

“Silent Sky” by Lauren Gunderson

**AUDITIONS FOR 4 WOMEN AND 1 MAN ON
SUNDAY, OCTOBER 4th and MONDAY, OCTOBER 5th at 7:00 p.m.**

Synopsis

Following the true story of Henrietta Leavitt and her team at Harvard Observatory, *Silent Sky* reveals the astonishing discoveries Leavitt made while battling for recognition in a man’s world of early 20th century astronomy.

The play opens with a discussion between sisters Henrietta and Margaret. Excitedly, Henrietta reveals to her sister a job offer she has received from Harvard, as they are in need of mathematicians at the observatory. Henrietta believes that this could be an opportunity to obtain “her best life” and is determined to have her fundamental questions of human knowledge answered: “Who are we, why are we, where are we?”

The year is 1900, and Henrietta begins to work as a “human computer” for Dr. Edward Pickering, mapping the stars. Eager to use Harvard’s telescope and filled with a passion for astronomy, Henrietta soon finds that she will not be able to participate in any astronomical discovery and will receive no scientific credit. Although she is only allowed to log the stars photographed only by her male coworkers, Henrietta refuses to be dissuaded.

Soon, Henrietta begins recording the changes in Cepheid stars, a discovery that greatly impacted the field of astronomy. Although Leavitt’s work ethic is admirable, her relationships begin to deteriorate. Her sister Margaret, love interest and Dr. Pickering’s apprentice, Peter Shaw, and colleagues Annie Cannon and Williamina Fleming are soon placed on the back burner as Leavitt focuses on this great discovery, explaining that “the point is, work is my life.”

Henrietta’s scientific discovery is vast and important, becoming “the first person to measure the universe,” but it isn’t the only discovery she makes. She comes to a personal realization: that to be truly alive she doesn’t need to know all the answers, but that “we need to be known.” Henrietta realizes that being a small part of something bigger is what makes life worth living in the end, insisting that “there is much more beyond ourselves.”

Cast Descriptions & Approximate Page Count

Henrietta Leavitt: 30’s, brilliant, meticulous, excited. ALWAYS wearing a period-correct hearing aid. Approx. page count: 50

Margaret Leavitt: 30's, homebody, creative. Henri's sweet sister. Sings and plays piano* Approx. page count: 21

** While ideally this actress should be able to play basic piano, this won't be a make or break for casting this role.*

Peter Shaw: 30's, the head astronomer's apprentice... and "the man". Approx. page count: 25

Annie Cannon: 40's, the leader of the women's "computer group" at Harvard, terse and sure. Approx. page count: 24

Williamina Fleming: 50's, smart as a whip and fun. Scottish* Approx. page count: 18

** Being able to mimic a Scottish accent or not won't be a make or break for casting this role.*

SILENT SKY

ACT ONE

Scene 1

The late evening sky outside Henrietta and Margaret's father's rural Wisconsin 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 right 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 library. (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~~

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 get it. Why Did You Say "Passion"?

HENRIETTA. Unlike for some people, following this curiosity is 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. *(Blurring this out.)* I sing. Gilbert and Sullivan — I want 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. They 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 murder — and I won't mention the musicals. *(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 — Scott's 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. Delicate with the plates, they crack.

HENRIETTA. Mr. Shaw —

PETER. Twenty-five cents an hour.

HENRIETTA. I would love a chance to pursue —

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.

ANNIE. Every single one.

WILLIAMINA. Every scattered sneeze of them.

ANNIE. *Will*, don't be crude

WILLIAMINA. They look like ground pepper till you get the hang of it.

ANNIE. Williamina is our best photometer, from whom you'll learn much if she doesn't get herself fired. (*Williamina smiles, Annie glares.*)

WILLIAMINA. I used to be her boss.

ANNIE. You still *are*. We share leadership of this department —

WILLIAMINA. She outdid me with those letters.

ANNIE. I did no such thing —

WILLIAMINA. The star classifications were her idea.

ANNIE. A *collective* effort, I assure you.

HENRIETTA. Star classifications? That's your work?

