

The Penguin Play

A ten-minute play  
by  
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## CAST

HENNY SCHWARTZ

40s, brilliant scientist and professor, passionate about her work, has a youthful enthusiasm

PAUL BASS

50s, wealthy, entitled, smart, alone, tenacious, tries hard to connect but seldom successful

Time: Summer, 2023

Place: Aboard a Viking Cruise ship nearing Antarctica

Script note: A forward slash (/) indicates where the next character's line cuts in.

Aboard a Viking cruise ship as it nears Antarctica. It's 9PM and the sun is still shining. HENNY is putting on her heavy boots and parka. PAUL, dressed in a tuxedo enters with two glasses of champagne.

PAUL

Hang on, I've been looking for you.

HENNY

I'm just headed outside for /a minute.

PAUL

It's foggy, nothing to see.

HENNY

I've got to check our gear for tomorrow.

PAUL

*(offering her a glass of champagne)*

Here, it's Veuve Cliquot. I brought a case of it on board /with me.

HENNY

*(turning him down)*

Thanks, I've still got to/ work.

PAUL

You finished your presentation, doesn't your boss give you a little time off /for good behavior?

HENNY

My boss?

PAUL

Now you're going to tell me that you're the boss.

HENNY

I'm leading the expedition, yes. *(dryly)*I mentioned that in my presentation.

PAUL

My wife would've given your talk an A+ . I'm not quite so generous.

HENNY

Well, please thank her for me.

She's about to exit.

PAUL

How many expeditions have you lead?

She doesn't want to appear rude, so she stays but hopes not for long.

HENNY

This is my seventh.

PAUL

That doesn't seem like a lot. You've been studying penguins for 20 years.

HENNY

Seven is a lot when you consider how many trips were cancelled because of COVID.

PAUL

My daughter loves penguins. When she was a kid she had a whole collection of stuffed ones.

HENNY

We call those "plush."

PAUL

Well, I didn't mean the stuffed dead ones. Yuck. How much money did you raise tonight?

HENNY

I won't know until we count the credit card /receipts.

PAUL

Looked like a stingy crowd to me.

HENNY

You never know. I'm optimistic.

PAUL

I wouldn't be. They looked tight fisted as hell. You know what was your first mistake? Passing around that awful smelling penguin poop. Why's it pink for chrissakes? Who makes pink poop?

HENNY

Penguins. They eat krill which is red-ish pink. Hence the color. Also in my talk.

PAUL

It stank and we'd just had dinner. You need some coaching on this fund raising business. You don't really know what you're doing. I'm just being honest.

HENNY

It's been a long day, sir and I've got to get ready for our landing tomorrow.

Again she tries to leave.

PAUL

I saw your lab.

HENNY

How?

PAUL

I got one of the housekeepers to let me / in.

HENNY

You weren't supposed to / do that.

PAUL

Don't worry, I didn't touch anything. I am entitled to know where my money is going.

HENNY

Your money?

PAUL

That's right, tax payer dollars.

HENNY

This is a commercial cruise.

PAUL

Yes, but the research you're doing is federally funded, isn't it?

HENNY

In part, yes. We still need to raise / more funds.

PAUL

Do you bring all that lab equipment with you?

HENNY

No, Viking keeps it on board for us and all the other research teams they support. Now I really need to go.

She tries to exit.

PAUL

Take the champagne with you.

She turns back, he hands her the glass and she makes to exit again.

PAUL

How long'd it take you to prep for this trip? Must be a whole experience unto itself.

HENNY

First we had to write an environmental impact statement -- 119 pages-- with species lists and maps of places we want to go or could possibly go in the event of weather. That goes out to the public for 90 days, we get comments you wouldn't believe. Then we spend the next three months getting permits from the US government and from our universities to collect blood from penguins and those permits are separate from the ones we need for the drones. Everything requires permission. After all that, if we manage to get our team on board without anyone catching COVID, we could get within 300 yards of shore and not be able to land.

PAUL

Why not?

HENNY

Bad weather or sea ice. Or fog. We could be blocked from landing for the whole day.

