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The show must go on

Recovering from live mishaps

BY RYAN LEEDS

IT'S A HALF HOUR to show time. Loud beeps from infrared machines provide the musical prelude as they scan the tickets of eager theatregoers. Meanwhile, backstage, a hurried cast and crew ensure that everything is in place for the performance. On both sides of the curtain, nervous tension and excitement build. What awaits will be an event to remember. Sometimes for all the wrong reasons.

Like life itself, things don't always go as planned in live theatre. Yet unlike television or film, there are no second chances in the middle of a performance. Once the curtain rises, the proverbial train has left the station. What transpires will either be a smooth and relaxing journey or a delay or a derailment. Even rehearsal can't always troubleshoot problems in the middle of a performance, but it's important to know what to do when unexpected issues occur.

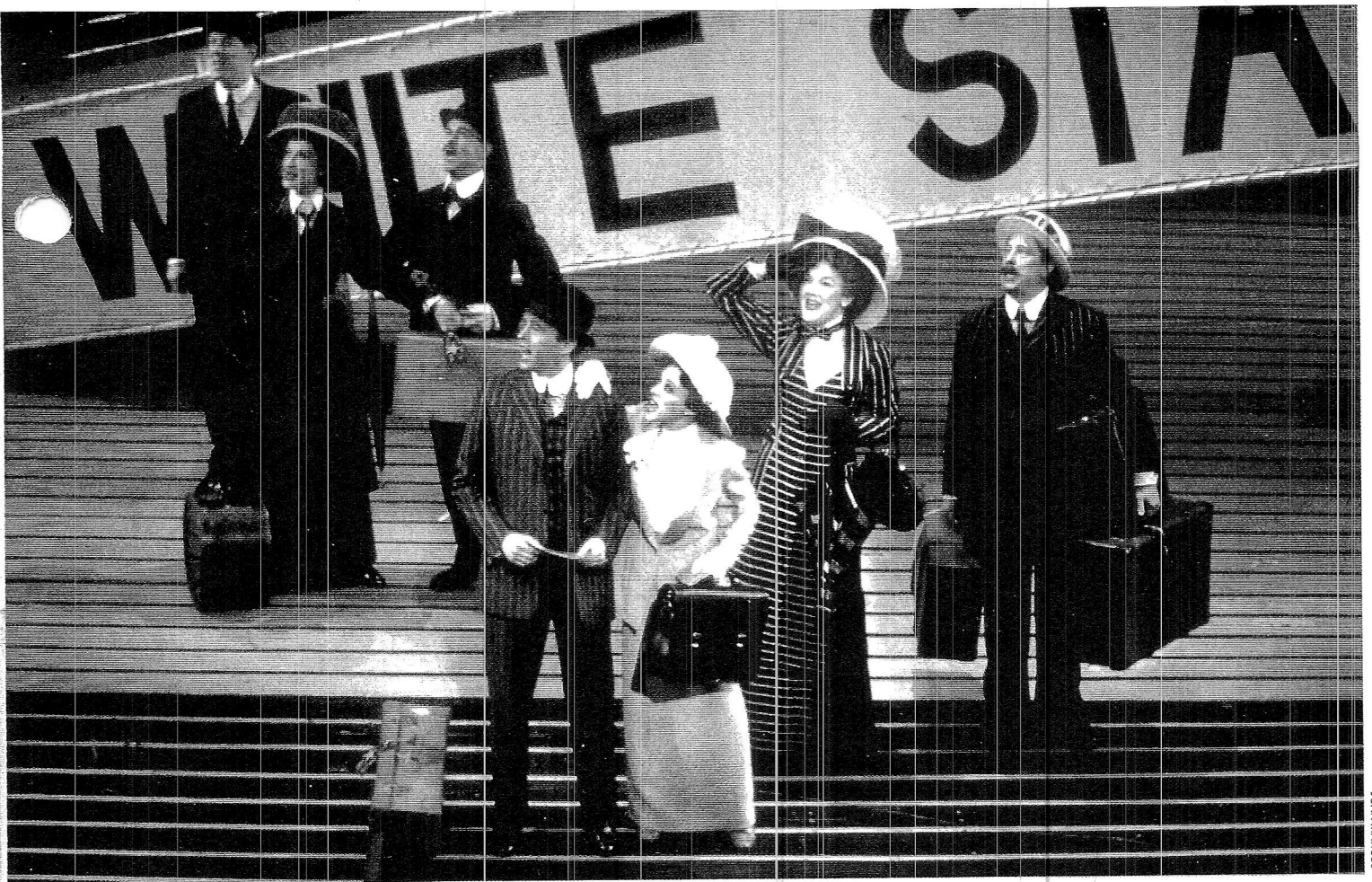
Dramatics magazine spoke with Broadway professionals to hear stories of their less-than-stellar performances and how they dealt with mishaps in the moment.

