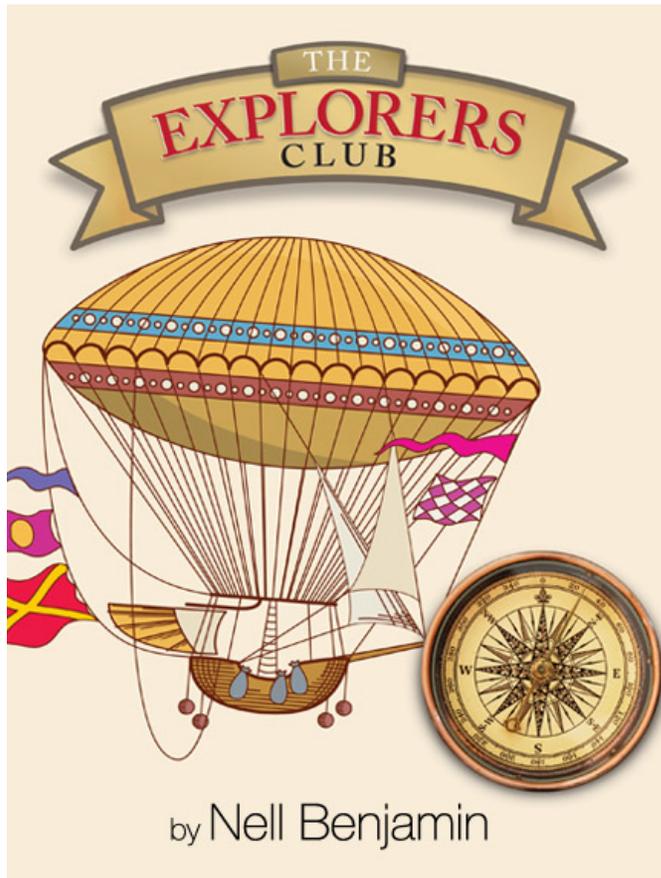


# Jewel Theatre Audience Guide



directed by Art Manke

by Susan Myer Silton, Dramaturg  
and Julie Bell Petrak, Assistant Director

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# ABOUT THE PLAY

*I hope audiences find the play equally funny and smart, because I like it to fire on all cylinders. There are rarified jokes about science and pseudo-science, and there are also the falling down and slinging-glasses-around jokes. I hope they walk out of the theater with a fresh sense of perspective about this period when science was a battleground between people who wanted to know what real science was and egotistical, wealthy amateurs who used science to reinforce their own beliefs. Even today, we have this issue of trying to get past our old biases in science, as in life. Setting a play in that period makes us think about it today. An attitude toward progress is useful to everyone, not just women, not just playwrights—everyone. We have to move forward.*

-Nell Benjamin

## CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

**Lucius Fretway** (Tommy Beck): an English botanist and President Pro Tempore of the Explorers Club

**Professor Cope** (Mike Ryan): an English herpetologist and Explorers Club member

**Professor Walling** (Andrew Davids): an English zoologist and Explorers Club member

**Professor Sloane** (Larry Paulsen): an English archeo-theologist and Explorers Club member

**Phyllida Spotte-Hume/Countess Glamorgan** (Elinor Gunn): an English explorer and anthropologist/wife of the Scottish Earl of Glamorgan and twin sister of Phyllida

**Luigi** (Louis Lotorto): a member of the NaKong tribe from the Lost City of Pahatlabong

**Harry Percy** (Crash Buist): a robust English explorer and President of the Explorers Club

**Sir Bernard Humphries** (Rolf Saxon): private secretary to Queen Victoria

**Irish Assassin/Beebe** (Andrew Yabroff): an Irish assassin/an English explorer, Jho Dae monk, and member of the Explorers Club

*I wrote a play about explorers because in the Victorian era in which the play is set, they were like rock stars.*

~Nell Benjamin

## SETTING

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All of the play's action takes place in the Explorers Club, a cross between an all-male social club and a scientific society in Victorian London. An addendum to this guide provides examples of gentlemen's clubs, including the Explorers Club in New York City, which was founded in 1904 and is a model for the club in the play.

