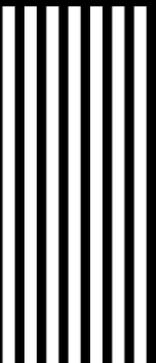




THE EXPLORERS CLUB

BY NELL BENJAMIN



DRAMATISTS
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THE EXPLORERS CLUB was presented in New York City by Manhattan Theatre Club (Lynne Meadow, Artistic Director; Barry Grove, Executive Producer; Mandy Greenfield, Artistic Producer) at City Center Stage I, opening on June 20, 2013. It was directed by Marc Bruni; the set design was by Donyale Werle; the costume design was by Anita Yavich; the lighting design was by Philip Rosenberg; the sound design was by Darron L West; the music was by Laurence O’Keefe; the production stage manager was Michael McGoff; and the production manager was Joshua Helman. The cast was as follows:

LUCIUS FRETWAY.....Lorenzo Pisoni
PHYLLIDA SPOTTE-HUME/
COUNTESS GLAMORGAN Jennifer Westfeldt
HARRY PERCY..... David Furr
LUIGI Carson Elrod
PROFESSOR COPE Brian Avers
PROFESSOR SLOANE John McMartin
PROFESSOR WALLING.....Steven Boyer
SIR BERNARD HUMPRHIES Max Baker
BEEBE/AN IRISH ASSASSIN Arnie Burton

CHARACTERS

LUCIUS FRETWAY, a botanist and a man of science.

PHYLLIDA SPOTTE-HUME, an anthropologist.

HARRY PERCY, an intrepid explorer.

LUIGI, a NaKong tribesman.

PROFESSOR COPE, an herpetologist.

PROFESSOR SLOANE, an archeo-theologist.

PROFESSOR WALLING, a zoologist.

SIR BERNARD HUMPHRIES, private secretary to Queen Victoria.

BEEBE, an explorer (also plays the Irish Assassin).

COUNTESS GLAMORGAN, a countess, née Andromache Spotte-Hume, twin to Phyllida (played by the same actress).

PLACE

London.

TIME

1879.

A Note on the Language

NaKong does have a grammar, and it is reflected in the play. Luigi should *never* improvise dialogue that does not follow the NaKong grammar. See “Some Basics on the NaKong Language” on page 51.

THE EXPLORERS CLUB

ACT ONE

We are in the bar of the Explorers Club. It is decorated in high Victorian style, with dark woods, leather chairs, and weird souvenirs from various expeditions like snowshoes, African masks, and hideous bits of taxidermy.

There is a sofa, a bar, and several cushy club chairs. A stair leads up to club bedrooms. There is a door to the outside, a door to the dining room, and a window that the characters can see out of, but the audience cannot.

The sound of applause. Hearty, yet restrained.

Lights up on Lucius Fretway, botanist, in the midst of addressing the club members at their annual meeting. The audience should feel as if they are members as well.

Listening to Lucius are Professor Cope, Professor Walling, and Professor Sloane. Professor Walling is holding a guinea pig. Professor Cope wears a cobra around his neck.

ALL. (*Singing.*)

... THOU UNLOCK'ST EV'RY MYSTERY.

SCIENCE! SCIENCE! HAIL TO THEE!

SCIENCE! SCIENCE! HAIL TO THEE!

LUCIUS. ... Gentlemen, good evening and welcome to the annual meeting of the Explorers Club. (*The members applaud and say "Hear, hear!"*) I have the honor to be acting as president pro tempore in the absence of Harry Percy, who is still leading the Pole expedition.

I know our prayers are with him. (*Solemn response from the members.*) Now, excellent news for our club: Two of our own have an audience with Queen Victoria at the palace tomorrow. (*Professor Cope stands. An unassuming man, except for the deadly cobra draped around his neck.*) Professor Cope, as many of you know, discovered a deadly new species of cobra on his last herpetological expedition ...

COPE. Her name is Rosie.

LUCIUS. Yes, and tomorrow ...

COPE. She's named for my mother.

LUCIUS. Yes. Thank you, Professor Cope. (*Cope sits, as club applauds him.*) Also presenting at the palace tomorrow is our own Professor Walling, who has done some amazing behavioral studies with his guinea pigs. (*Professor Walling, holding a guinea pig, also interrupts.*)

WALLING. *Cavia porcellus*, if you please. Loveable creatures. Very clever. I designed an experiment in which I put food outside their cages to see if they would be able to figure out the latches. And you know they did. And now I can't find any of them. I think they're in the walls or something. This one, Jane, had some trouble with the latch, so I've still got her. (*Getting glum.*) In retrospect it wasn't the best-designed experiment.

