



THE LAST LIFEBOAT

BY LUKE YANKEE



DRAMATISTS
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INC.



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A workshop production of THE LAST LIFEBOAT was presented at the NoHo Arts Center in North Hollywood, California on July 14, 2013. It was directed by Luke Yankee and produced by James Mellon, Kevin Bailey and Jay Willick. The production stage manager was Don Hill. The cast was as follows:

ACTOR #1 Robert Yacko
ACTOR #2 Scott Antonucci
ACTOR #3 Jay Willick
ACTOR #4 Gil Berry
ACTRESS #1 Barbara Niles
ACTRESS #2 Karesa McElheny
ACTRESS #3 Lynne Marta
ACTRESS #4 Suzanne Benoit

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

A word on the style:

This is a large, epic story. It is also a memory play. As a result, it should be told as simply as possible in terms of sets and costumes. It is intended to be performed by a company of anywhere from seven to fifty-eight actors playing multiple roles with minimal costume changes. Each character should have a basic, period costume of the early 1900s to which they add a hat, a jacket, etc. Think in terms of *The Laramie Project* or the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of *Nicholas Nickleby*.

The set mainly consists of two large, wooden trunks with removable lids which can represent everything from a lifeboat to a bed to a desk. A few odd tables and chairs are all else that should be required, with the many scene changes taking place with lighting and sound effects. No real food needs to be consumed. Many elements can either be mimed or representational.

Above all, it should be played for honesty, simplicity and nothing arch or broadly comedic.

Luke Yankee
Playwright

CHARACTERS

ACTOR #1 — (late 40s): J. Bruce Ismay, Young Ismay.

ACTOR #2 — (20s – 30s): William Randolph Hearst, Thomas Andrews, Boatswain, Lightoller, George Ismay, David Butler, Angry Man, Reporter #3, Male Witness #1, Steward, Irish Journalist.

ACTOR #3 — (30s – 40s): Sanderson, Chairman, Mr. Fry, Gonzalo, Jennings, Rector, Murdoch, Reporter #1, Sailor #2, Dr. McGee, Farrelly, Policeman, Senator Fletcher, Male Witness #2, Man in Crowd, Mr. Franklin, Scottish Journalist, Lord Mersey.

ACTOR #4 — (60s – 70s): Chaplain, Thomas Ismay, Captain Smith, J.P. Morgan, John Jacob Astor, Reporter #2, Senator Smith, British Journalist, Old Man.

ACTRESS #1 — (40s): Vivian, Young Vivian, Sophie, Young Mother, Female Witness #1, Evelyn Ismay, Dr. Grenfell.

ACTRESS #2 — (20s): Florence Ismay, Young Florence, Little Girl (Angela), Madeline Astor, Steward, Page, Female Witness #3.

ACTRESS #3 — (50s – 60s): Mrs. Ryerson, Margaret Ismay, Lady Peale, Mother, Old Woman, Female Witness #2, Mrs. Chase.

*NOTE: If a larger cast is required, roles can be broken down differently. The above is intended as a guideline for the minimum cast size. If actors have other strengths in terms of dialects, etc., feel free to adjust roles accordingly, as long as Ismay/Young Ismay are the only roles played by Actor #1. The actresses playing Vivian and Florence should also play Young Vivian and Young Florence.

THE LAST LIFEBOAT

ACT ONE

In the darkness, the low blast of a ship's whistle is heard. Lights up on a modular set of wooden planks with various playing areas on different levels. The company members enter and cross to two large trunks center stage. They are well-dressed people in the fashion of the early 1900s. They take the final pieces of their costumes — hats, gloves, vests, etc. — out of the trunks and put them on as they address the audience.

ACTOR #2. He was the most despicable man who ever lived.

ACTRESS #3. He was a hero. He saved my life.

ACTOR #3. He was a rich bastard!

ACTRESS #1. A scoundrel.

ACTOR #4. My mother lived because of him.

