

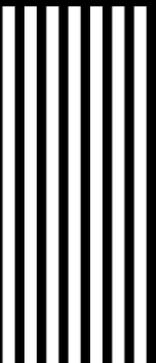


# SILENT SKY

BY LAUREN GUNDERSON



DRAMATISTS  
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SILENT SKY was commissioned by and premiered at South Coast Repertory (Marc Masterson, Artistic Director; Paula Tomei, Managing Director), in Costa Mesa, California, with support from the Elizabeth George Foundation, as part of the 2011 Pacific Playwrights Festival. It was directed by Anne Justine D’Zmura; the scenic design was by John Iacovelli; the costume design was by David Kay Mickelsen; the lighting design was by York Kennedy; the original music was by Lewis Flinn; the projection design was by John Crawford; the dramaturg was John Glore; and the production manager was Joshua Marchesi. The cast was as follows:

HENRIETTA LEAVITT ..... Monette Magrath  
MARGARET LEAVITT ..... Erin Cottrell  
PETER SHAW ..... Nick Toren  
ANNIE CANNON ..... Colette Kilroy  
WILLIAMINA FLEMING ..... Amelia White

## CHARACTERS

HENRIETTA LEAVITT (LEH-vit): 30s, brilliant, meticulous, excited — almost always wearing a period hearing-aid.

MARGARET LEAVITT: 30s, homebody, creative, sweet, sister.

PETER SHAW: 30s, the head astronomer's apprentice ... and the man.

ANNIE CANNON: 40s, the leader, terse and sure, grows into a firebrand.

WILLIAMINA FLEMING: 50s, smart as a whip and fun, Scottish.

## SETTINGS

1900–1920.

Star field.

The Harvard Observatory 2nd-floor offices.

Leavitt home, Wisconsin.

Ocean liner on the Atlantic.

Henrietta's home, Cambridge, MA.

## NOTES

Sets: Simple, representational, flexible — e.g. a period desk, not a whole room. Swift transitions are key.

Stars: The star field from the Northern Hemisphere should be almost ever-present; even if the stage lights disappear, the stars shine and cradle the set.

Photographic Plates: These should be black and white window-pane-sized glass of the star field. They are negatives of the true night sky — stars are black and sky is white. For examples see: <http://tdc-www.harvard.edu/plates/gallery/>

Music: Margaret's piano composition and playing should be live (seemingly), then augmented by a fully encompassing sound as the stars take over. (*See Note on Music on following page.*)

Magellanic: MAJ-eh-LAN-ic  
Cepheid: SEH-fid  
Andromedae: An-DRAH-muh-DIE

More research and images here: [SilentSkyPlay.tumblr.com](https://www.silent-sky-play.com)

### **NOTE ON MUSIC**

Original music composed for the play by Jenny Giering is available for licensing through the Play Service. Please visit the SILENT SKY page on [www.dramatists.com](http://www.dramatists.com) for more information regarding the ordering and use of the original music, and to hear samples.

*“In our troubled days it is good to have something  
outside our planet, something fine and distant for comfort.”*

—Annie Jump Cannon

# SILENT SKY

## ACT ONE

### Scene 1

*The late evening sky outside Henrietta and Margaret's father's rural Massachusetts church — about 1900 ...*

*A ruddy sun sets on Henrietta — a fiercely smart woman, curious, energetic, spilling over her own traditionalism. Dressed primly and warmly, she points to the sky above her.*

HENRIETTA. Heaven's up there, they say. "Pearly clouds, pearly gates," they say. They don't know much about astronomy, I say. *(The sun is gone and the sky darkens into night.)* The science of light on high. Of all that is far-off and lonely and stuck in the deepest dark of space. Dark but for billions and billions of ... *(The first star to peek out. A single note accompanies it.)* Exceptions. *(As the sister stars emerge. Another note.)* And I insist on the exceptional. *(As the night sky suddenly brightens into stark day — Margaret sneaks up on Henrietta and pinches her.)* Ow — *What are you doing?*

MARGARET. You know church is about to start. You know this and you're avoiding it and you've been caught.