WILLIAMINA. Oh yes indeed, the sky was a riot until Miss Cannon coded it. *I* wanted to give every star a number based on color — but *she* insisted on labeling stars with *letters* based on *temperature* —

ANNIE. Ladies —

WILLIAMINA.

HENRIETTA.

OBAFGKM.

OBAFGKM —

Yes.

HENRIETTA. You created a ... standard, Miss Cannon. My goodness. I'm so honored. I'm sure you'd laugh, but my professors made us memorize your letters using this ridiculous phrase —

WILLIAMINA. She also made up that ridiculous phrase.

ANNIE. But I didn't mean for it to find its way into textbooks.

HENRIETTA. "Oh Be A Fine Girl, Kiss Me." You did that too?

WILLIAMINA. She had a muse.

ANNIE. *Miss Fleming.*

WILLIAMINA. She thought it would be best for the boys. That's all they think about anyway.

ANNIE. Let's get back to work please.

WILLIAMINA. (*To Henrietta — whispering.*) Because she's the boss.

~~ANNIE. I wouldn't have to be if you didn't insist on this ridiculous request of a woman who started the department. (*To Henrietta.*) You know Will was the first woman to ever hold the title "curator" in astronomy? And the *Dryden Catalogue* is *all* her work — She discovered stars, and nebulae, novae — She's the reason that I'm here, and even if she has far too much fun I am the first to admit that she is fundamental to this institution.~~

HENRIETTA. Oh my God.

PETER. Oh my God. Not to worry.

HENRIETTA. This is just —

PETER. Imposition, so sorry.

HENRIETTA. This —

PETER. My fault completely.

HENRIETTA. This is *so* exciting! She's right, I push through it, charge through it, matter of time — I know the answer is there — I just keep going. Right? Yes! *Hi. (Loudly awkward pause.)*

PETER. Hello. I just came by for my ... hat.

HENRIETTA. Oh.

PETER. My gloves — left my gloves — and I saw the light and I thought, "Well I wonder how all the spanking is going."

HENRIETTA. Might we all agree to another name for that?

~~PETER. I think that's for the best.~~

HENRIETTA. Mr. Shaw, I know I shouldn't be here this late.

PETER. Actually I'd prefer it — much prefer it if you called me by my given name. Peter. Would be — nicer, nice.

HENRIETTA. Oh. Henrietta.

PETER. Good. *(Takes his gloves out of his pocket.)* Found them. *(Starts to go but doesn't —)* Miss — Henrietta — I — I don't know anything about you really and — and that's a shame. So. Might I know something about you? Now. Would be nice.

HENRIETTA. Oh. I grew up in Lancaster, family in Wisconsin, my hearing's not great, and I used my dowry to get here, which is why I'm a bit zealous about all this.

PETER. Ah.

HENRIETTA. And I play the clarinet. Not well.

PETER. I play also. Also not well.

HENRIETTA. Then we could be terrible together! I mean — that's not what I mean. I have a habit of blurting.

PETER. And I have a Dachshund. Named Carl. Which is fun. *(He smiles, she smiles. He wants to say ... but doesn't.)* Carl awaits. *(Peter leaves, forgetting his hat. Henrietta smiles. Picks up his hat. Flips it and puts it on her head. Peter returns.)* Sorry. Hat. *(Henrietta hands him the hat. He touches her hand.)* I think that ... you might be quite ... marvelous. I think that. Often. *(Silence. He leaves.)*

HENRIETTA. Oh that is not standard. *(She smiles. Peter enters again. This is an outpouring of pent-up romantic enthusiasm in nearly one breath.)*

PETER. There's an ocean liner leaving tomorrow — You should be on

it — I'll be on it — I'm saying come with me — to Europe — For a month — or two? You don't have to decide now — but close to now because the liner leaves tomorrow — I said that — Pack warmly — cold at night — We might stop in Spain — And there's dancing and lobster and water and moonlight and bobbing around and that's romantic — or sickening — Either way there'll be an eclipse. Which is fun.

HENRIETTA. I ... oh my ... yes, that sounds ... very interesting.

PETER. Interesting?

HENRIETTA. Incredible.

PETER. Oh good.

HENRIETTA. If it weren't on a boat.

PETER. You don't like boats? I didn't think of that.

