with lighting designer Paige Seber. “A lot of our job was to give her options and let her run wild,” Evansohn says. Laubacher adds, “A lot of what Paige did was scenic design. We said, ‘Here are the trusses. Can you give us a light plot that is architecturally informed?’ And she really did that. Sometimes you walk into a theatre, and you’ve seen the light plot, but when they focus, it doesn’t look as clean as it did on paper. This design is very tight; Paige helped us in a lot of ways.”

“As designers, we can often be stuck in our lanes,” Evansohn says. “But we had conversations with Paige about the placement of lights. When we got to the theatre, I might say, ‘Those two lights are bothering me; can we move them to a place that is still useful to you?’ Or she’d say, ‘If you stagger the trusses by this much, I can use





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them as different backlight lanes.’ That conversation is desired but not always standard, and it was appreciated.”

With an unforgiving time frame, finding a scene shop was also a priority. “It does seem like, more and more, shops are being asked for quicker turnarounds,” Laubacher says. “Sometimes the bid process will be truncated, and a deal will be made before you get to bidding. We got a couple of bids and ended up going with ShowMotion. They knew what the timeline meant, that we’d need to truncate certain conversations, that we’d be designing while they were designing. They were game to step up. A shop that runs like that can do more to help with a difficult timeline.”

Evansohn adds, “Especially on that timeline, everything gets more expensive, so we had to make choices. Can we get this piece done in time and with this material? In an ideal world, there might have been slight modifications to the dimensions, but we went with what existed, was available, and could be procured in the timeline and in budget.”

The challenge to scale up, yet retain the production’s gleefully scrappy nature, can be seen in the development of the heart locket worn by Rose, the heroine. It is seen in two versions, as a large-scale set piece dangling from the proscenium at the show’s opening, and as a prop worn by Melissa Barrera, who plays Rose. Evansohn says the original set piece “is still a totem of the production. We rebuilt it for scale in the St. James. There was also a desire to make it a little more fabulous.” Laubacher says the prop locket

“went through one or two versions in rehearsals; it got a little too professional and had to be brought back to the crafty quality. There’s a fine line between wanting it to shine yet not be too professionally made.”

Expanding on the point, Evansohn talks about striking a balance between “doing something that feels very well-executed on a Broadway scale and the DIY spirit of the piece, also honoring the amazing tradition of drag culture, which makes something spectacular out of trash. That is the core of the show’s emotional life. It’s very, very tricky.”

“We were handed an almost impossible and an ambitious brief,” Laubacher says. “We wanted to make a better version than we have ever done before. Without our being in the trenches together, I’m not sure it could have happened.” Regarding Mindelle, Blue, Rousouli, and their fellow designers, she adds, “We’ve had six years of building these collaborative relationships. It feels very natural, like we’re all in the same brain, which is kind of magical. Without that, I don’t think the show would have been nearly as good from the design perspective.”

### Lighting

As noted, lighting designer Paige Seber worked unusually closely with Evansohn and Laubacher, for, as a glance at one of the photos on these pages reveals, the set is the lighting and the lighting is the set. (“The set of *The Voice*,” cracks Mindelle in the show.)



"In an earlier iteration of the design, I had GLP impression X4s," Seber notes. "We ended up trading them out for twice as many of the smaller X5 Compacts. It was the right move: *Titanique* is all about maximalism, so doubling our beams was more important than having a single, slightly brighter source."

The key to realizing *Titanique* in its many incarnations is simple, Seber notes. "The show is audacious," she says. "We show more of everything, and then we pull out something else. That concept is very scalable and has developed incrementally over time. When we moved to the Daryl Roth, we worked with all these lights. In the West End, we got a few more toys. Then came the Paris production with a fountain in the floor that we decided to embrace. The production was massive, and I feel like we had scaled the show's original visuals as far as they could go."

In starting over for Broadway, Seber says, "At its heart, the show is a Celine Dion concert, so it felt appropriate to push it closer to a concert experience, more like her Vegas show." The fun begins with the proscenium, which is lined with compact automated units. "I told Joel [Shier, her associate designer] I needed a lot of fixtures, and they needed to have solid crystal lenses. He introduced me to the ACME Lighting Tornado, which is the workhorse of the show. It comes at a relatively low price point, and we could get so many of them. They work like a small army;

it's probably one of the most exciting new pieces of vocabulary that we have."

