

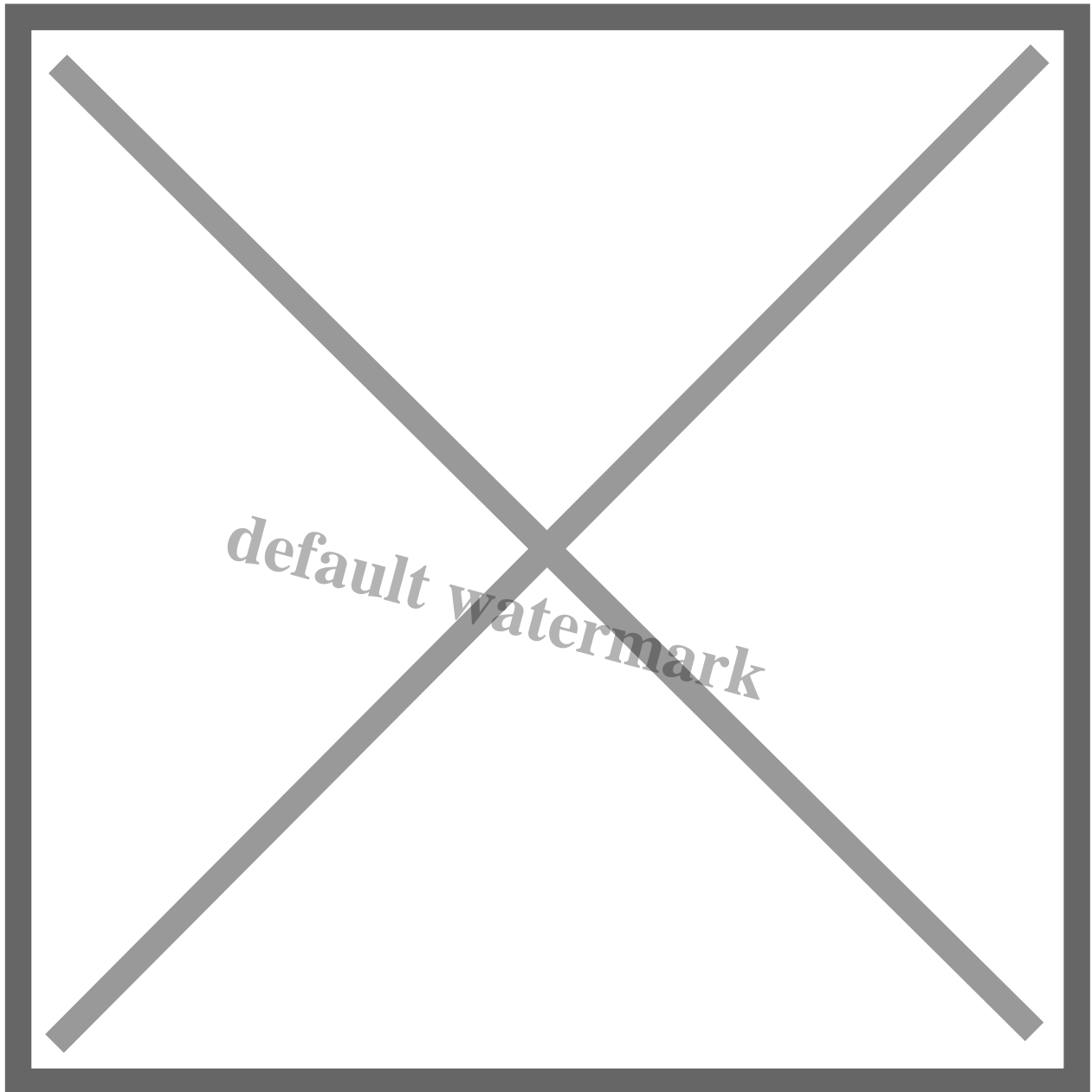


Stellar Aspirations: Illuminating the Life of Henrietta Leavitt in *Silent Sky*

Description

CEDAR CITY, UT The **Utah Shakespeare Festival** is celebrated for its meticulous attention to detail across its many seasons, establishing itself as a premier theatre company. This season's lineup is diverse and impressive, with [Lauren Gunderson](#)'s *Silent Sky* standing out as a favorite among theatre-goers, and for good reason. Gunderson beautifully blends historical facts with fictional elements to dramatize the life and achievements of **Henrietta Leavitt**, a pioneering astronomer whose work on Cepheid variable stars revolutionized our understanding of the universe. The festival has assembled a brilliant cast and production team to bring this story to life.

Henrietta Leavitt begins her work at the **Harvard Observatory** in the early 1900s. Restricted from using a telescope or voicing original ideas, she joins a group of female "computers," charting the stars for renowned astronomer Edward Pickering, who measures projects in "girl hours" and disregards the women's innovative theories. In her spare time, Henrietta endeavors to measure the light and distance of stars while also navigating her life, striving to balance her scientific dedication with family obligations and the potential for love.



