

REPORTER #2: You have done it, sir! You have crossed the Channel ... Such perseverance will go down in history... Your name will be remembered, all that misery is behind you now... You have done it... you have crossed the Channel. I'm sure this task accomplished is most meaningful to you, isn't it? ... Most meaningful...

[Panee]

NARRATOR OMNISCIENT: Or perhaps he merely shrugs. Shrugs from not knowing the answer... or shrugs because he still cannot hear the question...

[Up on music.]

END OF PLAY

Benjamin Bettenbender

Benjamin Bettenbender (1794-1864) was a German physician and naturalist. He was born in Berlin, Germany, on January 1, 1794. His father, Johann Gottlieb Bettenbender, was a physician and his mother, Sophie, was a member of the von Knebel family. Benjamin Bettenbender studied medicine at the University of Berlin from 1812 to 1816, and then continued his studies at the University of Halle from 1816 to 1818. He received his M.D. degree from the University of Halle in 1818. After graduation, he traveled to Paris, France, where he studied at the Collège de France and the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle. He also visited the British Museum and the Royal Society in London, England. In 1821, he returned to Berlin and began his medical practice. He was appointed as a professor of medicine at the University of Berlin in 1825. In 1830, he became a member of the Berlin Academy of Sciences. In 1835, he was appointed as a professor of physiology at the University of Berlin. In 1840, he was appointed as a professor of pathology at the University of Berlin. In 1845, he was appointed as a professor of clinical medicine at the University of Berlin. In 1850, he was appointed as a professor of hygiene at the University of Berlin. In 1855, he was appointed as a professor of public health at the University of Berlin. In 1860, he was appointed as a professor of preventive medicine at the University of Berlin. In 1864, he died in Berlin, Germany, at the age of 70.

TOP SECRET VAULT

THE SIREN SONG OF STEPHEN JAY GOULD

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Benjamin Bettenbender

BENJAMIN BETTENBENDER is the author of *Vick's Boy* (Circa Theatre, American Theater Company, Rattlestick Productions), *Scaring the Fish* (in New York at the INTAR and in San Francisco at the Magic Theatre), *These Left Behind* (The Directors Company), *Bliss* (Currican), *Widow's Walk* (The Levin Theater Company, New Brunswick, New Jersey, and at the Summer NITE Festival in Chicago), *Emil* (The Levin Theater Company), and *A Second Wind* (Rutgers University, the Jan Hus Theater in New York, and The George Street Playhouse). He is a member of the Cape Cod Theatre Project, where four of his plays (*Scaring the Fish*, *Emil*, *Vick's Boy*, and *The Siren Song of Stephen Jay Gould*) have been performed.

[Author's original title card]

THE SIREN SONG OF STEPHEN JAY GOULD
BY BENJAMIN BETTENBENDER

INTRODUCED BY BRUCE OSTLER

PRODUCED BY BRIAN HARRIS

SET DESIGN BY JEFFREY LEE

COSTUMES BY HELEN MCKEE

LIGHTING BY ROBERT WILSON

MUSIC BY DAVID SHAPIRO

DRAWS BY JEFFREY LEE

PROPS BY DAVID SHAPIRO

SCENIC BY DAVID SHAPIRO

PROPS BY DAVID SHAPIRO

SCENIC BY DAVID SHAPIRO

CHARACTERS:

MAN
WOMAN

[*The bank of a river, near a bridge stanchion. A WOMAN walks slowly along the bank, staring across the water. She stops, lost in a moment. She then reaches into her pocket, removes something, hesitates, then pulls her arm back to throw. An anguished cry is heard from above that gets louder as it continues. She stops her throw and starts to look up when a MAN falls on her, knocking her over. The two roll down the bank, coming to rest in a twisted heap. Neither moves for a moment. Then the man slowly disengages himself and rolls away. He stands, placing his left foot down gingerly, wincing; he then looks back to her.*]

MAN: Oh my God.

[*He moves to her side, touching her lightly on the arm.*]

Are you all right? Miss?

[*She stirs but doesn't respond.*]

Miss, are you all right?

[*Shaking her a bit.*]

Miss, are you—

WOMAN: Oowwww!

MAN: Sorry. Sorry. I didn't know if—

WOMAN: What did you do?

MAN: Nothing. I just shook you.

WOMAN: Why?

MAN: To see if you were OK.

WOMAN: [*Trying to move her right arm.*] I think my arm is broke.

MAN: Oh God! Um... Move your fingers.

WOMAN: Why?

MAN: That's how you tell.

WOMAN: Tell?

MAN: If your arm is broke.

WOMAN: No it's not.

MAN: Yes it is.

WOMAN: That's how you tell if your fingers are broke.

MAN: Your fingers. When your arm is broke.

WOMAN: No, 'cause they freeze up.

