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 Clicquot. 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

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 Amundsen. 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.

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
(handling 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 Gentooos 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.

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.

Yes.

HENNY
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.

Double it?

PAUL

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