HENRIETTA. No, I just can't leave my work. I'm very close to something and —

PETER. The ladies can't manage?

HENRIETTA. Not *this* work, no. It's my findings and I've worked so hard and —

PETER. You don't have to leave it. I can pack them. You and me *and* work.

HENRIETTA. They crack.

PETER. So they'll be here when we get back.

HENRIETTA. I'm too close to leave — I'm so close.

PETER. But we could meet astronomers all over Europe. Talk about your ideas. See the world!

HENRIETTA. That sounds marvelous but why don't we just go to dinner?

PETER. Because you're always up here!

HENRIETTA. Then I can't go to Europe!

PETER. Henrietta.

HENRIETTA. Peter.

PETER. This is a rather large moment for me so I just want to be clear because it took me three years to get this far. So. Your mind and spirit ... I quite adore ... those things ... about you. And I don't expect you to reciprocate immediately or at all, but I feared combusting if I didn't tell you that you've been the brightest object in my day since we met. And we work with stars. And I know I haven't been the most emotive suitor but I have been a thoughtful one, and I hope that counts for something. And I also hope I do not offend you by expressing how very deeply I ... admire you.

HENRIETTA. Well. I think it's an accurate statement to say that I ... approve.

PETER. You do? That's just tremendous. And a bit shocking, I thought I might have ruined it with that first impression. Or the second. Or this one.

HENRIETTA. Fortune favors the unashamed. But. My work is very important to me and if there is any resistance to that then you might reconsider your adoration promptly.

PETER. I couldn't reconsider if I tried. I know you and I know your work and ... if you can't go with me, I'll stay. Because I cannot walk away from this.

HENRIETTA. Well it's — it's love right?

HENRIETTA. I don't know. Is it?

PETER. It's got to be. My heart's beating like a train. That's your fault.

HENRIETTA. *My fault?! It's your fault.*

PETER. Yes. See? Love!

HENRIETTA. How, God, *how* do you know that?

PETER. Comparative analysis. Before you: content. After you? Passionate, confident ... idiot. Rounds? Please. An ocean liner? Just to be with you in the widest world. And finally I tell you. And finally you hear. And finally ... *(Eyes connect. Peter takes her hands ... As the Harvard Observatory falls away into ... The deck of an ocean liner — night. Stars ablaze overhead. A band plays somewhere. He spins her into a dance ... Suddenly — Margaret appears in a telegram —)*

MARGARET. Sister — stop. Come home — stop. Father stroke — stop. *(Henrietta stops. The stars go dark. The dream shatters. The Observatory — Peter and Henrietta alone.)*

HENRIETTA. Oh god. Peter. I'm sorry. I have to go.

PETER. Go? Where? What's wrong?

HENRIETTA. My family needs me. My father. Oh god.

PETER. I can help. I can come with you. Whatever you need.

HENRIETTA. My father is sick, my sister's alone.

PETER. I'm coming.

HENRIETTA. You don't need to do that.

PETER. I can help. I want to help.

HENRIETTA. Thank you and I'm sorry but I have to go home and you have to go to dinner in Europe.

PETER. No.

HENRIETTA. Go, Peter.

Scene 2

Henrietta on that ocean liner at night. She is alone. Noise of people around her though. The sounds of a ship. She is thoroughly happy. This is real ... not a dream. She looks up. A letter to Margaret ...

MARGARET. "Dear Margie," (*But faraway, Peter reads a letter from Henrietta as well.*)

PETER. "Dear Mr. Shaw,"

HENRIETTA. I would like to say that I wish I could send you a image of this sky tonight. But I hope we never invent pictures that perfect — that would miss the point.

PETER. "Which is what I think staring out to sea."

HENRIETTA. I used to think that to be truly alive I needed answers I needed to know. But all this does not in fact need to be known, do it? We do.

PETER. "We do."

HENRIETTA. Because the real point ... is seeing something bigger. And knowing we're a small part of it, if we're lucky. In the end that a life well-lived.

PETER. "Please tell Miss Cannon that when I come back ... have work to do."