The set strikes back

Broadway star Victoria Clark was full of anecdotes from her time on the stage. "You called the right person for this piece," she joked during a recent phone conversation. "I've got a million of 'em. I mean, I've

During her Tony-winning performance in The Light in the Piazza, Victoria Clark endured a harrowing microphone malfunction during a live-televised Radio City Music Hall performance.

JOAN MARCUS



JOAN MARCUS

Broadway's *Titanic* got a rough start when the simulated shipwreck went awry during the preview performance. The show, though, went on to win five Tony Awards.

been doing this for over 30 years."

Clark originated the role of second-class passenger Alice Beane in 1997's *Titanic* on Broadway. From the moment the musical was announced, audiences and critics were wary of the show's potential. *Entertainment Weekly* magazine reported, "The show's disastrous March 29 preview began with a preemptive apology from director Richard Jones, who warned the audience that the crossing might be rough. No lie. The production repeatedly ground to a halt because of bugs in its tilting, three-story hydraulic-lift set. The audience finally left after a grueling three and a half hours — an hour longer than the mighty ship took to sink in real life."

After a while, the actors "started to incorporate the pauses into the show, so they could sink the ship in real time," Clark explained. "The stage managers made an announcement that there would be a 15-minute intermission. They brought the

lights to half, but audiences didn't really know what to do. Should they applaud? Get candy? Leave? Most people thought they were witnessing the death of a show."

She continued, "A few times we sent our cast spokesperson, Michael Mulheren, out to tell jokes. He was so entertaining and really took care of the audience. After the hydraulics were solved by our incredibly hardworking crew, the audiences embraced the show." The production swept the Tony Awards with five wins, and it ran for two years. "We were able to look back and laugh about the ups and downs of gaining success."

It wasn't the only technical glitch that Clark has lived through. On the first national tour of *Les Misérables*, she breathed life into the thieving Madame Thénardier. Both the original productions and subsequent road versions were well known for their use of a rotating turntable. One night during a performance at the Kennedy

Center, the computer that operates the turntable malfunctioned.

"At the end of our scene, it picked up speed and just went faster and faster," Clark recalled. "I was one of three actors onstage — along with Olga Merediz and Kevin McGuire. We were spinning around so fast that it felt like we were in a circus act. We were hanging on to the set pieces for dear life, trying to fight the centrifugal force and not spin off of it. Ultimately, we were in hysterics. I eventually leapt off the turntable and ran into the wings, because I thought I was going to fly off the stage like a picnic plate. I have no idea what Olga and Kevin did. It was every woman for herself. The audience seemed to be both horrified and extremely entertained."

Clark, always one to keep her cool, wasn't rattled by the incident. "I mean, it's live theatre. These things happen."

Fortunately, nothing fatal happened the night that Clark had a backstage emergency. As the Fairy Godmother in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Cinderella*, she flew through the air, attached to a swing. "One time, my wings got caught on a pipe. I ended up hanging upside down and nearly choking to death on a pipe. My dresser was the only one who saw it. She was jumping up and down yelling, 'Vicki's stuck! Vicki's stuck!' There were many attachments to my costume and things that couldn't easily come undone. Plus, I was 15 feet in the air."

The incident forced a policy change. "After that, they installed two cameras and instituted new rules so that this would never happen to anyone else." To that end, she humorously deems herself a "pioneer in wing safety."

