

The Whale's Tale

A full-length play

By Mona Deutsch Miller

(10-page excerpt for the Leah)

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

CHARLIE, late 40s, divorced for several years from TONI. Handsome but insecure, a bit reticent. HE is an experienced technician and general "Minister without Portfolio" at the laboratory of the Neptune Marine Institute ("NMI"). While he lacks advanced degrees, he has learned untold amounts in his 23 years there. NORA makes him feel insecure.

NORA COLLINS INVERNESS, 30s, the recently promoted head scientist for the NMI laboratory. Very attractive but cool, extremely bright and ambitious, stellar academic credentials. Hardheaded, ultra-rational, laser-focused.

TONI, 40s, warm hearted, still friends with CHARLIE after a long marriage destroyed by infertility and CHARLIE's refusal to let her use donor sperm.

CONNIE, late 20s. Strong, athletic, beautiful, free and open but not a flake, no advanced degrees but passionate about marine mammals.

TED CHANDLER, HEAD OF THE INSTITUTE, 50s to early 60s, attractive, powerful, charismatic, confident, persuasive. Nobody disagrees with him.

SETTINGS

A Reception Area at the Neptune Marine Institute

Laboratory of the NMI

Cafe on the NMI campus

An area with a railing, overlooking an invisible tank

A bar (this may simply be set off by light)

PRODUCTION NOTES

The action takes place during early 2010, at a fictional aquarium that makes its money from wildly popular whale and dolphin shows, but also conducts serious research on cetaceans and other marine mammals. In just a few years, everything will come crashing down for such institutions, as public tolerance for keeping intelligent marine mammals in captivity is about to end. In addition, shortly after this, more than one trainer is killed or injured by a killer whale, and the public becomes more aware of the stress these animals are under when confined.

The set includes a large, hollow sculpture of a whale, suspended from the ceiling and balancing over everyone. Alternatively, on the wall or a screen upstage, a video of a swimming orca may play, or a large photograph or drawing of an orca may be displayed. In some form the whale is present over every interaction. The sculpture (if used) may be suggestive rather than anatomically accurate, embodying the smooth, rounded lines of an orca. The two videos may be seen on a screen inside or just behind the outlines of the Whale, or projected on the upstage wall. The sculpture or other depiction may be used to establish the mood of a scene. For example, when the attack on Mother Mary has taken place, the sculpture may turn black and red, or the screen on the upstage wall may become red. The Whale (whether a suggestive sculpture or projection on a wall) may change color, light up, have a colored "fog" within it, etc. Orca calls, vocalizations and clicks, sounds of the ocean and other sound effects and music may be used. (Audio tapes of orca vocalizations are on the internet. See, e.g., <https://www.orcaresearch.org/index.php/audio-2>)

The Whale should feel like a living presence. Where the Whale "reacts" or changes, * appears in the script, but the director is free to pick different places or to not use all moments marked with *. Characters react to changes in the Whale only where indicated in the script.

The set need not be realistic or crowded with furniture and props; it may be suggestive and full of empty space. Lights may be used to set off Toni's location when she visits Charlie, or the last scene between Charlie and Connie.

During the initial celebratory meeting, a gauzy constellation of lights plays over the stage, a kind of mingling of sea and sky that is beautiful and suggests a deep space.

ACT 1

Scene 1

Lights create a combination starry blue/purple sky and a sense of infinite ocean. Great excitement and celebration in the air. The hollow orca sculpture gleams. All characters are on stage, very dressed up, holding champagne glasses. TED CHANDLER (in bespoke tuxedo), NORA and CHARLIE are near each other, d.s. TED hugs NORA and CHARLIE. CONNIE and TONI are near each other, elsewhere on the stage.

In the b.g. on a screen if available, when indicated we see video of the birth of an Orca calf in captivity. It runs continuously in a loop. If possible, CHARLIE's narration should dovetail with the action on the video. [If no video is available, the play stays the same.]

TED

Happy New Year! We did it! What a great way to start 2010! I want to personally congratulate the entire staff of the Neptune Aquarium and Marine Institute Laboratory, which it has been my honor to head for these last twenty-three years, on the birth of a beautiful baby orca! There was no way I was going to miss this, even though I'm supposed to be in Southern France right now, opening our newest branch aquarium! And then on to the Canaries - we're scouting out the right space for another Neptune Aquarium! Let's lift our glasses and toast our new calf! To our new calf!

(All lift and clink glasses)

ALL CHARACTERS

To our new calf!

TONI

(To CONNIE)

I think he should say "the new calf." He's so proprietary -

CONNIE

It's his - he's the head honcho at Neptune. This is Neptune One. There are five of them. Sounds like we'll be up to seven pretty soon.

TONI

They pour millions into this place.

CONNIE

State of the art.

TONI

Do you work in the lab?