When activated, the Tornados seemingly make the entire proscenium dance. Also, Seber notes, "They work as a light curtain. Sometimes, they pull us downstage to the prow of the deck and shut us off from everything. And they're great for punctuation; they do flyouts that really include the audience."

Indeed, big sweeping movements and wildly overt cues are all fair game here. "Sometimes in tech, my programmer, Parker Conzone, will say, 'I just figured out I could make the lights do this.' And my response is, 'That's the dumbest thing I've ever seen; we'll use it.' We have a lot of fun with the camp humor, and we sneak in really beautiful, simple moments between all the shtick." (Mindelle gets many gorgeous jewel-lighting effects.)

Onstage, the set is a frame for an array of lighting units, all on display. The inverted V trusses are lined with GLP impression X5 Compacts and Ayrton Veloces. They "do a ton of work for us," Seber says, adding that each inverted V is also lined with pixel tape. The brick-shaped units on

the trusses are GLP JDC Burst 1s, which provide plenty of punctuation and blinder cues.

Behind this layout, Seber adds, “we strategically reveal things over the course of the show. At the top, the Kabuki drops, and immediately the whole set is exposed. I was worried about making the show continuously evolve, even with a set that stays in place all evening. We do that with layering. There’s an upstage bar of JDC Burst 1s that you don’t see until the Act I finale. We save the downstairs strip for the second half, when Celine sings ‘My Heart Will Go On.’ We continue that way, building out the depth of the space so it feels bigger and bigger over the course of the night.”

Check out the shot on page 40, with Rousouli surrounded by beams from paired units. “In an earlier iteration of the design, I had GLP impression X4s,” Seber notes. “We ended up trading them out for twice as many of the smaller X5 Compacts. It was the right move: *Titanique* is all about maximalism, so doubling our beams was more important than having a single, slightly brighter source.”

Hidden in the wings are side trusses with Ayrton Perseos and GLP impression X4s. “Good old-fashioned” LED tape provides the set’s stairs with color-changing illumination. Running the numbers, the rig, provided by PRG, includes 66 GLP X5 Compacts, 30 impression X4s, 32 JDC-1 Bursts, 22 X5 IP MAXX units, 19 Veloce Profiles, 12 Perseo Profiles, 21 Vari-Lite VL3600 Profile IPs, 16 ACME Tornados, and two Lycian 1295 followspots. Stationary gear includes 47 ETC Lustr 2s, 36 CHAUVET Professional COLORado Solo 2s, and 13 COLORado Solo Bar 6s. Atmosphere is provided by four Look Solutions Unique 2.1 haze generators, four Look Solutions Viper NT fog machines, three MDG ATMe haze generators, and ten Martin Jem AF-1 MkII DMX-controlled fans. Control is via an ETC APEX 10 console.

Cueing the show, especially the many moments of pure diva delirium, “has impacted who I am as a designer,” Seber says. “The humor is ever-present, and we always punctuate it. The show is intentionally overstimulating; it washes over you and takes you along for the ride. It’s funnier when the joke lands with a button.”

Interestingly, she adds, “We are so true to the maximalism that I imagine this is the only show on Broadway in which the final number, ‘My Heart Will Go On,’ has fewer lighting cues than anything else in the show, because it’s about finally getting to sit with these characters and appreciating the journey we’ve all been on together. It should make you feel you’ve listened to the raunchiest humor for 90 minutes, and suddenly you care because it feels beautiful. I hope we manage to tackle that problem.”

## Sound

Lawrence Schober, who has run up many credits Off Broadway and as an associate on Broadway, says the move to the St. James brought a new level of scale to

both the sound and music departments. He has learned his lessons well; this is one of the clearest and most intelligible designs on Broadway, punchy but not assaultive, leaving the music with plenty of room to breathe.

Of course, he notes, “The geometry of each new theatre informs the complexity of the speaker system. The venues in London and on Broadway have been the most traditional. In Paris, we had a three-quarter thrust stage that was partially in the round, which took us to a more spatial version of the show, because of how close the audience was to the U-shaped stage.”

For Broadway, the orchestra increased from four musicians to 19. There are eight musicians onstage and 11 more in the pit. “So,” Schober says, “We have scaled up our microphone package dramatically. The DPA microphones in the pit give us the close, reliable isolation we need for certain instruments, while the Sennheiser and Neumann condensers help the larger orchestra feel open and dimensional. That balance is important for a show that needs to sound like a Celine Dion record but still feel alive in the theatre.

“Beyond that,” he notes, “we’ve used every major loudspeaker brand, different speaker processing, and three major console models. It all depends on what’s available in each local market.” This means that each time, the show must be built from scratch.