Katie Cunningham as Henrietta Leavitt in the 2024 production of *Silent Sky*. (Photo by Karl Hugh. Copyright Utah Shakespeare Festival 2024.)

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 is a life well-lived. Because thank God there's a lot out there bigger than me.

-Henrietta Leavitt, [\(played by Katie Cunningham\)](#) written by Lauren Gunderson

Gunderson, the most-produced playwright in America since 2015, is renowned for her ability to weave together science, history, and romance in a manner that both educates and entertains. Described as a "historical fantasy," the play incorporates several fictional elements to enhance the story.

Characters like Peter Shaw and Margaret Leavitt represent broader societal attitudes and personal sacrifices of the time. The romantic subplot between Henrietta and Peter, though entirely invented, explores the personal costs of Henrietta's dedication to her work.

One of the most powerful scenes features Peter behind a screen, symbolizing the emotional and societal barriers between him and Henrietta. However, this symbolism might feel overdone to some, as it emphasizes the insurmountable distance between them, making the romantic subplot somewhat strained and unnecessary. Henrietta was a strong, independent woman with a disability—hearing loss—yet she did not let that stop her from contributing significantly to society. **Edwin Hubble** (the namesake of the NASA Hubble Space Telescope) often said that Leavitt deserved the Nobel Prize for her work, and Mathematician **Gösta Mittag-Leffler**, a member of the **Swedish Academy of Sciences**, tried to nominate her for that prize in 1925, only to learn that she had died of cancer three years earlier.

Henrietta never married, but more than that, she was not concerned with getting married, and I wonder if portraying her in this way—spending so much time on a fictional love story—does justice to her story. Inserting a fictional love story risks perpetuating harmful stereotypes that suggest a woman's value is tied to being loved. I don't think every play needs a love story. That said, Gunderson has a way with words that cannot be denied. *Silent Sky* is beautifully written. As it stands, with fictional elements added, *Silent Sky* may indeed have a better narrative flow with the romance included and appeal to a broader audience.



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Katie Cunningham as Henrietta Leavitt in the 2024 production of *Silent Sky*. (Photo by Karl Hugh. Copyright Utah Shakespeare Festival 2024.)

The play also introduces the character of [Annie Cannon](#), played by a talented actor ([Alia Shakira](#)) who brings a unique dimension to the narrative. While Cannon was not historically Black, this casting choice adds layers of irony and poignancy, especially in scenes depicting Annie's activism for women's rights. The play ends by saying, "The next year! Annie gets a vote." However, we know this would not be true for Black women living in the early 1900s. I found that this casting decision enriches the play's thematic exploration of intersectionality and representation, even though it deviates from historical accuracy. Cannon, the historical figure, also suffered from hearing loss, which is one of the reasons these two women grew to be so close. This fact is glossed over in the play—a missed opportunity for Gunderson to address representation more comprehensively. Casting a deaf actress to play Annie or Henrietta would have been a powerful statement, enhancing the play's commitment to authenticity and inclusivity.

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Abdul-Khaliq Murtadha (left) as Peter Shaw and Alia Shakira as Annie Cannon in the 2024 production of *Silent Sky*. (Photo by Karl Hugh. Copyright Utah Shakespeare Festival 2024.)

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Katie Cunningham (left) as Henrietta Leavitt and Sarah Shippobotham as Williamina Fleming in the 2024 production of *Silent Sky*. (Photo by Karl Hugh. Copyright Utah Shakespeare Festival 2024.)

Gunderson's use of light as a grounding motif throughout the play effectively symbolizes both the literal and metaphorical enlightenment brought about by Henrietta's discoveries. The thematic exploration of "glass ceilings" is skillfully woven into the narrative, reflecting on the barriers faced by women not just in their professional lives but also in their personal ambitions. Scenic designer [Jo Winiarski](#) and projection designer [Joe Payne](#) maximize the space with a variety of projections, including Hubble photographs, sunset projections, and star clusters, which envelop the theater. The projections even have shooting stars flying across them occasionally. [David Kay Mickelsen](#)'s costumes are beautiful and root the play firmly in its 20th-century period, while [Jaymi Lee Smith](#)'s lighting design captures Director [Melinda Pfundstein](#)'s theme of light that is displayed through the passage of time and themes of connection and separation. The minimalist props are carefully chosen to enhance the atmosphere.

The technical aspects of the production are top-notch. Sound design by [Ien DeNio](#) enhances the emotional elements of the play. I found the addition of high-pitched tones that imitate Henrietta's carbon hearing aid to be a thoughtful and interesting choice that constantly reminds the audience what Henrietta could not forget because it affected her in every way.



