

A decorative element consisting of seven vertical black lines of equal height and width, positioned to the left of the title.

# SILENT SKY

BY **LAUREN  
GUNDERSON**

A decorative element consisting of seven horizontal black lines of equal height and width, positioned below the star and to the left of the publisher's name.

★  
DRAMATISTS  
PLAY SERVICE  
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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](http://SilentSkyPlay.tumblr.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

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.



HENRIETTA. Is it? I find the very notion of this work to be a thrill — a bracing excitement. And it's just something you *do*?

PETER. Well I enjoy the work, of course I do. It's interesting and reasoned and sound and my father pulled a lot of strings to — WhyDidYouSay“Passion”?

HENRIETTA. Unlike for some people, following this curiosity was not easy. I had to insist, which requires a dedicated desire unmatched by reason, which is called passion. You should try it. *(Tiny pause.)*

PETER. *(Blurting this out.)* I sing. Gilbert and Sullivan — I wanted to be an actor — Dad thought not — But — I still sing — On occasion — With enthusiasm. Does that count?

HENRIETTA. Technically. *(Slightly embarrassed, he picks up a glass star plate. Back to orienting.)*

PETER. Well. Here you go. One of the plates you'll be working with. A slice of heaven.

HENRIETTA. Beautiful. I should take one to my father.

PETER. *Excuse me.*

HENRIETTA. He's a pastor.

PETER. These never leave the premises.

HENRIETTA. You said “heaven,” I was joking.

PETER. Harvard property —

HENRIETTA. Of course —

PETER. Very expensive —

HENRIETTA. And if you don't mention the attempted larceny and I won't mention the musicals. *(She extends her hand, he takes it, shakes it.)*

PETER. You're ... curious.

HENRIETTA. In every way. *(A bustle outside — women coming back from break.)*

PETER. Oh, they're back. Watch out for Miss Fleming — Scottish stock. Swift and angry.

HENRIETTA. Oh my.

PETER. And Miss Cannon — don't get in her way, her name is Dickensian.

HENRIETTA. But I'd like to ask about —

PETER. What else can I tell you — Penmanship — key. Delicacy with the plates, they crack.

HENRIETTA. Mr. Shaw —

PETER. Twenty-five cents an hour.

HENRIETTA. I would love a chance to pursue —

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PETER. It's good money for women's work.

HENRIETTA. It's volunteering.

PETER. What are you asking, Miss Leavitt? (*Annie and Williamina enter, unnoticed.*)

HENRIETTA. That I might more fully engage in the ideas here?

PETER. Other than doing the work you've been hired to do?

HENRIETTA. Other than, pardon me, *do your math*. Now when may I use the telescope?

PETER. (*Flustered, not dismissive.*) Well. You can't. (*Henrietta is too shocked to answer. Annie clears her throat.*)

ANNIE. I'll take over, Mr. Shaw.

PETER. Yes — very good — Started to brief her.

WILLIAMINA. Then I'd be brief.

PETER. Yes — well — Good day, ladies. (*To Henrietta.*) I'll see you ... around. (*He leaves. They look at Henrietta.*)

WILLIAMINA. Welcome, Miss Leavitt.

HENRIETTA. Thank you. Hello. I was so excited to be here that I fear I might've scared him.

WILLIAMINA. Easy to do. Williamina Fleming. I like you.

HENRIETTA. Thank you.

ANNIE. Annie Cannon. I haven't decided.

HENRIETTA. Oh. Miss Cannon. I know that I probably shouldn't have gone on like that with him.

ANNIE. No you shouldn't.

HENRIETTA. And I'm sorry if I made a poor impression —

ANNIE. Harvard Observatory is the pinnacle of the astronomical community. The academic world looks to us.

HENRIETTA. To "bookkeep the stars," if you talk to Mr. Shaw.

ANNIE. Which is why we try not to talk to Mr. Shaw. We are mapping the sky, Miss Leavitt. If doing what has never been done before sounds unimportant to you, uninspired? I'd leave before you are asked to. Otherwise, show some respect.

HENRIETTA. Of course. And I would never —

ANNIE. Respect is a *quiet* thing, Miss Leavitt. Practice this.

