



MARIST CLS - THE POWER OF READERS THEATRE
FALL 2023 - CLASS #2
LAUREN GUNDERSON & *SILENT SKY*

SILENT SKY BY LAUREN GUNDERSON

THE TRUE STORY OF 19TH-CENTURY ASTRONOMER HENRIETTA LEAVITT, *SILENT SKY*, WRITTEN IN 2015, EXPLORES A WOMAN'S PLACE IN SOCIETY DURING A TIME OF IMMENSE SCIENTIFIC AND HEART-BOUND DISCOVERIES.

WITH MUSIC AND MATH BURSTING FORTH ONSTAGE, HENRIETTA AND HER FEMALE PEERS CHANGE THE WAY WE UNDERSTAND BOTH THE HEAVENS AND EARTH.

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LAUREN GUNDERSON

• "THE MOST PRODUCED PLAYWRIGHT IN AMERICA." *AMERICAN THEATRE MAGAZINE*

• LAUREN HAS BEEN ONE OF THE MOST PRODUCED PLAYWRIGHTS IN AMERICA SINCE 2015, TOPPING THE LIST THRICE INCLUDING 2022/23.

SHE IS A TWO-TIME WINNER OF THE STEINBERG/ATCA NEW PLAY AWARD FOR *I AND YOU* AND *THE BOOK OF WILL*,

THE WINNER OF THE LANFORD WILSON AWARD

A FINALIST FOR THE SUSAN SMITH BLACKBURN PRIZE.

SHE IS A PLAYWRIGHT, SCREENWRITER, MUSICAL BOOK WRITER AND CHILDREN'S AUTHOR WHO LIVES IN SAN FRANCISCO. SHE GRADUATED FROM NYU TISCH AS A REYNOLDS FELLOW IN SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP.





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SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

“...SHEER MAGIC [IS] IN LAUREN GUNDERSON’S *SILENT SKY*... GUNDERSON [WRITES] ECONOMICALLY AND WITH BURSTS OF SMART, INFECTIOUS HUMOR.”



HOW DID YOU DISCOVER HENRIETTA'S HISTORY? WHAT INITIALLY INSPIRED YOU TO DRAMATIZE HER LIFE FOR THE STAGE?

LAUREN GUNDERSON: I DISCOVERED HENRIETTA IN A BOOK CALLED *MISS LEAVITT'S STARS: THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE WOMAN WHO DISCOVERED HOW TO MEASURE THE UNIVERSE*, BY GEORGE JOHNSON.

I LOVE STORIES OF WOMEN IN SCIENCE AND IMMEDIATELY WAS SHOCKED THAT I DIDN'T KNOW WHO THIS WOMAN WAS.

WHAT REALLY MADE ME WANT TO WRITE A PLAY ABOUT HENRIETTA HOWEVER IS THAT HER STORY WAS NOT ONLY ABOUT ONE BRILLIANT WOMAN BUT AN ENTIRE COHORT OF WOMEN WHO [WERE] KNOWN AS HARVARD "COMPUTERS."

THIS WAS A STORY ABOUT A SISTERHOOD. IN THIS PLAY WE ALSO GET TO KNOW ANNIE JUMP CANNON AND WILLIAMINA FLEMING, [AND] OTHER ASTRONOMERS THAT WORKED WITH HENRIETTA.

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**HOW WOULD YOU CHARACTERIZE THE PLAY
SILENT SKY?**

GUNDERSON: THIS PLAY IS ABOUT THE GLORY
AND HARD WORK OF SCIENCE.

IT IS A STORY OF FAMILY, BOTH THE ONES WE ARE
BORN WITH AND THE ONES WE CHOOSE.

IT'S THE STORY OF SISTERHOOD AND, YES, A LITTLE
BIT OF OLD-FASHIONED BOY MEETS GIRL AS WELL.

THE OTHER INCREDIBLY EXCITING FEATURE OF
THIS PLAY FOR ME IS MUSIC. HENRIETTA'S SISTER
MARGARET IS A PIANIST AND HER LOVE OF MUSIC
TRANSFORMS INTO A CRITICAL WAY THAT
HENRIETTA UNDERSTANDS STARS AND THE
PATTERNS IN THE SKY.

MUSIC AND MATH ARE ONE & THE SAME!

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IN ADDITION TO HENRIETTA, HER REAL LIFE COLLEAGUES WILLIAMINA FLEMING AND ANNIE JUMP CANNON PLAY SUPPORTIVE AND OCCASIONALLY SASSY ROLES.

FLEMING, A SCOTSWOMAN AND FORMER MAID TO OBSERVATORY DIRECTOR EDWARD PICKERING, IS THE ORIGINAL MEMBER OF "PICKERING'S HAREM," THE CASUALLY SEXIST TERM USED AT THE TIME FOR THE WOMEN "COMPUTERS" WHO ANALYZED PHOTOGRAPHIC PLATES.

ANNIE JUMP CANNON, AS HENRIETTA IN THE PLAY POINTS OUT, IS KNOWN FOR THE STELLAR SPECTRA CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM SHE AND FLEMING WORKED TO DEVELOP.

HENRIETTA'S STAR-STRUCK REACTION TO MEETING CANNON AND FLEMING IS PERHAPS MORE FITTING OF A MODERN GIRL MEETING HER FAVORITE POP STAR, BUT IT GETS THE POINT ACROSS: THESE WOMEN SHOULD BE RESPECTED.

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A REMINDER - READERS 'THEATRE OFTEN INCLUDES A "NARRATOR" (STORYTELLER) WHO SERVE S AS A NONPARTICIPATING WITNESS.



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NEXT WEEK

BORN YESTERDAY BY GARSON KANIN

BORN YESTERDAY PREMIERED ON BROADWAY IN 1946, STARRING
JUDY HOLLIDAY AS BILLIE DAWN.



• TODAY'S MENU

- Act One – Scene 1 – Narrator, Henrietta & Margaret - Late evening sky outside Henrietta and Margret's father's rural Wisconsin church-about 1900.
- Act One – Scene 2 – Narrator, Henrietta, Peter, Williamina, Annie, & Margaret
- Vacant room of the Harvard Observatory.
- Act One – Scene 5 – Narrator, Henrietta, & Peter - Leavitt home in Wisconsin.
- Act Two – Scene 1 – Narrator, Peter, Henrietta, Williamina, & Annie – The Harvard Observatory – December 1910
 - Act Two – Scene 5 – Narrator, Henrietta – Here, Now