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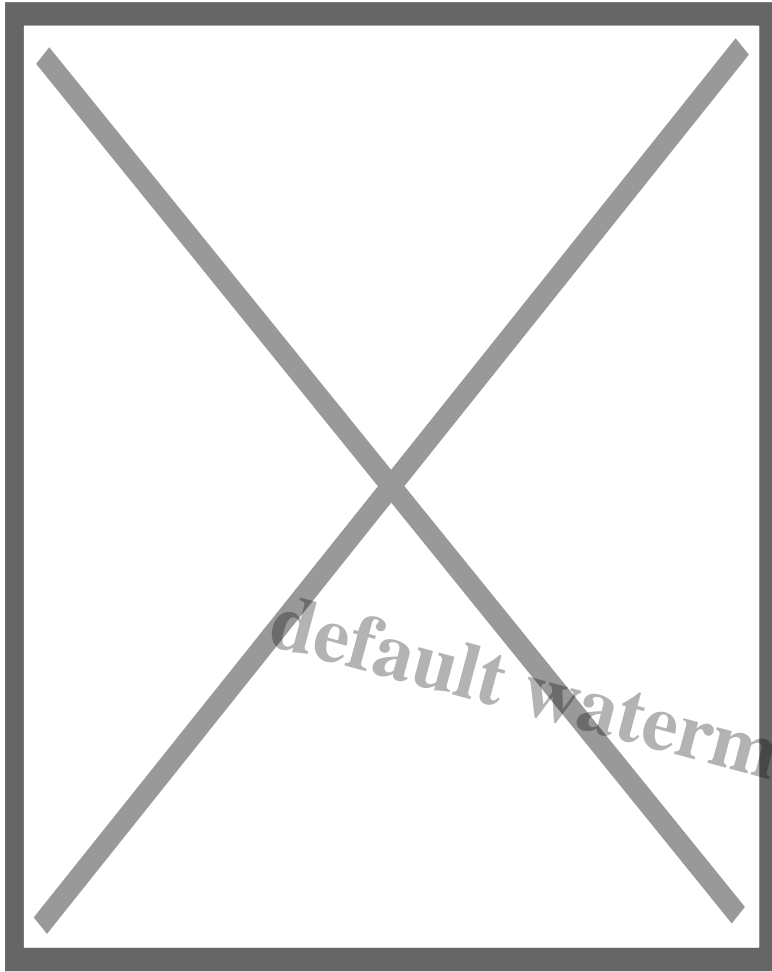
Katie Cunningham (left) as Henrietta Leavitt and Kat Lee as Margaret Leavitt in the 2024 production of *Silent Sky*. (Photo by Karl Hugh. Copyright Utah Shakespeare Festival 2024.)

The actors of this production, made up of both equity and non-equity, absolutely shine. [Katie Cunningham](#)'s portrayal of Henrietta Leavitt masterfully captures the character's quest for discovery and emotional depth, balancing determination with vulnerability. Cunningham has a beautifully resonant voice and portrays Henrietta with grace and dignity. [Kat Lee](#)'s Margaret Leavitt serves as an excellent contrast, bringing humor and frustration underpinned by sisterly love. Lee also sings "For the Beauty of the Earth" as a recurring theme throughout the play and does a beautiful job. [Abdul-Khaliq Murtadha](#)'s Peter Shaw is endearing, serving as a foil to Annie Cannon ([Alia Shakira](#)) and Williamina Flemming ([Sarah Shippobotham](#)). Shakira and Shippobotham deliver performances marked by wit coupled with just the right amount of attitude, creating formidable and memorable characters. One example is when they walk in on Peter, giving Henrietta instructions on the first day. Peter remarks, "I'm beginning to brief her." And Annie snaps back, "Then be brief."

Leaving the theatre, I watched as several theatergoers were overcome with emotion by the message of this show. It brought me joy to witness the talented artists deliver the magic of theatre so effectively to their audience. Even though there are elements of the story that I would like to see rethought, I appreciate the beauty of this play and its message. Overall, the success is evident in the number of tickets being sold—I think every seat was filled the day I attended—and the fact that this show is bringing Henrietta Leavitt and Annie Cannon, two worthwhile figures, to the forefront.

I know that distance is only space and time, and for some of us light. I am out of time. But light has never let me down . . . Because wonder will always get us there! Those of us who insist that there is much more beyond ourselves. And I do.

-Henrietta ([played by Katie Cunningham](#)) written by Lauren Gunderson



[The Leavitt Crater by Aura Satz, 2014.](#)
[National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution](#)

Utah Shakespeare Festival presents *Silent Sky* by Lauren Gunderson.

Venue: Eileen and **Allen Anes Studio Theatre**, Located in the [Beverly Taylor Sorenson Center for the Arts](#)

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Tickets: \$30-60

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