ACTRESS #3. He sent my uncle to a watery grave.

ACTOR #2. He was a coward.

ACTRESS #2. A saint.

ACTOR #4. A victim.

ACTRESS #2. He was my husband.

ACTOR #2. My father.

ACTOR #4. My son.

ACTRESS #1 & #2. The love of my life. *(As the low, mournful sound of a foghorn is heard, they all cross to an upper platform where a body lies wrapped in muslin and draped for burial. They form a semicircle around the body with the chaplain center stage. As they take their positions, the chaplain sings a portion of the Latin hymn “Agnus Dei” from Verdi’s Requiem.)*

CHAPLAIN. We commit his body to the deep in certain hope of

the resurrection unto eternal life. Amen. (*The chaplain and two men lift the body and carry it to the offstage side of the platform and throw it over. A distant splash is heard. In the darkness on the other side of the stage, we hear a man screaming.*)

ISMAY. No! Stop! Please! Noooooo! (*Lights crossfade to a man asleep in an armchair having a nightmare. He is J. Bruce Ismay. Despite his current distress, he is a serious but pleasant-looking Englishman of forty-nine with a large mustache of the Edwardian era. His wife, Florence, crosses to Ismay. She is an attractive American woman, younger than her husband. As she shakes him, he lets out another startled cry.*)

FLORENCE. It's all right, dear. You're all right. (*Ismay wipes a few beads of sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.*)

ISMAY. (*Catching his breath.*) Thank you.

FLORENCE. That's the fourth time this week. Shouldn't you speak to someone?

ISMAY. Who?

FLORENCE. I don't know. A doctor?

ISMAY. I'm not sick.

FLORENCE. The vicar, then.

ISMAY. Don't be absurd.

FLORENCE. Come to bed. It's late.

ISMAY. I must finish these reports. (*Florence exits. Harold Sanderson, an ambitious young businessman, enters from the opposite side of the stage and stands upstage right, holding a business ledger. Ismay puts on his jacket and crosses to him.*)

SANDERSON. Beg pardon, Mr. Ismay. The insurance adjustors are here again.

ISMAY. How many claims is it up to now?

SANDERSON. Just under three thousand. (*Ismay has to process this for a moment.*) Sir, the ribbon cutting is at half past four.

ISMAY. (*Firmly.*) And *you* will you make the presentation.

SANDERSON. (*Reluctantly.*) Mr. Ismay, as the principal benefactor of this charity, if you'd only say a few words ... (*Ismay's face tightens.*)

ISMAY. We agreed, Mr. Sanderson. I shall be present, but you are not to acknowledge me in any way. Is that clear?

SANDERSON. Yes, sir. (*Lighting transition as we hear a small town brass band play the last few notes of a march offstage. The rest of the company is onstage surrounding Sanderson. Ismay enters the scene and stands slightly removed from the crowd, shielding his face from them.*)

Ladies and gentlemen, as vice-chairman of the White Star Line, it

is my great honor to be here today as we cut the ribbon on this spot where we shall erect a memorial to those left behind by this terrible tragedy. *(An angry man in the crowd heckles him.)*

ANGRY MAN. What about your employer? Where's he, then?

OLD WOMAN. He saved himself, but my Robby got drowned!

SANDERSON. Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. J. Bruce Ismay is — *(Ismay blanches at the mention of his own name.)*

ANGRY MAN. That coward!

OLD MAN. It wasn't his fault!

ANGRY MAN. He should be drawn and quartered! *(Ismay quickly walks away, visibly shaken. As he sits downstage to compose himself, a young girl enters skipping and carrying a school bag. She approaches him.)*

YOUNG GIRL. Pardon me, sir. Aren't you J. Bruce Ismay?

ISMAY. *(Pleased.)* Why, yes, I am. Do I know you?

YOUNG GIRL. I saw your photograph in the newspaper. I'm Sophie.

ISMAY. How do you do, Sophie? *(Ismay shakes her hand gallantly. She curtsies.)*

SOPHIE. Do you think I could have your autograph, sir?