HENRIETTA. I haven't been caught, I've been attacked.

MARGARET. With love.

HENRIETTA. With pinches. What kind of world is this.

MARGARET. You're not wearing your hearing-aid, you're fair game. Church. Now.

HENRIETTA. I can't hear now.

MARGARET. Oh yes you can, We're Waiting I'm freezing Come In.

HENRIETTA. Margie, I'm sorry but I cannot sit still right now.  
MARGARET. The only thing you have to do in church is sit still.  
Now tell me what's going on or come inside.  
HENRIETTA. I've been trying to tell you all week but you're busy  
and you're barking and —  
MARGARET. (*Bark-like.*) *I don't bark.* I'm running the house, and  
Daddy's running the church, and *you* — What are you doing? Staying  
up all night? In the cold? Like a moth?  
HENRIETTA. What is wrong with you this morning, Miss Jumpy.  
MARGARET. I'm not jumpy —  
HENRIETTA. I'm not a moth —  
MARGARET. Why are we still outside?!  
HENRIETTA. *Because.* They have a job for me at Harvard. At the  
Observatory. Actual astronomy.  
MARGARET. Since when were you even looking for a job.  
HENRIETTA. Since they offered. Margie, this is an extraordinary  
thing. They need mathematicians and they asked me specifically —  
MARGARET. Harvard asked *you*?  
HENRIETTA. Yes and please don't hold back your tone of shock.  
MARGARET. This is shocking — I am shocked.  
HENRIETTA. And I'm ... leaving. I'm taking the job and I'm  
leaving. (*Holding out a letter. Beat.*)  
MARGARET. You've always been leaving.  
HENRIETTA. Next week.  
MARGARET. Next...? Oh Henri. Now wait. We need to discuss  
this as a family.  
HENRIETTA. Margie, this could be my best life and it's right in  
front of me.  
MARGARET. And I'm still freezing. (*Turns to go.*)  
HENRIETTA. Margie, talk to me —  
MARGARET. Fine — yes — I know that we were never going to be  
grow-old-next-to-each-other kind of sisters, and the way you drive  
me crazy makes that for the best — but — Henrietta this is extreme.  
HENRIETTA. Exactly. Come with me. (*Small pause.*)  
MARGARET. Oh, Henri, please.  
HENRIETTA. Both of us. Come on.  
MARGARET. What are you talking about? That's absurd.  
HENRIETTA. Only a little! You're the only person who understands  
me, and you're always up for an adventure, and I *do* want to get old  
and scrappy with you.

MARGARET. I did not say scrappy.

HENRIETTA. You should come with me and fire up your heart!

MARGARET. What are you talking about?

HENRIETTA. The edge of the wide world!

MARGARET. It's Boston.

HENRIETTA. A blaze of learning!

MARGARET. A *blaze*?

HENRIETTA. A blaze! And Radcliffe is nearby and they have a music school.

MARGARET. Henri. Slow down.

HENRIETTA. You don't have to stay here. You can be happy, you can loose yourself —

MARGARET. *Loose* my — ? No. Stop. Do not start wearing bloomers.

HENRIETTA. Margie.

MARGARET. *Wait*. There are women these days, and they wear pants, and it's ridiculous. Now I have to play the hymns for the service that started ten minutes ago, and thank you, sister, my fingers are numb.

HENRIETTA. *I need you to convince Daddy to give me my dowry. (This stops Margie cold.)* I'm serious. Very. Please talk to him.

MARGARET. *Why do I get all the yelling jobs?*

HENRIETTA. You're so good at it.

MARGARET. This is your future, Henrietta. You know for certain that you'll never marry, you'll never fall in love — people do that. Uncoordinated, unplanned emotion — Just the word "spinster," Henrietta, please.

HENRIETTA. I need to start my life ... with Daddy's money.

MARGARET. Next the bloomers. Whiskey with suffragettes.