HENRIETTA. Yes, Miss Cannon.

ANNIE. Practice now. (*Henrietta nods. Pause. Will holds up one of the photographic star plates.*)

WILLIAMINA. Let me show you what we do here, Miss Leavitt. This is the latest technology. A photograph of the stars. And we chart every point of light on every one.



WILLIAMINA. (*To Henrietta.*) And that, new friend, is how you introduce yourself without boasting.

ANNIE. I quit.

WILLIAMINA. (*To Annie.*) "Oh Be A Fine Grandma."

HENRIETTA. It's a great phrase.

ANNIE. We have WORK. TO DO. And Dr. Pickering is a very particular man.

WILLIAMINA. He calls us his *harem*.

ANNIE. He's joking.

WILLIAMINA. He's not. He measures a project in "girl hours."

ANNIE. He's joking.

WILLIAMINA. He's not. Sometimes "kilo-girl hours."

ANNIE. The point is, we're busy because we're essential.

WILLIAMINA. We're the dirt. (*Annie glares. Correcting ...*) From which mighty oaks grow.

HENRIETTA. And do we have a title of some sort?

WILLIAMINA. We do indeed. Congratulations, Miss Leavitt, you are now a computer.

HENRIETTA. What's a computer?

ANNIE. One who computes.

WILLIAMINA. Notate the plates, transfer the data, input the data, process, record, next star.

HENRIETTA. And the plates. How do I read them?

WILLIAMINA. Star Spanking. (*Annie reveals a wire-and-glass paddle like a small fly-swatter. Annie places the spanker over the plate.*)

ANNIE. Align the spanker with a star. The matching dot indicates how bright that star is. Record magnitude, position, date, and repeat until you fill up the logbook.

WILLIAMINA. Or go slightly crazy.

HENRIETTA. And what about working on our own ideas? Using the telescope for our own work?

ANNIE. You don't.

HENRIETTA. Oh. But I thought this was — ?

ANNIE. We collect, report, and maintain the largest stellar archive in the world. And we resist the temptation to analyze it.

HENRIETTA. But you just said how much you discovered here — both of you.

WILLIAMINA. Resisting doesn't always work.

ANNIE. Can you do this job, Miss Leavitt?

HENRIETTA. Of course I can.



ANNIE. I need the consistent, not the creative.

WILLIAMINA. She can do it, Annie. She understands.

ANNIE. Good. Please show Miss Leavitt to her station.

WILLIAMINA. Will do, Mr. President.

ANNIE. You make me crazy and you know you make me crazy.

WILLIAMINA. Balance of power, darling. *(Annie exits.)* Alright, you. More questions?

HENRIETTA. Is she mean or just to me?

WILLIAMINA. Oh nono. She's just meticulous. And blunt. And she sings.

HENRIETTA. Sings what?

WILLIAMINA. Like a crow, but still. Shows her humanity — atonal though it may be. You want her on your side. She's always on the right one.

HENRIETTA. Good. Because I have some pressing issues with ... science.

WILLIAMINA. The whole of it?

HENRIETTA. A lot of it. As far as I can tell we do not appear to know where we are. Astronomically. Which is shocking. This is the modern age. We've been looking *up* for millennia and we don't know how far away those stars are? We don't know if the Milky Way is the universe? That's just unacceptable.

WILLIAMINA. You're fun. But here's some perspective. I was Pickering's housekeeper before he brought me here. So we're a lot of things, but at present we are cleaning up the universe for the men. And making fun of them behind their backs. It's worked for centuries. *(Annie enters with more plates.)*

ANNIE. Working isn't talking.

Here we like to say: WILLIAMINA.  
The sky's the limit. The sky's the limit.

WILLIAMINA. And there's so damn much of it.

ANNIE. And so we work. *(She deposits the plates. The women sit down at their desks and work. As they label each star — a single bright star pops into being in their spare sky, accompanied by a musical note. Rote.)* Star Name —

HENRIETTA. Star Name —

WILLIAMINA. Star Name —

HENRIETTA. Alpha Leonis 3982.

ANNIE. Beta Orionis 1713.

WILLIAMINA. Ninety-five degrees declination.