



# SILENT SKY

BY LAUREN GUNDERSON



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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.



# SILENT SKY

by Lauren Gunderson

1M, 4W

When Henrietta Leavitt begins work at the Harvard Observatory in the early 1900s, she isn't allowed to touch a telescope or express an original idea. Instead, she joins a group of women "computers," charting the stars for a renowned astronomer who calculates projects in "girl hours" and has no time for the women's probing theories. As Henrietta, in her free time, attempts to measure the light and distance of stars, she must also take measure of her life on Earth, trying to balance her dedication to science with family obligations and the possibility of love. The true story of 19th-century astronomer Henrietta Leavitt explores a woman's place in society during a time of immense scientific discoveries, when women's ideas were dismissed until men claimed credit for them. Social progress, like scientific progress, can be hard to see when one is trapped among earthly complications; Henrietta Leavitt and her female peers believe in both, and their dedication changed the way we understand both the heavens and Earth.

*"... sheer magic [is] in Lauren Gunderson's SILENT SKY. ... Gunderson [writes] economically and with bursts of smart, infectious humor."*

—San Francisco Chronicle

*"... SILENT SKY could act as a simple reminder of what a pleasant, thought-provoking evening at the theater ought to look like. It's a lively, funny, accessible play that's alive with interesting ideas."*

—ArtsAtl.com

*"[SILENT SKY] is a startling, entertaining true story of a brilliant, history-making woman — hitherto unknown to many of us."*

—AtlantaInTown.com

*"Lauren Gunderson's luminously beautiful play SILENT SKY is an intellectual epic told on an intimate scale. Bottom line: Heavenly."*

—Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Also by Lauren Gunderson  
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