HENRIETTA. I'm not a cowboy.

MARGARET. You know what I'm talking about.

HENRIETTA. I'm talking about astronomy. You keep talking about terrible pants.

MARGARET. *It starts with pants*. It's a changing world. And some things should be sacred. And I'm not saying you shouldn't go — but I worry. It's far away, that place, and it's crowded, and you're still here in my sight and I worry.

HENRIETTA. I'll be doing math. Don't worry.

MARGARET. Why not stay here and live with us and ... teach?

HENRIETTA. No.

MARGARET. Like every other girl with your temperament.

HENRIETTA. *I like my temperament* and I don't want it stuffed in a

schoolhouse. I have questions, I have fundamental problems with the state of human knowledge! Who are we, why are we — where are we?!  
MARGARET. Wisconsin.  
HENRIETTA. In the universe!  
MARGARET. Still Wisconsin.  
HENRIETTA. *Margie*, I am not just curious I am charged and poised and you *know* that I'll just get more and more annoying until I go — You know this — You know this. (*Margie knows this. Pause.*)  
MARGARET. One day there will be a word for you. Just — for me, for our father, who will only after much snorting approve of this — when you go? Take a Bible.  
HENRIETTA. I think Harvard has those.  
MARGARET. You know what I mean. We look in the same direction — (*Points up.*) but our understanding is ... distinct.  
HENRIETTA. I love you. It's too cold for God.  
MARGARET. That's why we keep Him inside.  
HENRIETTA. *Margie*, come with me.  
MARGARET. *I can't.*  
HENRIETTA. Why not?  
MARGARET. Because Father counts on me, and if you leave I can't leave, and I don't want to leave and ... Samuel proposed. (*Moment.*)  
HENRIETTA. What.  
MARGARET. To marry.  
HENRIETTA. Who?  
MARGARET. Henri.  
HENRIETTA. I mean, "when."  
MARGARET. This morning, thank you for noticing.  
HENRIETTA. Aha, jumpy.  
MARGARET. Yes. Other people's lives are also in progress.  
HENRIETTA. Is he...?  
MARGARET. Inside looking very attentive until the service ends. And I answer.  
HENRIETTA. What's your answer?  
MARGARET. Of course I will.  
HENRIETTA. To Samuel?  
MARGARET. Well I wanted to talk to you first.  
HENRIETTA. You'd leave me for Samuel?  
MARGARET. You just said you're leaving me!  
HENRIETTA. Not for Samuel!  
MARGARET. He is very good and ... (*Small pause.*)

HENRIETTA. Yes. He is.

MARGARET. He is. And I'm happy.

HENRIETTA. Then ... I am too. (*They hug — marriage! Yay!*)  
Come with me.

MARGARET. Just ... come back. (*Squeezes Henri's hand and runs inside.*)

HENRIETTA. And so. I go. (*Preps herself as ... The Harvard Observatory falls into place around her ... We hear Margaret singing "For the Beauty of the Earth."*)

MARGARET.

*For the beauty of the Earth,  
For the glory of the skies;  
For the love which from our birth,  
Over and around us lies;*

*Lord of all, to Thee we raise  
This, our hymn of grateful praise.  
(Margaret fades away. Transition ... )*

## Scene 2

*Henrietta stands in the vacant room of the Harvard Observatory — A small wooden room like an attic — desks, file drawers, and boxes fill the room.*

*Peter — unintentionally handsome, a bit bumbling — enters briskly, a pencil behind his ear, charts, papers.*

HENRIETTA. Excuse me, is this the Observatory office?

PETER. Oh — yes — Hello. You must be my ten o'clock. Miss Leavitt. You are Miss Leavitt?

HENRIETTA. I am. Henrietta Leavitt and I'm thrilled to —

PETER. Good. We'll make this quick. It's not that complicated.

HENRIETTA. May I just say how pleased I am to meet you, Dr. Pickering. I am so honored —

PETER. No.

HENRIETTA. I'm not?