The loudspeaker rig at the St. James consists of d&b audiotechnik gear. “We had a full d&b system in the Asylum as well,” Schober says. “Now we’re using bigger boxes. We have three V-Series line array systems at the proscenium, with V-Subs both flown and underneath the deck. And then we have other xS-Series and E-Series point-source speakers throughout the theatre as outfills, delays, just filling in gaps where needed. We have a DS-100 signal processor; we used one in Paris as well, using [d&b’s] Soundscape technology for object-based audio. On Broadway, we are using it as a conventional delay matrix.”

Still, he notes, “We did the show with a Meyer system in London, and it sounded great. At the Daryl Roth, we had an L-Acoustic system, and it sounded great. We were confident that if we needed to pivot, we’d be in good hands with any of these manufacturers.”

The cast is miked with DPA 4066 units (“I’m a fan,” Schober says) with Shure Axiom ADX-1M belt packs, their compact size allowing for seamless integration into costumes and wigs. “We used DPA Off Broadway and at the Daryl Roth. I like how they sound, and I’m satisfied with their form factor,” too. He adds, “We’re lucky that we worked with PRG as our rental shop. They’ve done every New York iteration of this show and have championed us.”

Controlling the sound is a DiGiCo Quantum 338. “We used a Yamaha desk Off Broadway, so we had to radically reimagine the console file,” Schober notes. “Early in my career, I mostly knew Yamaha, but over time, I was



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exposed to DiGiCo, and I was impressed by how flexible their programming is and how great a solution it is for musical theatre." The musicians use an Aviom personal

monitor mixing system.

To get that Celine Dion sound, Schober relies on a TC Electronic 6000 reverb and a Waves Titan SoundGrid



Server. “The Waves Titan SoundGrid server hosts a variety of plug-ins that give us the compression and dynamics that we’re looking for. There’s a decent amount of processing in the voices, mostly the 1176 compressor, which gives the studio sound we want. We also have a few auxil-

ary effects in the H Series of plug-ins. DiGiCo and Waves are well-integrated, so we could program that stuff very quickly.” He adds, “DiGiCo’s Mustard Processing was helpful to isolate everyone’s vocals. It really helped with the intelligibility that we were chasing.”

He adds, “The flexibility of a DiGiCo’s programming allows us to customize how we treat each voice, creating actor-specific profiles for each performer. If someone else comes in, say, to play Molly Brown, we can create a new set of parameters for that performer.”

It’s not every day that a sound designer makes his Broadway debut with a show on this scale. “I was very lucky to have an experienced team,” Schober says. “The production audio engineers, Mike Wojchik and Jake Scudder, associate sound designer, Kevin Sweetser, and head audio, Jarrett Krauss, helped me navigate this undertaking.”

The advantage of a traditional Broadway house, he adds, is that “a lot of the challenges we had with lavalier microphones on the actors in non-traditional spaces were solved. We have no problem giving the actors what they need in their foldback monitors, because there’s a physical barrier between them and what the audience hears.

“One challenge we faced is that the cast breaks the proscenium line for a good portion of the show. The prow step unit, where much of the show’s action takes place, is downstage of the theatre’s plaster line, and it’s difficult to get things to sound correct when the actors are in front of the speakers. That’s one reason I was glad to have the DS100 on this system; it allows us to set different timings of actors’ voices through the sound system based on where they are. It really helps with the intelligibility that we can set unique delay times to each speaker based on the actors’ locations. There are moments when orchestra members roam around onstage; having specific timings for them helps, too.”

Additional key personnel include Rick Steiger (production stage manager), Alice M. Pollitt (stage manager), Chelsea Olivia Friday (assistant stage manager), Miguel Urbino (associate scenic designer), Joel Shier (associate lighting designer), Kevin Sweetser (associate sound designer) Eric Reynolds (original props designer), Parker Conzone (lighting programmer), Andrew Cappelli (production carpenter), Jeremy Whalers (production electrician), Sean Furphy (associate production electrician), Paul Verity (associate production sound), Jarrett Krauss (head sound engineer), Aja Anderson (head electrician), Michael Wojchik and Jake Scudder (production sound engineers), Emmie Finckel and Janie Meija (assistant scenic designers), Mikaela Baird (assistant lighting designer), Jamie Davis (assistant sound designer), Lillian Sun (production props), Stephen Ehrlich (head props). *Titanique* runs on Broadway through September 20. 📡