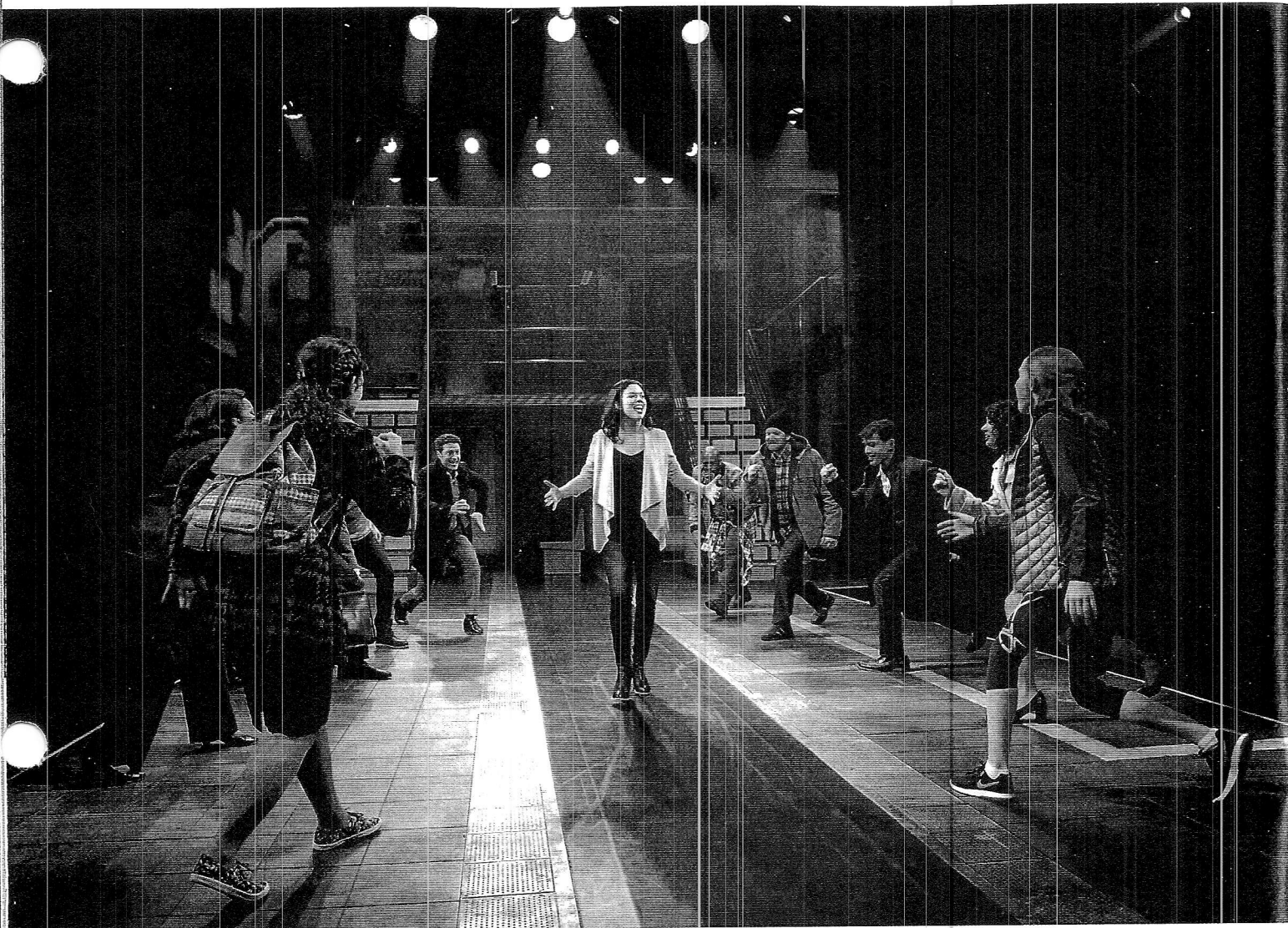
Margo Seibert is well aware that scenic design can assume a life of its own. She made her Broadway debut as the timid, pet-shop employee Adrian in 2014's *Rocky*. "We had very limited wing space, so these large pieces were separated, flown, and assembled backstage, then brought onstage.

Many of them could be split into two parts. In our previews, I was always pretty nervous to make my first entrance, which was in the pet shop. I was arranging bird accessories," she said. "One night, the set started to move as the curtain was about to rise. I heard something. I looked down



MATTHEW MURPHY

While performing as Adrian in Broadway's 2014 Rocky, Margo Seibert found herself in the middle of a set that was literally breaking in half.



Margo Seibert (center) and her cast mates scrambled to keep a song on track after a substitute conductor miscued them through in-ear monitors during a performance of In Transit.

and saw that the knives joining the two set pieces weren't connecting. Instead, they were completely breaking apart. It looked like I was kneeling at the precipice of an earthquake. The whole shop was moving erratically in different directions, and I was the only one on stage."

She continued, "Our stage manager, Lisa Dawn Cave, should have received an award. She was so swift at stopping the action so that no one would get hurt. She announced that we would be holding for technical difficulties, but the curtain didn't immediately come down. I just turned out to the audience and waved goodbye as the curtain descended.