PETER. *I'm* not.

HENRIETTA. You're not Dr. Pickering?

PETER. I am.

HENRIETTA. You *are* Dr. Pickering?

PETER. So sorry. My name is Peter Shaw. I work for Pickering.

HENRIETTA. Oh. Lovely. Mr. Shaw. Nice to meet you. Colleagues then. (*Peter snorts.*)

PETER. You actually work *for* me. And I work for him. So.

HENRIETTA. So we're still colleagues it would seem.

PETER. Technically yes but —

HENRIETTA. And here I thought Harvard was such a technical place.

PETER. No, I just mean that — I mean of course it is it's just — You see I'm Dr. Pickering's apprentice — Junior Fellow in Astronomical Research, summa cum laude, Mathematics *and* Physics.

HENRIETTA. And if you spot me I'll swoon.

PETER. What?

HENRIETTA. It's a technical term. Now, Mr. Shaw I've come a long way and I'm quite anxious to get started. (*He's staring a bit too long at her.*) May I?

PETER. Hm?

HENRIETTA. Get started. Or just point me to the telescope and I'll be fine.

PETER. The telescope?

HENRIETTA. (*Looking out a window.*) Is that it? The Great Refractor.

PETER. Yes, but —

HENRIETTA. One of the largest in the world.

PETER. I am very aware. Quite a point of pride for us. But. *This* is the workroom for you girls ... to work. In here.

HENRIETTA. A short orientation then.

PETER. We bring the Girls' Department photographic plates from the telescope — latest technology.

HENRIETTA. Yes. Good. Question. Why all women?

PETER. Oh. This is great. Pickering got fed up with the boys he was sent and said — really said this — that his housekeeper could do better, so he hired her. And she did better. Now it's quite a women's ... world ... up here.

HENRIETTA. I was expecting the usual world.

PETER. Oh I make regular rounds.

HENRIETTA. Rounds?

PETER. I come around.

HENRIETTA. To what end?

PETER. (*Snort-laugh.*) Evaluation. Of course.

HENRIETTA. Mr. Shaw, I also graduated summa cum laude, from Radcliffe, which is basically Harvard in skirts and lucky for us the universe doesn't much care what you wear, so my expertise and yours might just complement each other's if we can get past this encroachingly unpleasant first impression. (*Re: her hearing-aid.*) Or I could take this out, and you could keep ... orienting.

PETER. Well. You'll fit right in the harem.

HENRIETTA. The WHAT?

PETER. Oh — no — nono — it's just a name — a joke — "Pickering's harem." It's a compliment.

HENRIETTA. If you're a concubine.

PETER. He picks the best is what we mean. We could just call you that — "Pickering's Best." "Pickering's Picks" — That's got a ring. (*Glances quickly at her hand —*) You don't. (*Henrietta looks too, hides her hand. Pause. Awkward.*)

HENRIETTA. I was supposed to meet Dr. Pickering at ten.

PETER. Yes. Yes. And he sends his warmest welcome through me. He was detained. More important — not "important," *pressing*. More pressing matters. I'll show you around.

HENRIETTA. I'll come back.

PETER. There's no need for that.

HENRIETTA. I'd prefer to speak directly to the Head of the Department.

PETER. Miss Leavitt —

HENRIETTA. Mr. Shaw. I don't mean to be brisk — maybe a little if that would drive home the point that I'm *finally* here. After a long time not being anywhere. And I'd really like to get started, and all you've thus far conveyed is that I'm in some kind of *math harem* waiting to be *picked* — and that doesn't sound right at *all*.

PETER. I am so sorry. And Dr. Pickering is thrilled to have you here. And I'd get in a lot of trouble with him if I ran you off on your first day. So. Please stay. We'd very much like you to stay. (*Pause.*)

HENRIETTA. You don't sound very excited about all this work.

PETER. Well, it is *work*.

HENRIETTA. It's not your — how best to make you uncomfortable — *passion*?

PETER. That's a bit excessive for physics.

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