CONNIE

No, I'm a trainer. I do tricks with the orcas at the shows, toss them fish, balls, you name it.

(Pointing to an unseen poster)

That's me, surfing along on Tiki's back, in my matching black and white wet suit. My usual second skin, not like this outfit.

TONI

You dress up very well. I love your shoes.

(TONI and CONNIE continue to chat quietly in a friendly manner)

TED

Who says whale and dolphin shows are a thing of the past? Once we get that baby calf performing, the crowds will be overwhelming! We've waited long enough - ladies, can you imagine having a 22-month pregnancy?

NORA

(To CHARLIE)

Eighteen months, I told him 17 to 18 months. He always gets that wrong.

CHARLIE

Well, you and I know that, but for the crowds having dinner out there, I doubt they care.

NORA

They should care.

CHARLIE

I agree, but what can we do about it? He's singing a pretty optimistic tune. The animal activists will no doubt be up in arms any minute.

NORA

Don't worry, we've got a security detail.

CHARLIE

You always think of everything, Nora.

NORA

Whatever we do, it's always wrong. Now they're going to say the poor orcas can't have sex, because they don't want any young born in captivity. Do they care about depriving them of sex?

CHARLIE

Yeah, that is a problem with being divorced. I realize that doesn't apply to you. Just me.

NORA

Focus, Charlie. And you could go out on a date.

CHARLIE

Is that what happens on dates nowadays? Back when I went out on dates - the Pleistocene Era - you were required to make some sort of commitment before there could be sex. Poor celibate me has spent years watching the males get stimulated during our breeding program. Yeah, I'm ready to be committed OFF NORA's LOOK) - forget it. We got our baby. We're not separating the calf from the mother. We're going to take our time and do this right. Even if sex for me has to wait.

(NORA nods, then motions for him to be quiet for the speaker)

TED

Ladies and gentlemen, dear supporters, I predict that we'll be able to introduce the little guy - we'll let him put on some weight first, of course - at birth he was a mere 600 pounds...

NORA

Four hundred.

CHARLIE

Four hundred.

TED

Within, say, six months.

CHARLIE

Six months? That's way too short.

NORA

For sure.

CHARLIE

The mother's not going to let us get anywhere close to the calf. Could be two years before the calf is weaned! Oh Ted, always in a hurry.

NORA

In a hurry to make money. The science comes second. Guess that's why he picked you for narration to the public.

CHARLIE

(Ignoring her barb)

Well, here comes my moment in the sun. Ready?

(NORA takes a hand held mic)

NORA

It is my great pleasure to introduce my colleague, Mr. Charles Banks, who has been an indispensable part of this laboratory and everything that goes on at the Neptune Marine Institute for - how long has it been, Charlie?

CHARLIE

Over twenty years, Nora. Hi, Ted!

(TED and CHARLIE wave to each other. As CHARLIE narrates the video, TED smiles and seems to share happy memories as HE looks at CHARLIE)

CHARLIE (Con't)

And for those of you listening out there under the stars, that's Dr. Nora Collins Inverness, distinguished marine biologist, zoologist, doctorate from the University of Oregon, and the new Director of the Neptune Marine Institute Laboratory.

(HE looks at NORA. Will there be more of an intro? Apparently not)

CHARLIE (CON'T)

Thank you, Dr. Inverness, for that concise introduction. This is a long awaited, historic occasion - the birth of an orca here at Neptune Marine Institute, which is very dependent on your financial support. And we are deeply grateful for it. Without you, this new life would not have come into being! I've had the pleasure of seeing you, distinguished visitors, over the years, as you watch these beautiful creatures perform. You've brought your children to our many educational exhibits so they can develop the same love for marine mammals. Here at Neptune Marine Institute, we have dedicated ourselves to learning as much as we can about cetaceans, that's whales and dolphins, and other marine animals.

TED

(Interrupting)

Charlie, get to the video, okay? The successful culmination of our breeding program!

CHARLIE

Knowing that much of our crowd is outside on the patio - we've had record attendance, and we thank you - as some of you may not be able to see this extraordinary video, we want to share with everyone what it's like to see the birth of an orca in captivity.

TED

(Bursting, interrupting)

Orcas are the biggest kind of dolphin. They're also called "killer whales." They're the reason I started Neptune. Charlie and I were just kids then, and now, I can hardly wait, Charlie's going to narrate for you, just as it happened in real time, two weeks ago - so unprecedented, a mature female orca, 18 years old, Mother Mary - you know, that was her name even before she had this calf, her first - swimming in Tank Number Three.

CHARLIE

That's not our main performance tank, where so many of you have been happily drenched by powerful flips of a whale's fluke - that's our word for her tail. And the second time you visit us, if you don't feel like taking a shower in your clothes, you know to sit in the higher rows.

CONNIE

You know how she got the name "Mother Mary?"

