

The show must float on

Way Upstream once flooded the National. As the play is revived, Michael Billington takes a look at great theatrical disasters

Michael Billington

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Theatre is a disaster area: a world of precarious illusion in which, as Michael Frayn brilliantly showed in *Noises Off*, chaos is always impending. And one of theatre's supreme ironies is that the more reliant it becomes on technology, the more disaster-prone it appears.

The classic example is Alan Ayckbourn's 1981 play *Way Upstream*, currently being revived at the Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough. Ambitiously set aboard a floating cabin cruiser, the play's problems started when it moved from Scarborough to the National Theatre.

In Scarborough, there had been just six actors on the boat; at the National it was weighed down by a dozen people, half of them stage crew. Scarborough kept the ship afloat in a plastic enclosure; at the National, it was held in a 6,000-gallon tank that eventually split and deluged the stage machinery. Previews were cancelled, water jokes abounded, and the critic Jack Tinker turned up on the first night in wellies. A Scarborough success turned into a National tragedy - caused by the latter's superior manpower and technology.

The moral is clear: those who live by machinery also die by it. In fact, our attitude to theatrical machinery is highly ambivalent. When it works, we applaud it; when it does not, we damn it with Luddite vehemence.

Clearly one of the big attractions for audiences of the 1980s musical was the prospect of hi-tech spectacle. *Les Misérables* was, for me, little more than TV's *The Fugitive* in period costume but audiences nightly thrilled to the moment when the cantilevered bridges of John Napier's set swung into action. And one of the great attractions of *Miss Saigon* was the sight of a helicopter landing on the roof of the American embassy to rescue the beleaguered troops.

But such reliance on technology carries its own built-in disaster scenario. Robert Lepage is undeniably a great innovator who seeks to synthesise theatre, film, video, art, architecture and dance: his company is even called *Ex Machina*. At its best - as in the cosmonaut's space dance at the end of *The Far Side of the Moon* - it can be magical.

But I remember how we all turned up for his eagerly awaited one-man show, *Elsinore*, at Edinburgh in 1995 only to find it had been cancelled. The reason was the

breakdown of the inordinately complex revolving box that enabled him to play all of Hamlet's key characters in quick succession. It was not merely an indictment of theatre's dependence on technology. When I finally saw Lepage's show, I realised that its artistic nullity was due to character and story having been subordinated to soulless mechanical trickery.

Theatre always offers a dialectic between order and disorder: this is what makes it a metaphor for life. One of its seductions is its capacity to overcome disaster and the combined fallibility of men and machines. A classic case was provided by the saga of Peter Hall's trio of late Shakespeares in 1988. The human problems started with the casting of Imogen in *Cymbeline* which, after two mishaps, finally went to Geraldine James. But the real difficulties began when the productions toured to the old, arthritic Soviet Union.

In Moscow, the first night of *Cymbeline* was threatened with cancellation because the KGB refused to unlock a vital stage door. By the time I caught up with the company in Georgia, the sets and costumes for the whole season were still making their way by truck from Moscow.

As they made their fraught cross-continental journey, we pored hourly over maps to see if the trucks would arrive in time. Of course, they didn't, and it was later suspected they had been sabotaged. But the company decided the show must continue minus sets and costumes - and the result was one of those miracles in which you actually saw Shakespeare in its purest, most anatomical form.

Sometimes, it is the battle between human ingenuity and unforeseen hazards that provides theatre's greatest pleasures. A revealing example occurred only this week on the first night of *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. It is a highly professional Broadway show but one lacking heart - until an interesting thing happened. One of the residents of Mrs Meers's all-girl hotel bouncily tried to exit through one of the doors, but it remained obstinately jammed. It was a tiny incident, but for a second the whole extravagant enterprise ground to a halt, and a bond of sympathy was established between actors and audience. We suddenly saw that there were people inside the well-oiled machine.

Today's mishaps simply replicate on a larger canvas the routine hazards of weekly rep, when this kind of thing happened all the time: sets collapsed, doors stuck, cues were missed. All that has changed is the scale: where sets once shook, hydraulic stages now stick and revolves jam. In the end, disaster and the theatre are inseparable.

And, while one sets out in search of perfection, there is something reassuring about the lurking possibility of disaster, about the prospect of what Michael Frayn calls "the great dark chaos behind the set, inside the heart and brain" reminding us of the human fallibility of the whole insanely precarious enterprise. As in life itself, the abyss is only a single footstep away.

• *Way Upstream* is at the Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough (01723 370541), until November 15. *Thoroughly Modern Millie* is at the Shaftesbury Theatre, London WC2 (020 7379 5399, until January 24.

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