We reset the whole scene and tried it again."

Pitch imperfect

Audio issues can also prove problematic in live performance. After *Rocky*, Seibert starred in *In Transit*, billed as Broadway's first a cappella musical. In every number, the entire cast had to sing. If they weren't soloists, they provided vocal accompaniment. She shared her experience of a time when a song went wrong.

"We were all wearing in-ear monitors, and the conductor would count us into the song. That way, we could listen to the music director and up to 11 other voices at any time. The

director was our lifeline more than anything, since we got our pitches and tempos from him. There is a swift, buoyant country-style song in the show called 'Four Days Home.' It's naturally an uptempo, but one day we had a substitute conductor who accidentally counted us into it a few clicks faster than intended," Seibert said.

She continued, "We started singing, and the whole cast started looking at each other, trying to figure out if we were all experiencing the same thing. We proceeded to sing the song at lightning speed — to the extent that we couldn't even get the words out. We were just full-out laughing onstage. It felt insane, but we were all in it together, so we got through it. I don't think the audience understood a single word of that song in that performance."

Clark, too, has endured audio malfunction. In 2005, on the stage of Radio City Music Hall and on live television, she performed "Statues and Stories" from *The Light in the Piazza*. "They thought that my mic went out, so they handed me a large handheld microphone that obviously was not part of the production. Plus, book writer Craig Lucas had written a new script to introduce the show. I had copies of it taped everywhere and was trying to memorize it up to the last second. It actually went relatively well, but I was trying to speak to the camera, remember the new monologue, and pay attention to this sound technician on the floor in front of me. He kept gesticulating wildly, trying to correct the microphone issue so that my body mic would work. Finally it did," Clark said.

She continued, "As it turned out, my mic was functional the whole

time. They just had the wrong one turned up. It was a big night for me, but after that experience, I didn't care if I won or not. Between that and natural childbirth, I figure I'd done the two hardest things in my life." The nerve-wracking night ended in celebration for her, however. Later that evening, she took home the Tony Award for Best Actress in a Musical.

Clark, who also directs and teaches theatre, is keenly aware that faulty technical issues can be common throughout a stage career. "When

microphones fail, the answer is not to sing louder but rather to walk up to someone else in the show. If they have a body mic, sing into their mic. Hopefully the sound technician will realize what's happening and will turn up their volume. I've done that many times, and in some cases, I've become the microphone for other people." Some might argue that this could disrupt the staging, but Clark believes it is more important to be heard. "In the end, I always go with the clarity of storytelling. If you're alone onstage and your mic goes out,

Tips for recovering from stage mishaps

ALTHOUGH THERE IS no way to anticipate every potential problem, these are some good general rules to keep in mind when things go south.

- Don't panic.
- Stay in character. If you or a scene partner breaks, calmly return to character.
- Improvise when necessary, but keep ad libs to a minimum.
- Stay attuned to the tech crew, if you're onstage. When improvising to stage mishaps, you must be responsive to each other's recovery efforts.
- As a techie, if you have to walk onstage for any reason during a performance, remain calm and steady in your movements. Running into the action to fix a problem not only looks unprofessional but it also makes matters worse.
- Budget permitting, have a backup microphone (even a handheld one) backstage that can be switched out if something happens during a show.
- Stage managers should fully stock up on emergency supplies, from extra duct tape to a first-aid kit.
- The director or stage manager should be the one to announce "technical difficulties" to the audience.
- As long as your safety isn't threatened, enjoy yourself. If you're still having a good time, the audience probably is, too.

walk downstage and speak or sing out. It's not always easy to tell when your mic is out, so that just takes time and experience."

Off cue

Arriving fashionably late to a party might seem hip, but showing up late for your scene can be horrific. Ar-bender Robinson, a Broadway professional with 10 shows under his belt, met with *Dramatics* in New York's Bryant Park to talk about performance snafus. "I have yet to be in a show when *something* didn't go wrong," he said. During his time in *Hairspray*, he recalled the night when the actress playing Motormouth Maybelle missed her first entrance.

"The ensemble and audience heard her before they saw her," he said. "She said her lines, 'There's platters of tunes and food on the table. What else would you expect from ...,' and we reply, 'Miss Motormouth Maybelle,'

then she is supposed to make her entrance. Instead, there was silence. Suddenly, we heard, 'I'm comin'. ... I'm comin'. ... I'll be there. ... OK. ... Here we go.' And she finally entered, after running for her cue. We all just held it together and continued the scene."