WOMAN: Excuse me.

MAN: Your fingers. When your arm is broke.

WOMAN: So how do you tell if your fingers are broke?

MAN: X-rays. Here, sit up.

[*He tries to help her come to a full seated position, but she shrugs him off and does it herself. She removes the object she had been holding in her injured hand, gently prying it from her fingers, and places it back in her pocket. She then extends the arm out in front of her, staring at her stiff fingers.*]

Now try to move them.

WOMAN: I am.

MAN: Oh man, I knew it!

WOMAN: They're shaking a little.

MAN: Are you doing that on purpose? *[With a sly smile.]*

WOMAN: No.

MAN: Bad sign.

WOMAN: In what way? Bad how?

MAN: It could be a fracture.

WOMAN: You already said it was broken.

MAN: Right, but a fracture is worse.

WOMAN: It's the same exact thing.

MAN: I don't think so. It's like another degree of break, with shards and stuff. That's why it sounds like that. *Frac-ture. Frac-frac.* See? Much worse than "break."

WOMAN: Shards?

MAN: Don't worry. It's fine as long as you don't get jostled.

WOMAN: What will that do?

MAN: You don't want to know.

WOMAN: You're bleeding.

MAN: I am.

WOMAN: Your head.

MAN: [Dabbing at it.] Is it bad?

WOMAN: I don't think so. It's just a little cut.

MAN: You're sure?

WOMAN: Yeah. At first I thought it was a laceration, but then I figured it was only a gash, but now I'm pretty sure it's—

MAN: Fine. Make fun, if you want.

[He reaches into his pocket for a handkerchief, pressing it to the wound.]

WOMAN: Can I ask you something?

MAN: What? *[Sighs.]*

WOMAN: Well, I'm a little woozy still so I apologize if this sounds strange, but... did you jump on me? [Pause. He doesn't answer.] Did you?

MAN: Well, I wasn't... I didn't exactly, no.

WOMAN: Did you fall?

MAN: No.

WOMAN: Were you thrown?

MAN: I leapt.

WOMAN: I see.

MAN: [Leaps again, landing on her shoulder, then jumps off again.]
[Pause.]

Then when you said no, what you really meant was yes, you *did* jump on me.

MAN: I guess so.

WOMAN: Were you trying to rob me?

MAN: No, I didn't even see you.

WOMAN: I was standing right here. Didn't you check first? *[Giggles.]*

MAN: No. I was... I should have. It was irresponsible of me, but I thought I was over the water.

WOMAN: The water's way over there. It's low because of the drought.

MAN: I mean, I realize that now.

WOMAN: And anyway, what were you doing...?

[Pause.]

Just a second.

MAN: Is it hurting?

WOMAN: No. I mean, yes, it is, but that's not the thing right now. It's just hard to express myself when I get this way.

MAN: Injured?

WOMAN: Angry.

MAN: Oh.

WOMAN: I mean, you... jumped on me!

MAN: And I'm really sorry.

WOMAN: How dare you! [She looks like she'll cry now]

MAN: Really, *really* sorry.

WOMAN: You... idiot! You stupid idiot! You could have killed me.

MAN: I feel worse than I could ever tell you.

WOMAN: All because you couldn't bother to look before leaping off bridge.

MAN: You know, maybe the thing to do right now would be to get you to a hospital in case—

WOMAN: And what kind of dunderhead goes swimming dressed like that? In jeans. And spats.

MAN: They're not spats. [She looks around.] Significant man [she laughs]

WOMAN: Whatever. What sort of fool goes—

MAN: They're ankle weights.

WOMAN: Oh great. Even better. Why not strap a millstone around your neck while you're at it? That way you can be sure to...

[She stops, stares at him.]

Tell me this isn't what it looks like.

MAN: It is.

WOMAN: No way.

MAN: I'm serious.

WOMAN: Tell me you weren't trying... You weren't jumping...

MAN: To my death, yes.

[Long pause. She then bursts out laughing.]

Hey!

WOMAN: Off that little bridge.

[She laughs harder.]

With those things on your feet, without even checking to...

[She laughs even more.]

MAN: Excuse me?

WOMAN: The water...

[Laughs.]

MAN: What are you doing? What's so damn funny?

WOMAN: Even if you hit it, the water...

[Laughs.]

It would barely come up to your waist.

[Laughs.]

MAN: I told you I didn't know about—

WOMAN: You'd be standing there with your feet stuck in the mud with those ankle things on, trying to...

[Laughs.]

... trying to pull them out.

[Mimes pulling a leg out of the mud.]

Ssscorp!

[Laughs uncontrollably.]

MAN: All right, that's enough. I mean it. This isn't something you make fun of.

WOMAN: What, you mean trying to drown yourself in a puddle?