HENRIETTA. Because thank God there's a lot out there for you to do. See you soon. (*Peter and the ocean liner fade into time and distance ... as Henrietta returns home on a huge ship greeted by Margaret with a huge wave ...*)

MARGARET. Henrietta! HENRIETTA. Henrietta.
(*The sisters hug a long hug.*)

HENRIETTA. Margie! I missed you so much. Welcome to Boston.

MARGARET. And the same to you. Welcome back. Now tell me everything.

HENRIETTA. Well Paris is as perfect as you'd like to think and London is just — (*Henrietta staggers, sits, then cringes as a pain sweeps over her abdomen.*)

MARGARET. Henri. Henri.

HENRIETTA. I'm fine.

MARGARET. You're not fine. What is this?

HENRIETTA. It's nothing. It passes.

MARGARET. It's not nothing. You should have come home *immediately*.

HENRIETTA. There were only a few bad days.

MARGARET. Henrietta, they've invented doctors.

HENRIETTA. I saw one in London.

MARGARET. And you're seeing another one right now.

HENRIETTA. Margie, no —

MARGARET. The luggage can wait.

HENRIETTA. I'm going straight to Harvard —

MARGARET. You're coming back to Wisconsin with me — you're resting and —

HENRIETTA. I'm going to work — I want to work —

MARGARET. I don't care. There's time for all that —

HENRIETTA. *There's not. (Pause. Her look tells Margie it's serious.)*

WILLIAMINA. Wait now, there she is! Henri!

ANNIE. Henrietta! There she is.

WILLIAMINA. That's what I said. I said that was her. Henrietta, dear!

HENRIETTA. Oh my goodness, what are you doing here?

ANNIE. What are we doing here? Your sister told us you were finally coming back.

WILLIAMINA. And you have to save us from each other.

ANNIE. You really do. Now, we have a mountain of work to get through.

WILLIAMINA. *(To Margaret.)* Hello, you, I'm Williamina.

MARGARET. I'm Margaret. Hello.

HENRIETTA. Oh, this is my sister Margie. I thought you'd met.

MARGARET. Not yet, but I've heard so much — *(Annie gives Margaret an uncharacteristically large hug.)*

ANNIE. You're the sister! We've heard of you!

MARGARET. Oh my.

WILLIAMINA. You're scaring the poor thing, Annie.

ANNIE. Unfortunately common.

WILLIAMINA. Didn't Henrietta say you have a son?

MARGARET. I do. As tall as his father, and twice the charmer.

WILLIAMINA. Oh dear.

MARGARET. Let's just say that I do not fear a lack of grandchildren.

WILLIAMINA. Send him to me, I'll straighten him out.

ANNIE. Alright, ladies. The early graphs from Princeton are in and we need your eyes on them.

HENRIETTA. I can do that.

MARGARET. Henri, wait — *(To Annie.)* She was just saying she's been a bit poorly these days.

HENRIETTA. I'm fine and I'm so looking forward to being back.

ANNIE. You're sick?

HENRIETTA. No.

MARGARET. Yes. She nearly fainted just now — She's not well — and I really must insist —

HENRIETTA. *I'm* insisting, Margie. My work is here. And my life, and every chance I've ever had. Is here. *(Pause.)*

MARGARET. Then so am I. You can't get rid of me.

WILLIAMINA. Me neither.

ANNIE. And you can work from home when you like, so there's not a single reason we can't all go about our business as usual.

HENRIETTA. Thank you. Lunatic women. *(She braves a small pain again. She leans on Margie.)*

WILLIAMINA. *(Helping her ...)* Here we go, darlin'.

ANNIE. I'll get the bags.

MARGARET. We've got you, Henri. We're right here. *(Helping Henrietta walk off. Transition ...)*

Scene 3

Annie is in the office gathering plates. Peter enters.

PETER. Excuse me. Miss Cannon.

ANNIE. Not today, Mr. Shaw.

PETER. I heard about Henrietta — Miss Leavitt. I heard she's sick. How sick? How is she?

ANNIE. Well she's making do. Working from home just down the street. I think you know that nothing is going to keep her down for long.

PETER. Nothing short of an earthquake.

ANNIE. That sounds about right. *(Pause.)*

PETER. *(Handing her a letter.)* Would you please give her this? I took the liberty of inquiring to a family physician and he said he'd