COPE. (*Helpfully.*) But you've proven their intelligence!

WALLING. (*Cheering up.*) Yes. Yes I have! Thank you, Cope. You always know how to make me feel better! They said a man who studies snakes and a man who studies prey could never be friends, but we've proved them wrong, eh?

COPE. We have!

WALLING. Science is the great equalizer.

LUCIUS. Indeed. To Science!

ALL. To Science! (*All drink proudly, then make disgusted noises at their drinks.*)

LUCIUS. Yes, a word about the cocktails. I'm afraid our club bartender, Roger, has been having some personal problems, so he's not doing his best work, but many of us feel that discharging him would be kicking a man when he's down, so you'll have to bear with the drinks until we get it sorted. (*Change of topic.*) And now, gentlemen, on to our annual Glamorgan Lecturer. I am very excited to introduce an exceptional explorer and scientist, whom, in fact, I hope to propose for membership. She has recently achieved ... (*Sounds of consternation.*)

SLOANE. “She”?!

COPE. Steady on, Lucius!

WALLING. There are no female members of this club!

LUCIUS. Gentlemen, gentlemen ... please. I know this is unorthodox, but we are men of progress. We must not judge by old categories, but look to the future. And I think you will find that her work speaks for itself. Gentlemen, please welcome Miss Phyllida Spotte-Hume, the first explorer to discover the Lost City of Pahatlabong! (*The members, amazed, mutter among themselves [“She did what?!” “The Lost City of Pahatlabong!” “We all thought it was a myth!” etc.] as Lucius leads out Phyllida Spotte-Hume and Luigi.*)

PHYLLIDA. Gentlemen of the Explorers Club, I thank you. I shall endeavor to prove worthy of the honor you do me. May I present to you all: a genuine warrior of the NaKong tribe of the Lost City of Pahatlabong! Luigi, *na’I haaru*. (*Luigi steps forward. He is painted blue. He wears a strange combination of tattoos, feathers, and knickerbockers. Delighted reaction from club members.*) His name is not actually Luigi, but *Loo-ah-JA-mweno-wepta-nefesmat-naaru-sengway*. Which translates roughly to “Strikes without Warning and Waters the Ground with Your Blood.” I have shortened it to “Luigi” for simplicity’s sake.

LUIGI. Luigi.

PHYLLIDA. (*Returning to notes.*) Of my full journey to Pahatlabong, I will say little. It was grueling. Although we had set out well-provided with canned meats, tea, cheap alcohol for the local guides, and better-quality alcohol for the stove, by the time we reached the island chain of Suk’haaru, we had exhausted everything. Deserted by those guides who had not died of alcohol poisoning, I crawled delirious through the swamps, and when I was found by Luigi, I was in possession of nothing more than the clothes on my back and a spoon ... Luckily for me, the NaKong god, Mogweet, is spoon-shaped. (*She holds up a spoon. Luigi falls to his knees.*)

LUIGI. *Mogweet Aleili!*

PHYLLIDA. So they greeted me as a messenger from their god. (*She puts away the spoon. Luigi rises.*) Luigi is a fierce fighter, like all NaKong. They have to be because Pahatlabong is the worst place on earth. The rocky soil cannot be farmed. All the trees have been cut down. They have hunted nearly all the animals to extinction and are forced to subsist on a jerky made of toad. The toad is poisonous. But most of the poison boils off when the toad is poached in urine. But

the NaKong will not move from their homeland. They say that long ago their god, Mogweet, commanded them to live there, saying it would make them strong, and when one of them asked why they could not be strong elsewhere, Mogweet grabbed him by the nostrils, flung him to the ground, and jumped up and down on his spine until he was dead. The NaKong celebrate this event every year, like Christmas. Only instead of singing carols and exchanging presents, they cower silently in their huts for two days. I will end this lecture here, as tomorrow I will be presenting Luigi to the queen, and he must rest after his journey, but I would be happy to continue my lecture series on this proud people, if invited back by this esteemed club. Thank you all. *(She gets a standing ovation.)*

LUCIUS. And thank you, Miss Spotte-Hume. There being no further business, this meeting is now adjourned. *(The club members come up to congratulate Phyllida.)*

WALLING. Wonderful lecture, Miss Spotte-Hume. I never thought I'd see a woman present at the Explorers Club, but you have proved me wrong.

PHYLLIDA. Thank you, Professor.

COPE. If you'd like to share a cab to the palace, Walling and I are going tomorrow as well.

PHYLLIDA. I'd be delighted.

SLOANE. I don't like it. This is an Explorers Club, not a garden party, Miss Spotte-Hume. Your science is adequate, but your sex is weak with sin and led astray with divers lusts. No offense.