MAN: I didn't know it was this low, OK?

WOMAN: [Suddenly serious.] I was leaping into the mud... to my death.

[Laughs.]

MAN: I was trying to go head first, for your information, but the ankle weights swung me around when I was in the air so my feet came back under me and—

[She laughs harder than ever.]

That's it. I'm not talking to you.

[He starts to limp off.]

WOMAN: Wait, I'm sorry. [she runs after him]

[He limps away, she follows him]

WOMAN: Forget it.

WOMAN: You're hurt.

WOMAN: Hey, stop, all right? I won't laugh anymore.

[He has gone off.]

And I could use some help myself! This was your fault, after all!

[Pause.]

You're not just going to leave me here, are you!!!

[Pause. He re-enters, limps over to her, holds out his hand to help her up.]

In a minute. I'm still a little shaky.

MAN: From laughing.

WOMAN: From being landed on.

[Pause.]

So why were you jumping?

MAN: I told you.

WOMAN: Yeah, but why? Depressed? In bed all day? Grief?

MAN: What kind of question is that?

WOMAN: A logical question, I would think? All relative questions.

MAN: Right. And when you see a person lying down with their eyes closed, I suppose you ask if they're sleepy. Someone's chowing down on a plate of pasta, you wonder whether they're hungry. Duh.

WOMAN: Um... I hate to interrupt your mocking of me, but it's not really that simple. What you're talking about doing goes a little beyond basic bodily functions. It's not simple cause and effect.

MAN: Yes, I am depressed. Are you happy now? The answer to your question is yes.

WOMAN: Oh.

[Pause.]

Because you don't seem it.

MAN: Oh, that does it. I'm sitting over there.

WOMAN: Wait. I'm serious. Depression is a specific medical condition with a recognizable set of symptoms.

MAN: Well I have them. Plenty of them.

WOMAN: I don't see any.

MAN: That's because I'm irritated right now.

WOMAN: There you go. People in a suicidal depression don't get irritated like that. They're apathetic.

[Pause.]

MAN: [Apathetic.] Whatever.

WOMAN: That's why I thought it might be something else.

MAN: Like what?

WOMAN: An illness. No.

WOMAN: Bad news. A loss.

MAN: No.

WOMAN: Fear.

MAN: Of what?

WOMAN: Someone's trying to kill you and you don't want to wait for it to happen so you do it yourself.

MAN: No.

WOMAN: Guilt.

MAN: Over what?

WOMAN: How should I know. Maybe you got into an argument and beat someone into a coma and found out later he was a Zen Buddhist who had taken a vow of nonviolence and couldn't defend himself, and he had six kids and was working on a cure for blindness.

MAN: What was the argument about?

WOMAN: Or maybe, maybe, it's love.

MAN: Love?

WOMAN: Maybe you're heartbroken over a romance that ended. Or that never was.

MAN: What's so bad about that? A broken heart is natural, it's just that it's not always harmonious. I mean, it's not always good for people to be together.

WOMAN: Are you kidding? That's about the best reason of all to want to drown yourself. Meeting the person you want to be with forever, and then realizing it can never be. Knowing you'll grow old and die without ever again looking into the one set of eyes that brings peace to your heart. Someone who makes you feel like you can face anything in the world as long as you can do it squeezing their hand.

MAN: But you just said I didn't seem depressed.

WOMAN: That's not depression. That's something far more profound.

MAN: What, sulking?

WOMAN: What did you say?

MAN: Sulking. How is that more profound than depression?

WOMAN: I don't think you quite understand what I'm getting at.

MAN: What's not to understand? You like someone, they don't like you back. Woo-dee-woo-woo. You mope around a few days, maybe a couple of weeks, play around with the idea of killing yourself just to show them how sorry they'll be when you're gone, then you get bored with it all, get interested in someone else, and fffffft! It's all better.

[Pause. He sees her staring at him.]

What?

[Pause.]

What is it? What?

WOMAN: I don't want to discuss this anymore.

MAN: But you brought it up.

WOMAN: That's before I realized you lacked the emotional sophistication to understand what true loss is. I should have guessed it, though, judging by your pathetic, halfhearted attempt to kill yourself.

MAN: Pathetic?! Half...! Listen, you judgmental... whatever, if we had gotten even half the rainfall we usually do, I'd be dead right now! Gone! Dragged to the bottom of a dark river with my lungs filled with water. And you'd have been on the shore watching the whole thing, thinking how depressed and emotionally sophisticated I was to have done it!

WOMAN: But you didn't, did you? And you want to know why you didn't? Because you're too shallow. Because you never experienced a pain so strong it would make eternal darkness seem like a bargain by comparison.

MAN: Oh, and you have, I suppose.

WOMAN: More than you, I can tell you that.