ISMAY. Why on earth would you want — ?

SOPHIE. Oh, please, sir? *(She fishes in her bag and hands Ismay a notebook and a fountain pen.)*

ISMAY. Very well. *(The flattered Ismay signs it and hands it back to her. She runs off excitedly.)*

SOPHIE. I've got it! I've got the autograph of the man who sank the *Titanic*! *(Ismay watches her go in shock, as if he'd just been violated. He sits for a moment in quiet despair. An abrupt shift in lighting takes us back in time. Ocean sounds and gulls are heard as Thomas Ismay, Bruce's staunch Victorian father, enters. Ismay's energy and body language transform into that of a small boy as he runs downstage playfully.)*

YOUNG ISMAY. Look, Father! Look at the big boats!

THOMAS ISMAY. When they are that large, my boy, they are not called boats. They are called ships.

YOUNG ISMAY. And you built these ships, Father?

THOMAS ISMAY. I had them built. I am the owner of the line. And one day, you'll do the same. *(Young Ismay quickly loses interest in the ships.)*

YOUNG ISMAY. Thank you, Father, but I think I'd rather join the fire brigade.

THOMAS ISMAY. Poppycock. Do you remember the names I told you for the different parts of the ship? (*Young Ismay stares at the ships and thinks a moment, eager to please his father.*)

YOUNG ISMAY. I think I do. Yes.

THOMAS ISMAY. Now then, which is the port side of the ship?

YOUNG ISMAY. (*Pointing.*) There?

THOMAS ISMAY. (*Sternly.*) Wrong! That is the bow. Now, try again. Which is the starboard? (*Young Ismay tentatively points again.*)

YOUNG ISMAY. There? (*Thomas Ismay shakes his son impatiently.*)

THOMAS ISMAY. That is not a part of the ship! That's a flag, you idiot! How will you ever be able to speak to the shipbuilders? (*Young Ismay looks shocked and wounded.*)

YOUNG ISMAY. But you said starboard. It has a star on it.

THOMAS ISMAY. (*Angrily.*) You're hopeless! (*Thomas Ismay stares out to sea, standing ramrod-straight. A lone tear trickles down Young Ismay's cheek. A warning.*) You're not crying?

YOUNG ISMAY. Of course not, Father. (*The young boy quickly brushes away the tear with his sleeve.*)

THOMAS ISMAY. We are gentlemen. We never cry.

YOUNG ISMAY. But ... what if one must cry?

THOMAS ISMAY. (*Still not looking at his son.*) Then you do it in the bath. Or at night, with your face in the pillow. But never where anyone can see. Do you understand?

YOUNG ISMAY. Yes, Father.

THOMAS ISMAY. Now. Where is the crow's nest? Surely you remember that? (*After thinking for a long time, Young Ismay points to the crow's nest.*) It's a start, anyway. (*Thomas Ismay strides quickly off. Young Ismay runs after him, eager for any crumb of approval. Lights transition to show another passage of time. Margaret Ismay, Bruce's mother, enters carrying his tailcoat.*) What are we going to do with him? He's so bloody awkward.

MARGARET ISMAY. He's young. Give him time. (*Ismay enters, now a gawky teenager. Margaret helps him into the tailcoat.*)

THOMAS ISMAY. Mind you show some manners. I'll not have any son of mine behaving like a hooligan.

ISMAY. Yes, Father. (*As Thomas Ismay crosses upstage, Margaret brushes him off and fixes his hair.*)

MARGARET ISMAY. Now, remember everything we've practiced.

ISMAY. But Mother, it won't be the same dancing with a young girl as it is with you!

MARGARET ISMAY. (*Dryly.*) Thank you, dear. That's most comforting.

