



show

Full steam ahead

Robert Wogan's lightshow on classic ship featured in PBS documentary airing this Saturday

In 1952 the *SS United States* hit the high seas: the fastest ocean liner ever built. For 17 years, she never had an engine failure, and could steam 10,000 miles without stopping to refuel. She was the largest passenger vessel ever built, and designed to be easily converted to troop-ship duty if need be. But the *SS United States* was soon obsolete – not through any misdeed; her 2,000 tons of aluminum have stood at the ready since 1996 in a Philadelphia shipyard. She simply outlasted the heyday of the great transatlantic voyage. By the late 1960s, her 1,000-member crew often outnumbered

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passengers aboard. By 1969, she was put into dry-dock at Newport News, Virginia for her annual sprucing-up. She never carried another paying passenger.

After passing through several owners including Cunard and her current ones, Norwegian Cruise Lines, the ship stands awaiting her fate. Renovations would be costly, even if a new generation could be attracted to luxury travel. Bragging of being totally fireproof in her day, any restoration work would now necessitate the removal of a great deal of asbestos from the interior. The *SS United States* Foundation is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to protecting and restoring "one of our country's greatest maritime symbols." Unfortunately, the Foundation has no legal say in the great ship's fate. It is hopeful that justice be done.

Kingston artist/builder Robert Wogan knew something of cruise ships: "As a young man, my father took me on cruises. He was a boat-lover." In the 1990s, Wogan specialized in artwork that used as its focal point "the obsolete and abandoned." He would light old buildings or other remains of the day, then reproduce the effect in a smaller scale for gallery shows. A friend in Philly told Wogan that he could get him onto the *United States*, that he had a connection.

Wogan was awestruck from the moment



(TOP PHOTO) VIEW OF THE *SS UNITED STATES* LIGHT INSTALLATION CREATED BY ROBERT WOGAN (PICTURED BELOW)



he got on board. "It felt like a crime to me that this ship was sitting here whiling away. How could this happen to the greatest ship in the world?" He conceived of another lighting project, *United Radiance* – one that would illuminate the ship's stacks in a similar way to how they appeared at night during a voyage. Cunard, the ship's owner at the time, "thought it would be a good publicity campaign," said Wogan. The company still hoped to restore and sail the *United States*.

On July 4, 1999, after Wogan's crew

dragged generators and other equipment aboard, the stacks were lit. Wogan had hoped for more publicity than what was received, but was happy with the results nonetheless. Ten years later, PBS producers have created a documentary on the *SS United States*, *Lady in Waiting*. Wogan said that it's been broadcast in the West

already, but is set to make its Northeast debut on Channel 13 on July 5.

In addition to his light show, the documentary will include some footage shot by Wogan on the sly while he worked aboard the ship: "While happening to be on the ship, I felt compelled to get in the engine room." He attached an infrared camera to a hardhat and created *Below*, which was also included in his gallery shows. It's an hour long, and Wogan said, "This was for me the meat of the project." A ten-minute teaser is available on YouTube.

During the filming of the documentary, Wogan was also asked to recreate *United Radiance*. He said that the original lighting company donated new parts to repair the abandoned equipment. The lights worked briefly, and this is documented in the film.

Wogan still worries about the ultimate fate of the *SS United States*, and his light piece was motivated by this concern. "This was like a beacon, and I wanted it to be known that this ship was there." For pictures and more information, see Wogan's websites, www.woganworks.com and www.wogan.com.

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