PAUL

So you try the next day.

HENNY

You'd think, right? But there's a long line of ships jockeying for position. Viking signed up for our docking dates months ago. So did all the other cruise lines. If we miss our time slot, chances are we won't get another one.

PAUL

Sounds like an awful lot of effort for a 2 week trip. Doesn't seem worth it.

HENNY

Of course it's worth it. The penguins are our gauges. They're creatures of the oceans who haul out onto land every few months.

## HENNY (CONT'D)

We have these tiny little windows into the ocean because of these animals. By studying them we learn how the oceans are functioning. You may not care about the penguins but you better care about the oceans. Oceans are essential to human society. We're not just documenting the penguins on these trips, we're watching the climate crisis unfold. What we find out will be shared among researchers around the world.

## PAUL

You seem like a smart person, Miss Schwartz. I was going to say "girl" but my daughter would hate that. I'm gonna tell you something to put your mind at ease: there is no climate crisis. We are at an inflection point in our evolution. This kind of thing happens.

## HENNY

What kind of thing?

## PAUL

Holes in the ozone. Species dying. That's pure evolution.

## HENNY

Sir, we are in real trouble. We are bringing about change that will kill large swaths of humanity, flood our coastal cities, disrupt life as we know it.

## PAUL

That's happened before. We're just in line for a reset, that's all.

## HENNY

When you get off the boat tomorrow and see what I see--

## PAUL

*(cutting her off)*

Get off the boat? Are you crazy? I'm not setting foot off this thing until we land back in Argentina.

## HENNY

We're landing at Brown Bluff tomorrow. Everyone's going ashore.

## PAUL

And I'll have the hot tub all to myself for the entire day!

## HENNY

The whole point of the trip is to see the landscape. The wildlife. To see the penguins!

PAUL

Maybe for you. The whole point for me is to cross Antarctica off on my list and tomorrow night open another bottle of champagne. After we land, I will have been to every continent in the world.

HENNY

So?

PAUL

So that's an achievement!

HENNY

Watching a continent slide by your window?

PAUL

Hell, yeah!

HENNY

What Scott did was an achievement. And Amudsen. And then Shackleton and his team on the Endeavor. Shackleton kept his men alive for two years when they were stranded here. It was a miracle they all survived.

PAUL

Nobody knows if that really happened.

HENNY

Of course it did. We have proof.

PAUL

I doubt that.

HENNY

Their camp is still there. The utensils they used, the plates and dishes. Even their food. Nothing has been changed in over 100 hundred years. If you take one of our Ross Sea trips I can show you.

PAUL

No, thanks.

HENNY

You don't want to believe.

PAUL

I don't have to believe, Miss Schwartz.



HENNY

Yes, you do. Or else we're all doomed.

PAUL

See, you people start saying things like that and it just turns me off.

HENNY

You came after me, I didn't--

PAUL

*(cutting her off)*

I didn't come after you. I came to offer you a glass of champagne for your efforts.

HENNY

And to tell me I did a crappy job.

PAUL

Well, you're doing better now. I have a check right here. And I'm going to make it out to you or your university or whoever you tell me to for fifty thousand dollars.

HENNY

*Right.*

PAUL

My name is Paul Bass. Google me. Go on.

She checks her phone. And indeed, he checks out.

HENNY

OK, Mr. Bass, you clearly have the funds. What's the catch? You don't believe in the climate crisis and you don't care about / penguins.

PAUL

*(as he writes the check)*

After I give you this check, you're going to write my daughter a letter saying that I helped fund your research and she's going to stop hating me.

HENNY

Why does she hate you?

PAUL

We have different philosophies.

HENNY

About?

PAUL

Everything.

HENNY

And you think she'll like you more if you give me this money?

PAUL

We haven't spoken in a long time. I'm hoping this will thaw the ice.

HENNY

No pun intended.

PAUL

*(he doesn't get it)*

Whaaa?

HENNY

Never mind.

PAUL

Take the check Ms. Schwartz. Give it a look.

He gives it to her. She looks at it and swoons  
a little at the zeroes on there.

