

STORIES AND SONGS FROM THE TITANIC

# UNSINKABLE WOMEN

CREATED AND PERFORMED BY DEBORAH JEAN TEMPLIN



FEATURE ARTICLE:

**DEBORAH JEAN TEMPLIN, CREATOR AND STAR OF  
UNSINKABLE WOMEN**

Deborah Jean Templin is no stranger to the highways and byways of America. In fact, during the last ten years most of her time has been spent touring with such shows as the Tony winning musical *Titanic* and *Mamma Mia!* A rigorous schedule such as this is hardly conducive to writing anything, let along an original script. But while on the road she created a powerful solo vehicle for herself. It's called *UNSINKABLE WOMEN: Stories and Songs from the Titanic*, and it's about the women who survived the sinking of the legendary liner on April 15, 1912. During the course of the play Templin portrays nine unique individuals, shifting from one to the other without leaving the stage. Her roles include Madeline Astor, teenage bride of John Jacob Astor and heiress to one of America's greatest fortunes. There's also New York housewife Daisy Spedden whose son's teddy bear survived the sinking with them and inspired her classic children's book *Polar, the Titanic Bear*. Of course, no Titanic account would be complete without the celebrated Molly Brown; yes she's here too—the bold, blunt, unsinkable character from Colorado who took charge of a floundering lifeboat and guided it to safety.

Templin began writing *UNSINKABLE WOMEN* while touring for 21 months with the stage hit *Titanic: A New Musical*. The show stimulated her deep investigation into the event which saw 1500 people perish in the North Atlantic. "I always wondered what the third act would have been—what it was like when the survivors finally came home."

So when does Templin find time to write? Her system is called "morning pages" in which she wakes up and jots down impression, ideas and emotional moments. Over time, and after intensive editing and expanding, these fragments become her script.

Among those who assisted Templin in creating *UNSINKABLE WOMEN* was the writer Walter Lord, author of the quintessential *Titanic* history *A Night to Remember*. "He told me to use my imagination," recalls the actress who had to search long and hard for information on certain people and events and created an original character of her own. The vaudevillian Nora, for

example, is a composite figure representing the ship's third-class passengers, of whom little is known. Others, like the famed Philadelphia heiress Eleanor Widener, are well-documented and therefore easier to flesh out in performance. But all the women portrayed speak to Templin in a deep way. "Whoever they are, wherever they're from, the characters are important to me because I know they're based in historical fact," she says. "Giving a voice to people who lived through this pivotal moment, many of them unsung heroes, has been truly exciting."

After trying out in a wide range of venues from Alaska to Virginia, *UNSINKABLE WOMEN* finally made its New York debut at the York Theatre Company in December of 2000. Early on Templin took the show to school auditoriums and community centers. This provided a good opportunity to determine which characters the audience felt the most connected to and which needed further exploration. She says, "The first characters I completed in this show were the ones I felt closest to. A lot of the challenge in creating the piece was getting to the essence of the person."

There's more to *UNSINKABLE WOMEN* than its striking dramatic portraits. The show is punctuated by period music such as Victor Herbert's "Toyland" and "Song of Old France" interpreted by none other than the Unsinkable Molly Brown. Templin is a seasoned musical artist and she continues to develop this gift with daily vocal exercises - a necessary measure when performing in plays as demanding as *Mamma Mia!* And while she's certainly used to halls packed with thousands of people, Templin welcomes the opportunity to take on a more human-sized show. Her hope is to create a powerful, yet intimate theater experience. With a one-person piece, she feels audience members develop a greater connection to what's happening on stage because the experience is so intensely focused. It's also most like they are in conversation with the characters.

In past years, Templin served as a Resident Professional Theatre Associate and Visiting Professor at Cornell and Susquehanna Universities. Now with her new endeavor she'll be teaching again. What do we have to learn from her *UNSINKABLE WOMEN*? Well, apart from telling the real story to the Titanic, Templin wants to make a point about the indomitability of the human spirit.

"These women were not traumatized by the Titanic. Instead they stepped out of what were conventional female roles and went on to do extraordinary things either in their personal lives or in the public arena." As Molly Brown says, 'You can't be looking down', you've got to be looking up. ' Embrace the present – and the future.'