PHYLLIDA. None taken, Professor...?

SLOANE. Sloane. Robert Sloane. Professor of archeo-theology.

PHYLLIDA. I'm sorry, of what?

SLOANE. Biblical science. God created science, and God wrote the Bible, and the Bible exhorts us to beware the evil woman.

LUCIUS. Gentlemen, shall we discuss it further over dinner?

SLOANE. Dinner! Excellent. *(Walling, Cope, and Sloane agree and exit, still discussing.)*

LUCIUS. Well done, Phyllida. I knew they'd be impressed. Are your guest accommodations comfortable?

PHYLLIDA. Luigi has a lovely room, thank you. And they've arranged a place for me as well.

LUCIUS. *(Pleased.)* Ah!

PHYLLIDA. I think it used to be the potato cellar.

LUCIUS. *(Less pleased.)* Ah.

PHYLLIDA. Lucius ... thank you for this. I know what it an imposition it is for you to propose me.

LUCIUS. (*Bashful.*) Well, you deserve it. You are ... an exceptional scientist. Will you and Luigi be joining us for dinner?

PHYLLIDA. Not until after the soup course, I think. All those spoons. And I must stay with him. He will wander off from time to time. And introduce himself to people.

LUCIUS. Well, we should encourage that, shouldn't we? (*Offering his hand to Luigi.*) Hello there, Luigi ...

PHYLLIDA. No, Lucius...! (*As Lucius extends his hand, Luigi promptly slaps him hard across the face.*) That is how the NaKong introduce themselves.

LUCIUS. Meeting the queen is a terrible idea.

PHYLLIDA. Don't be silly, Lucius. You don't shake hands with the queen. Luigi will bow. We've been working on it. Watch: Luigi! The queen! (*Luigi grovels on the floor.*)

LUGI. Mah-jah-stay!

PHYLLIDA. I think she'll be charmed.

LUCIUS. Phyllida, I wonder if I might have a moment...?

PHYLLIDA. Yes, of course. (*Whatever Lucius is going to say is hampered by Luigi standing awkwardly between them. Phyllida ignores Luigi, so Lucius decides to press forward.*)

LUCIUS. I'd like to show you this. (*Lucius fetches a beautiful little flower.*)

PHYLLIDA. Oh, that is lovely, Lucius! What is it?

LUCIUS. It is a brand new species I've discovered. I get to name it, you see, and, if I'm not being too forward, I've named it genus "*Phyllida*."

PHYLLIDA. For me? Why?

LUCIUS. Because it's beautiful ... And it has several interesting properties: It's like a drug, you see. If you inhale it just a little, you become confused and words don't seem to come out right. Inhale a little more and you feel all sorts of inexplicable ... hungers. Inhale even more, and you're filled with euphoria and happiness. So the name is quite appropriate, really.

PHYLLIDA. What if you take too much?

LUCIUS. Er ... coma and death, which is not so appropriate.

PHYLLIDA. No, that's actually insulting.

LUCIUS. But it's hard to take too much because you get intense itching well before you overdose.

THE EXPLORERS CLUB

by Nell Benjamin

9M, 2W (doubling)

London, 1879. The prestigious Explorers Club is in crisis: their acting president wants to admit a woman and their bartender is terrible. True, this female candidate is brilliant, beautiful, and has discovered a legendary lost city, but the decision to let in a woman could shake the very foundation of the British Empire, and how do you make such a decision without a decent drink? Grab your safety goggles for some very mad science involving deadly cobras, irate Irishmen, and the occasional airship.

"You don't have to be British to lose your composure and howl with laughter at THE EXPLORERS CLUB, a witty spoof of all those bold Victorian adventurers who ravaged foreign lands and annihilated indigenous cultures in the name of science." —Variety

"[T]he title location is where Victorian men of science ponder the mysteries of nature while genteelly getting blotto ... But the most impressive act of mixology belongs to playwright Nell Benjamin, whose comedy recipe goes a little like this: two parts Blackadder, one part Monty Python, a dash of Shaw, shake wildly and garnish with fresh feminist ire." —Time Out (New York)

"The jokes come barreling fast and furious ... but, like most farces, the effect is cumulative. By the time all the various comic strands start weaving together in the second act, the silliness has gotten contagious." —Entertainment Weekly

"In her hijinks-happy cocktail THE EXPLORERS CLUB, Nell Benjamin follows this recipe: To a starchy bunch of science geeks bemoaning the worst barkeep in London, add a plucky adventurer and her discovery, a trouble-making tribesman. Then shake, stir, serve in an eye-catching vessel, and brace for laughter."

—New York Daily News

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