(TONI shakes her head)

CONNIE (CON'T)

It was before my time, but they told me - somebody said that she looked like she had a nun's habit on, you know, with the black and white across the face, and she acted like the boss, the Mother Superior, but with that huge smile, so...

(The Video starts)

CHARLIE

Here we go! There's Mother Mary, alone in the tank - we wanted to give her plenty of space, and some privacy. She swims, that beautiful black and white curved body, we call it "fusiform," think aerodynamic but for water, so perfectly designed for the ocean, that moist skin quite sensitive, I've felt it, they're so sensitive - you know, they can get sunburned? Look, there she's going around and around, close to the concrete walls of the tank. They do some echolocation, you know. She's sending out those clicks so she knows from the way they bounce back where the walls are. They're so magnificent! So smart! Mother Mary makes steady, graceful, rhythmic revolutions around the tank...

Ted

(Interrupting)

Look at that power!

CHARLIE

(Smoothly continuing)

She does weigh close to five tons. Look, she never stops swimming, smooth ripples in the water, and then, watch the underside of her body, around three-quarters of the way back towards the fluke, just behind the pectoral flipper, the tiny little calf just slips out, tail first...

TED

There it is!

CHARLIE

See that ribbon of dark blood in the water, Mother Mary keeps going, the calf slides out right underneath her.

TED

Don't worry, ladies, that tail is soft and flexible at this stage.

CHARLIE

That tiny little calf is almost eight and a half feet long! But he looks like a little cutie next to Mother Mary, doesn't he? She's around 18 feet long.

CHARLIE (CON'T)

Oh, how they swim together, mother and calf in perfect harmony, the calf under her, like there's a special current of love between them.

(NORA rolls her eyes)

NORA

(Covering the mic)

Just call it a slipstream, Charlie.

CONNIE

(To TONI)

Oh I just love the way he describes them. I love those orcas. They're like family to me. I spend all day with them, every day.

TONI

(Drily)

He's awfully emotional talking about the whale baby. Do you know him? Charlie?

CONNIE

Oh, I know who he is, of course. I can't believe they brought in Dr. Inverness over him, but I guess he didn't have the PhD - but we've never really met. He's cute. Do you know him?

TONI

You could say that. He's my ex-husband.

(CONNIE is surprised)

TONI (CON'T)

We're still good friends. He makes sure I get to go to the big events at Neptune. And this is a biggie alright.

TED

Oh, Charlie, we did it! One final toast to our crowning success! And kudos to our brilliant marine biologists and scientists working at our state of the art laboratory.

Let's hear it for Dr. Inverness, a renowned scientist, and all our staff, including our wonderful trainers! Please, raise your glasses once more, to Neptune's calf! And to the bright days ahead!

(ALL CHARACTERS on stage raise their glasses and drink. ALL exit during the light change)

LIGHTS CHANGE
TO A NORMAL
DAYTIME OFFICE
SETTING.

SCENE 2

NMI LABORATORY. The laboratory is suggested by metal counters or rolling file cabinets. It need not be elaborate. A computer monitor is centrally placed. NORA, CHARLIE and CONNIE confer, surrounded by notebooks. THEY are now in casual office attire. * indicates that the Whale reacts, in light, color, "fog" vocalization or otherwise. Unless noted, the characters do not react to the Whale.

NORA

If the Board would just listen - the shit's about to hit the fan. It's like Alice in Wonderland - you've got to run as fast as you can just to stay in the same place.

CHARLIE

Tell me about it. I thought the hours were long before, but...

NORA

The calf is now four months old.

CHARLIE

(Consulting a paper)

They've got big plans all right.

NORA

You know they want some sort of show in two months that uses the calf. Two months! We've got to come up with a whole program, the training, the whole regimen...

CONNIE
It's too soon.

CHARLIE
It's too soon.

CONNIE
Jinx!

NORA
I know, I know, but the head of the Institute never loses a chance to tell me how much revenue is down from...

(TED enters, casually but stylishly dressed)

NORA (CON'T)
Speak of the devil.

TED
Well this is service the way I like it. I call a staff meeting and here's the staff.

NORA
You've got me, Charlie and our best trainer, Connie...

(TED greets each during the next speech, a polished glad hander)

TED
Hi everyone - hey Charlie. We've gotta get together. Remember when we used to go fishing in Baja? Nora, bet those universities are weeping that I got you and they didn't. Connie, kids are hoarding those old posters of you - you're a star! Wish that black and white suit showed some skin though. Those whales are lucky.

(NORA, CHARLIE and CONNIE love the attention, which suddenly shifts)

TED (CON'T)
Look, I'll just cut to the chase. You're all grownups; you should know what the situation is. Revenue is down. The public is not going to stand for these partial shows - they're half-assed. They've got to have the whole "Neptune" experience!