ISMAY. But what if—

MARGARET ISMAY. Hush! You'll be fine. (*A waltz starts to play in the distance. As Young Ismay crosses the stage, one of the trunks is brought on, covered with a tablecloth. A punch bowl and cake stand sit on it. Margaret crosses upstage and watches the next scene with her husband. Ismay pulls at his stiff collar, which pinches his neck. As he stands by the refreshment table, Young Vivian, a beautiful girl of nineteen in a ball gown, approaches him.*)

YOUNG VIVIAN. Hello, Mr. Ismay. Would you please hand me a slice of cake? (*The shocked Young Ismay nervously hands her the cake.*)

YOUNG ISMAY. You know my name? (*The amused Young Vivian nibbles on her cake.*)

YOUNG VIVIAN. Well, it's not so strange. My father has worked for yours for most of our lives. I'm Vivian Pettiford.

YOUNG ISMAY. I know. I ... I'm surprised that you know me.

YOUNG VIVIAN. Of course, as the child of a lowly riveter, I'm not in your class.

YOUNG ISMAY. That's rubbish. (*Pause. He stares at her awkwardly, not knowing how to make small talk.*)

YOUNG VIVIAN. I'd love to dance.

YOUNG ISMAY. (*Stunned.*) With me?

YOUNG VIVIAN. (*Playfully.*) No. With him at your back. (*As Young Ismay turns around, Young Vivian laughs gaily. He leads her out onto the dance floor. As they gaze into each other's eyes, Young Ismay is in heaven. As they continue to waltz, his parents cross back downstage.*)

MARGARET ISMAY. I think he's quite taken with her. He says he's in love.

THOMAS ISMAY. Piffle! He's far too young to know what love is. (*Thomas Ismay motions to his son, who crosses to him. Young Vivian watches at a distance.*) Well, my boy, now that you've finished Harrow, it's time you saw the world.

YOUNG ISMAY. Thank you Father, but I'm quite content here in Liverpool.

THOMAS ISMAY. Nonsense. The world is your oyster. I'm sending you to the New York office. (*Stunned silence. He didn't see this coming.*)

YOUNG ISMAY. For how long?

THE LAST LIFEBOAT

by Luke Yankee

39M, 19W (flexible casting, doubling — minimum 4M, 3W)

J. Bruce Ismay was an upper-crust Englishman who always did what was expected of him. He went to the best schools, married the right society girl (even though he was in love with someone else) and vowed to his staunch, unfeeling father on his deathbed that he would take over the family shipping business and build the biggest, most opulent ship the world had ever seen: the RMS *Titanic*. What an accomplishment! We all know the story of how the ship sank ... or do we? Ismay saved as many people as he could on that fateful night, and finally, with no women and children in sight, he stepped into the last lifeboat ... and was branded a coward and a traitor forever. The world needed a scapegoat for the sinking of the *Titanic* and Ismay became the perfect target. He had a powerful enemy in the United States — newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst. Hearst condemned Ismay nationwide before the rescue ship *Carpathia* even landed in New York. Hearst's cause was aided by William Alden Smith, a ruthless senator with presidential aspirations, who led a "witch-hunt" investigation into this high-profile disaster. Although there was no solid evidence against Ismay, Senator Smith managed to drag the hearings on for months. More than 3,000 passengers brought lawsuits against the White Star Line for loss of life and property, which only fueled Ismay's intense survivor's guilt. When he was forced to resign from the White Star Line, he spent the rest of his days as a recluse at his estate in Ireland, haunted by the ghosts of that fateful night to the point of near insanity. THE LAST LIFEBOAT is the story of the *Titanic* that has never been told. This epic tale explores not only the tragedy itself, but the sensationalized trials and aftermath of the night that changed the world forever.

"Imagine the epic story of the drama behind the sinking of the Titanic, revealed with easy, minimal staging on a bare stage! Luke Yankee has written a surging drama that is riveting, dramatic, educational and entertaining all at the same time. THE LAST LIFEBOAT is destined to become a theatre classic!" —Rex Reed

Also by Luke Yankee

A PLACE AT FOREST LAWN
(Bontempo, based on Yerby)

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