Clark also learned a tough lesson about stage timeliness. "The only entrance I ever missed was with the late, great Dick Latessa. We were both in the revival of *Cabaret* at Studio 54. I was probably four or five seconds late during a show and didn't have an excusable reason. I was just telling jokes backstage. Afterward, Dick asked what had happened. I told him that I had no good excuse and that I was very sorry. He said, 'Don't ever let it happen again — ever — with me or anyone else.' It was the most serious I had ever seen him."

She continued, "I respected and loved him so much, and to this day, I am terrified of missing an entrance. He just made it clear that it can be an absolute nightmare for someone when their scene partner is late."

Hair-don'ts

Wigs are an often overlooked component that can blindside performers. Robinson played a Member of the Tribe in the 2011 Broadway revival of *Hair*. To authenticate the look of a 1960s hippie, he was given a large afro wig. "I noticed during a show that it was creeping up on the sides," he explained. "At intermission, I went to the wig room, and they told me it was fine. We started Act 2, and throughout that whole act, I could just feel it sliding off my head. I was also wearing a headband. I took the headband off and tried wrapping it tighter around the hair."

He continued, "There is a scene in the show when [Caren Tackett] the actress playing Sheila started to sing 'Good Morning, Starshine.' By that time, I had tied the headband the whole way around my head to keep the wig on — complete with a bow on the bottom. Caren looked at me,

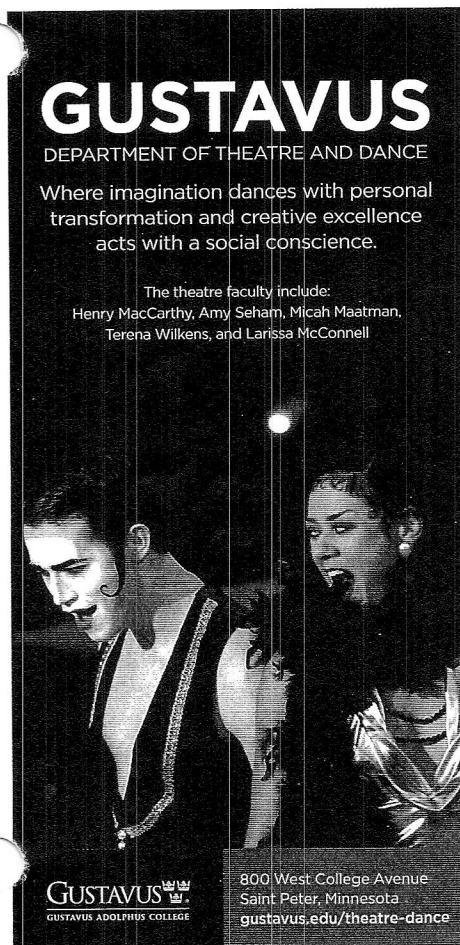
noticed that this huge afro wig was now being held on by the headband. My microphone pack was tied to the top, and it looked as though I was wearing a bonnet. She just started laughing — right in the middle of her song. I jumped in and started singing the lyrics into her microphone until she stopped laughing."

Keep calm and carry on

Are there repercussions for breaking character? "Stage managers will tell you not to, but we're human," Robinson said. "People are paying a lot of money to see the show, so we want to keep the integrity, but sometimes it just can't be helped." He added, "The audience likes when things go really wrong. They see you trying to cover, but they feel like they are in on the joke. That's why we see live theatre, right? We don't see it for perfection. We see it to have a story. In that way, we can say, 'I was there on the day that this or that happened.'"

Clark shares Robinson's sentiments. "Sometimes, you have to acknowledge the errors," she admitted, "but keep breathing. Remember that theatre really tries to simulate real-life scenarios. As long as your safety isn't in peril, you should look at it as a gift. Embrace it and realize that it will be over in a second and you'll be back to your routine." She added, "The routine of theatre can get a bit monotonous, so when things go wrong, I actually look forward to it; because it's an opportunity to create something in the moment that is truly fresh and new. It's a chance to improvise."

Seibert agreed, "The audience lives for those moments. As long as no one is getting hurt, we're all on the same page and it's all fine. These kinds of events happen all the time in the theatre, and honestly, it's why we do it. It can always go a myriad of ways." Even when mistakes happen, she is confident that everyone is doing the best they can do at that moment. "I believe you can never troubleshoot for mishaps. That's the joy of life." ▼



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