## TIME

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The play is set in 1879, about two-thirds of the way through Queen Victoria's reign, a time of great innovation and scientific invention, including mechanical and technological advances. At this point in time, Britain was the world's most industrialized power. After 400 years of exploration, discovery and colonization, it had become the most extensive empire in history. A timeline of the Victorian Era is provided separately as an addendum to this guide.

*Generally, if you ask even the most unreasonable of people, "How do you feel about women or people who are different from you?", they will say the right things, but they don't necessarily feel the right things. But if you can get an audience to laugh at unreasonable people, then you can get them to feel the right thing—to feel like those guys are ridiculous and should be mocked, not indulged or followed. I feel that a play like The Explorers Club can change your mind in a way that a forceful letter to The New York Times about how such-and-such a thing was insensitive cannot.*

-Nell Benjamin

## SYNOPSIS

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The play opens with Lucius Fretway bringing the members of the Explorers Club to order at their annual meeting. He is the acting president in the absence of Harry Percy, who is leading an expedition to find the East Pole. After the members toss back some dreadful drinks concocted by the club's notoriously untalented bartender, and discuss their audience with Queen Victoria the next day, Lucius presents Phyllida Spotte-Hume, the annual Glamorgan Lecturer, whom he hopes to propose for admission to the club. The shocked and horrified members, particularly the Bible-quoting Sloane, vociferously object to a woman infiltrating their stodgy gentlemen-only club. Lucius asks the members to allow Phyllida's work to speak for her, announcing to their astonishment that she has discovered the Lost City of Pahatlabong. During her lecture, Phyllida introduces Luigi, a genuine warrior of the NaKong tribe, whom she has brought back from Pahatlabong with her.

Harry Percy bursts in, returning from his expedition without the rest of his party, who have met horrible deaths, a common occurrence under his leadership. After irritating Lucius by shamelessly flirting with Phyllida, he dismisses her so the men can enjoy their brandy and cigars, which are never partaken in the company of women.

The next day is a disaster as Luigi slaps Queen Victoria, Cope's snake consumes Walling's beloved guinea pig, and the Irish Society revolts when Sloane informs them that his discovery proves that they are, in fact, the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, and therefore Jews. An Irish assassin, Queen Victoria's private secretary, the Countess Glamorgan (Phyllida's twin sister), and Beebe, who was left for dead on Percy's most recent failed expedition, invade the club, bent on revenge. The outside of the club becomes a war zone as an Irish militia, a phalanx of Royal guards, and a tribe of warrior monks surround it and then turn on each other. Amidst the madness, kisses are exchanged, Phyllida builds an airship to fly to Pahatlabong to warn the natives of the queen's wrath, Luigi proves an excellent bartender, and the plant Lucius has discovered, which he names after Phyllida, makes for a fine cigar with benefits.

# ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

*Nothing is a level playing field, but we're bringing in the dirt.*

- Nell Benjamin

## NELL BENJAMIN



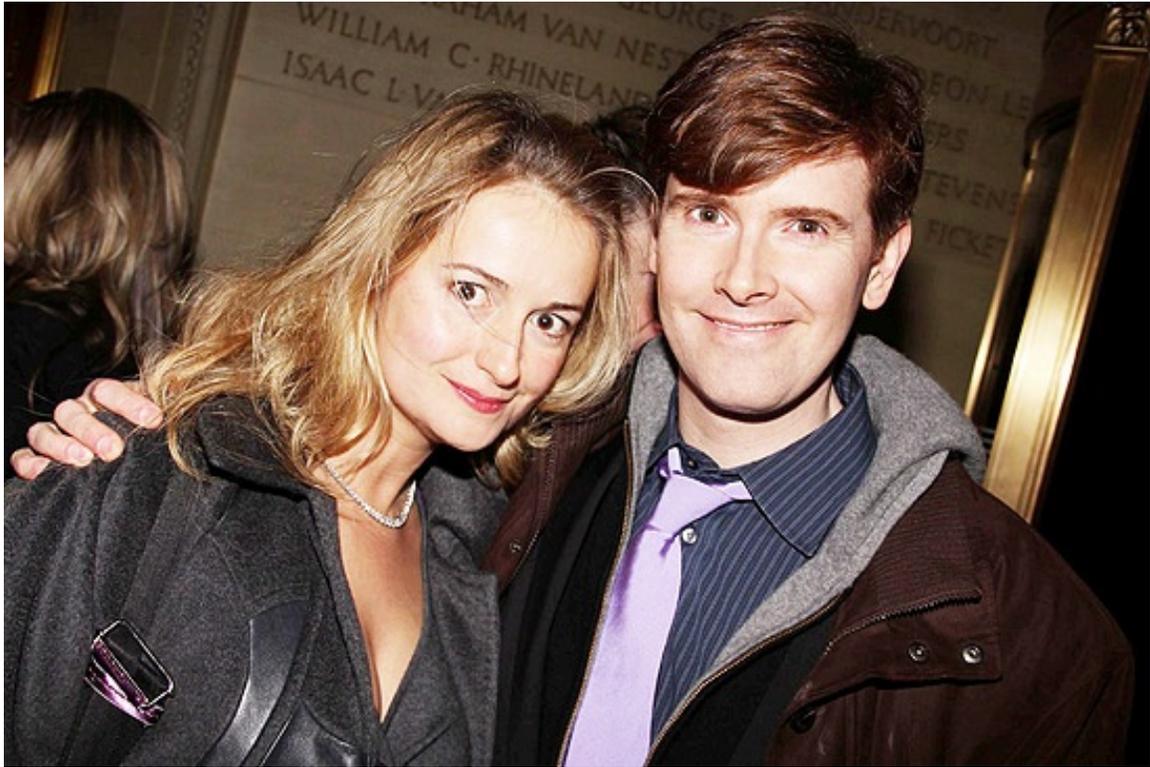
Nell Benjamin in the studio during the recording of the *Mean Girls* cast album

Nell Dunbar Benjamin insists that her first full length play, *The Explorers Club*, was written simply about science; however, audiences and critics have found the underlying message of gender inequality much more interesting. Sandwiched between her Tony nominated productions of *Legally Blonde :The Musical* (2007/Best Original Score/Nominee) and *Mean Girls* (Best Original Score/2018/Nominee), *The Explorers Club* opened Off-Broadway at New York City Center on June 20, 2013.

Isn't it fascinating that a farce set in London in the late 1800's would resonate so deeply with our world today? In the era of Time's Up and #MeToo, *The Explorers Club* is striking a familiar tone.

Born and raised in New York City, Benjamin studied English at Harvard where she

met her husband and writing partner, Laurence O’Keefe. She went on to receive her master’s degree in Women’s Studies from Trinity College, University of Dublin. After college, the writing pair spent a decade in Hollywood writing for sitcoms and TV movies before returning to New York City where they currently reside with their daughter, Persephone.



Nell Benjamin and her husband, Laurence O’Keefe

After moving back to New York City, Benjamin and her husband collaborated on numerous projects including the original Off-Broadway musicals, *The Mice* (2001), an adaptation of *Sarah, Plain and Tall* (2002) and *Cam Jansen and The Curse of The Emerald Elephant* (2004) based on the Cam Jansen mystery series.

*I’m very interested in doing shows about, for, and by women. Not to the exclusion of other things, but it’s just where I like to live.*

- Nell Benjamin

Ms. Benjamin’s inspiration for *The Explorers Club* came from a high school friend who went on to receive a PhD in Astrophysics—a field led predominately by men. She wanted the star of the show to be the Club—set in a time where these elite clubs were in their prime. In her play, Benjamin seems to relish in “poking fun” at the often hilarious male stereotypes; yet, underneath the comedy is truthful storytelling about

the human connection, embracing different cultures and shattering the glass ceiling.

Over the course of her career, Benjamin has received numerous awards and grants to fund the commissions of her new works. Highlights include the prestigious Edgerton Foundation New American Plays Award (2012), a \$125,000 grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, the 2003 Jonathan Larson Grant and the 2003 Kleban Foundation Award for lyrics.

*The Explorers Club* received the Outer Critics Circle Award for Outstanding Off-Broadway Play.

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