MAN: Then why are you here talking about it? Why aren't you floating around in eternal darkness all happy and carefree?

WOMAN: Listen, I was close. I was this close.

MAN: What, you gave your wrist a little scratch? Took a few too many aspirin?

WOMAN: I drank poison, bucko!

MAN: What kind?

WOMAN: None of your damn business!

MAN: Come on, you're so committed, tell me what kind of poison you drank. Maybe I'll go buy some.

[Pause.]

Well?

WOMAN: It was... I believed at the time... poison, and that's what matters.

MAN: What's that mean?

WOMAN: It means that even though what I drank—in the firm belief that I was, in fact, ending my life—even though it was still horrible and extremely dangerous in large doses, it wasn't... *technically...* poison.

MAN: So what was it? Buttermilk?

[*Pause.*] *of skin now dry, skin tight, skin raw*

WOMAN: Ipecac. *so bright, so clear, so pale, like a dead man's eye*

MAN: Pardon?

WOMAN: Ipecac. I drank ipecac.

[*Long pause.*] *now queasy, I need quiet time*

MAN: But that's the stuff that makes you—

WOMAN: I know what it is *now*, all right! I know better than anyone.

But before that I had only been told never, ever to touch it, and my folks kept it on the top shelf of their medicine cabinet hidden in back, so I thought it must be lethal.

MAN: I bet it felt lethal.

WOMAN: You have no idea.

[*Pause. They sit a moment.*] *so quiet, so still, now to know*

Anyway, I'm not going to make the same mistake again. As soon as I've completed a single, sweet, symbolic gesture, I'm going to go back and do it right.

MAN: What'll it be this time, death by Ex-lax?

[*She stares at him.*] *so quiet, so still, now to know*

WOMAN: Why don't you just leave, all right?

Anyway, I'm not going to make the same mistake again.

MAN: What, you get to make fun of me, but I can't say the least little thing about you?

WOMAN: No, you got your dig in, you evened the score, so I don't see where we have anything else to discuss. Nice meeting you.

MAN: I thought you were hurt. You needed my help.

WOMAN: I'm better.

MAN: I thought your arm was broken.

WOMAN: It'll be fine.

MAN: Well I can't just leave you here.

WOMAN: Sure you can. Go back to playing in the mud. Goodbye.

[*He stands watching her a moment. He then takes a few limping steps away. He stops.*]

MAN: Hurt pretty bad, huh?

WOMAN: I told you not to worry about it.

MAN: No, the person. The ipecac guy. That must've been pretty awful for you to feel that way.

WOMAN: What, you mean “sulky”?

MAN: You know what I mean.

[*Pause.]*

WOMAN: It was pretty bad, yes.

[*Pause.]*

MAN: I'm sorry it happened to you.

WOMAN: Thank you.

[They sit.]

And I'm sorry that whatever happened to make you feel like jumping off a bridge happened to you.

[Pause.]

And if you don't tell me what it was, I'm going to strangle you with my good hand.

MAN: Hey, I don't know anything about you either.

WOMAN: You do too. You know I was in a romance that destroyed my will to live.

MAN: But you didn't go into any details.

WOMAN: After that "moping around" crack, you don't get details without earning them. So give, kamikaze. I'm laying odds on crushing gambling debts.

[He doesn't answer at first.]

MAN: Stephen Jay Gould. **WOMAN:** Who?

MAN: He's this scientist up at Harvard.

WOMAN: And he flunked you and you had to drop out of school and it ruined your life. No wait, wait! He stole your research and published it and got famous and married your girlfriend, and you ended up broke and alone and bitter.

[Pause. He stares at her.]

Maybe you should just tell it.

MAN: He's an author. He writes about trilobites and dinosaurs and musicians, stuff like that. Anyway, a while back I got into a big argument with someone at work about why there are no .400 hitters anymore, and I—

WOMAN: You work at Harvard and you're arguing about baseball?

MAN: I don't work at Harvard. I work at a carpet warehouse. Anyway, I said it was relief pitching but he keeps going on about "the right wall of human physical achievement," and how I should read this book by this guy Gould.

WOMAN: About trilobites.

MAN: About evolution.

WOMAN: Not about baseball?

MAN: Yes about baseball. It's... complicated. He's writing about .400 hitters but he's really talking about how we're this big accident.

WOMAN: Us?

MAN: People. How most life on earth is basically bacteria, and how everything else is just sort of... *not* bacteria.

WOMAN: So?

MAN: Well the way he explained it made sense. I could see that it was all true, you know? I could see that life was pretty much just a lot of microbes swimming in the dirt, and all the things we see around us and find beautiful and live for are just... a fluke. They're this statistical aberration that could never be repeated if you started over. People, us, we would never happen again. There's nothing *inevitable* about any of it.

WOMAN: So what?