HENNY

That's a very nice check, and God knows we need the money, but I have a rule not to get mixed up in other people's family business.

PAUL

You write one letter, that's it.

HENNY

*(handing it back)*

No thanks. Good night.

He doesn't take the check.

PAUL

You said in your presentation that hundreds of Gentoo penguins used to live in the area around the post office in Port Lockroy. But over the years, they'd been scared off by all the cruise ships.

HENNY

Not the ships, the people who come off them.

PAUL

But when COVID hit, the Gentoos came back.

HENNY

Because the cruise lines stopped running. No trips, no tourists.

PAUL

And no research scientists poking around.

HENNY

Yes.

PAUL

Now that the cruise ships are back and bringing passengers, what do you think you'll find when you get to the post office at Port Lockroy?

HENNY

That the penguins have disappeared again.

PAUL

I think so, too.

HENNY

What's your point?

PAUL

If you don't land, if you stay away, they'll come back again.

HENNY

I'm part of one group, thousands of passengers come here every /year.

PAUL

But you're the ones living with them, poking at them, bothering them.

HENNY

I can't study them if I don't get close.

PAUL

Wouldn't the penguins be better off if you didn't?

HENNY

I haven't finished my / research.

PAUL

Ms. Schwartz, you know what your problem is? The things you want to learn most about would be a much happier if you didn't come around.

HENNY

I don't have enough data /yet.

PAUL

How much is enough? A point here? A point there? It'll never be enough.

HENNY

For you, maybe.

PAUL

I'm talking about for *you*. Listen to the penguins, Ms. Schwartz. They're telling you to go home so they can live in /peace.

HENNY

If you stop counting the penguins, we'll never be able to convince people that the oceans are changing, that humans are having a major impact on the environment. It's so easy for the Antarctic to be out of sight out of mind.

PAUL

You sound just like my wife. She hated throwing in the towel.

HENNY

What would she tell me to do?

PAUL

She'd tell you to be optimistic.

HENNY

Smart woman.

PAUL

Smartest person I ever met.

HENNY

*(genuinely)*

I'm very sorry for your loss.

PAUL

*(surprised)*

Oh. Thank you. (getting it) You read that, didn't you? When you Googled my name.

HENNY

Yes.

PAUL

We were married 32 years. We got to see every continent together except--

He can't go on.

HENNY

I'm not done. Not yet. When I am --and I will get to that point-- I will stop coming to Antarctica.

She drinks the champagne.

PAUL

Keep the check. My wife would want you to have it.

Henny rips up the check instead.

HENNY

I don't want this check, Mr. Bass.

PAUL

*(stunned by her moxie)*

Good God.

HENNY

Go on the landing tomorrow.

PAUL

*(off ripped check)*

You're just going to throw all that money away?

HENNY

Yes, because I think if you go ashore and see what I see, you'll double it.

PAUL

*Double it?*

HENNY

Absolutely.

PAUL

I can't go out there, it's too cold.

HENNY

We've got extra cold weather gear in the mudroom. It'll feel like Miami in July. And you can tell your daughter all about what you did and saw. Bring your iPhone.

PAUL

I'll think about it.

HENNY

Don't think too long. We land in a couple of hours.

PAUL

If you're lucky.

HENNY

Oh, I think you're going to bring me luck, Mr. Bass. I'll meet you at the coffee bar at 0500 hours.

PAUL

We'll see.

HENNY

Get some rest.

PAUL

I haven't agreed yet.

HENNY

0500 and don't be late.

PAUL

There is no climate crisis.

HENNY

Of course, there is.

She exits. He stands there, solitary. Looking out at Antarctica, he drinks his champagne down. Then he takes his iPhone out of his pocket and punches a few numbers into the phone.

PAUL

*(leaving a message)*

Hi, it's Dad. Sorry you're not home. I'll call back another--*(He looks at his phone. He's getting another call. Hangs up on the original one and answers)* Hello? I was just leaving you a-- How are you? ... That's good... Oh, I'm fine. I was just, I was just thinking about you and mom and thought I'd ...

He exits.

BLACKOUT.

THE END