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# **20,000 Leagues Under the Seas**

Adapted by

**DAVID KERSNAR and  
ALTHOS LOW**

Based on the books by

**JULES VERNE**

**Dramatic Publishing Company**

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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For W. Scott and Earl W.

*20,000 Leagues Under the Seas* premiered on May 23, 2018, at the Lookingglass Theatre in Chicago, Rachel Fink, executive director; Heidi Stillman, artistic director.

**CAST:**

CAPTAIN CYRUS SMITH,  
CONSTABLE WEAVER.....Edwin Lee Gibson  
GIDEON SPILLET, J.B. HOBSON .....Thomas J. Cox  
PENCROFF, FARRAGUT ..... Joe Dempsey  
HARBERT, ENSIGN SMITH,  
NICHOLAS ..... Micah Figueroa  
NEB, MR. DRAX, FIRST MATE ..... Glenn-Dale Obrero  
CAPTAIN NEMO..... Kareem Bandedaly  
PROFESSOR MORGAN ARONNAX.....Kasey Foster  
BRIGETTE CONSEIL ..... Lanise Antoine Shelley  
NED LAND ..... Walter Briggs

**PRODUCTION:**

Director ..... David Kersnar  
Set Design .....Todd Rosenthal  
Costumes..... Sully Ratke  
Lighting..... Christine A. Binder  
Sound Design, Music Composition ..... Rick Sims  
Circus Choreography ..... Sylvia Hernandez Distasi  
Puppet Designs..... Blair Thomas,  
Tom Lee, Chris Wooten  
Rigging Design ..... Rigability Incorporated  
Properties ..... Amanda Herrmann  
Dialect Coaching.....Kathy Logelin  
Fight Choreography ..... Max Fabian  
Production Stage Manager..... Mary Hungerford

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We owe a debt of gratitude to everyone at the Lookingglass Theatre for their Sisyphean work in first mounting the play—most especially, Artistic Director Heidi Stillman, Artistic Producer Philip R. Smith and Production Manager Sarah Burnham.

We are also grateful to definitive Verne-scholar William Butcher and to Dennis Kytasaari, president of the North American Jules Verne Society, for their time and enthusiasm.

And, finally, we would like to thank the students, staff and faculty of Lake Forest College and Monterey Peninsula College for their participation in university workshops and performances that contributed to the development of the adaptation.

# 20,000 Leagues Under the Seas

## CHARACTERS

The CASTAWAYS on Lincoln Island:

CAPTAIN CYRUS SMITH: A Union Army officer.

GIDEON SPILLET: A newspaper reporter.

PENCROFF: A Union Navy sailor.

HARBERT: PENCROFF's adopted son.

NEB: A Union Army private.

CAPTAIN NEMO: Master of the submarine boat, the *Nautilus*.

In New York:

PROFESSOR MORGAN ARONNAX: A French naturalist  
with the Natural History Museum of Paris.

BRIGETTE CONSEIL: ARONNAX's friend and aide-de-camp.

J.B. HOBSON: Secretary for the United States Navy.

OFFICERS

Aboard the *USS Bainbridge*:

CAPTAIN DAVID FARRAGUT: Master of the ship.

MR. DRAX: First Mate.

ENSIGN SMITH: Officer.

CONSTABLE WEAVER: 74th precinct, Brooklyn.

NED LAND: Canadian harpooner.

SAILORS: Including BOATSWAIN and ENGINEER.

Aboard the *Nautilus*:

FIRST MATE

SAILORS

DIVERS



## PRODUCTION NOTES

The play requires a minimum ensemble cast of 9 (7m., 2w.), with most of the actors taking on a wide variety of parts.

A global story, diversity in the casting is essential: the roles of CYRUS SMITH and CONSEIL are to be played by actors of color. CAPTAIN NEMO is to be played by a performer of Indian or South Asian heritage. From there, the more cultures represented, the better.

## AUTHORS' NOTES

This adaptation uses two of Jules Verne's *Voyages Extraordinaires* as its source: *Vingt Mille Lieues Sous Les Mers: Tour du Monde Sous-Marin* (*Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas: A World Tour Underwater*), published in 1869, and its partial sequel, *L'Île Mystérieuse* (*The Mysterious Island*), published in 1874.

“Seas” is the correct English translation of the novel's original title. It denotes the distance the *Nautilus* travels in the story. The commonly used singular, “Sea,” implies a depth impossible to achieve.

20,000 leagues is roughly 60,000 miles. But the deepest part of the world's oceans—the Pacific's Mariana Trench—measures less than seven miles.

The play aspires to be an adventure of believable human beings in actual, tangible peril. Our hope was also to build a text that would lend itself to as many inventive staging ideas as possible.

If you're contemplating a production of the play, and have concerns regarding the adaptation, themes, casting, or production, feel free to contact us through Dramatic Publishing—all questions are welcome.

# 20,000 Leagues Under the Seas

## ACT I

### SCENE 1

*(The voice of PROFESSOR MORGAN ARONNAX speaks from the dark.)*

ARONNAX *(V.O.)*. Given the man's nature, it seems right to begin his story—and my own—in the winding current of yet another. It was here, in the 1860s, on a remote—and mysterious—*island in the Pacific Ocean.*

*(As she speaks, an underground lake within a vast cavern appears.)*

*On the lake's surface, five CASTAWAYS row a small boat toward another, much larger, sea vessel half-submerged there.)*

ARONNAX *(cont'd, V.O.)*. They were prisoners of war. Northern fighting men who engineered a daring escape from a Confederate prison four years ago—in a hot-air balloon, no less. Only to find themselves blown halfway across the world and made prisoners of nature. But they are not alone.

*(The larger vessel is cast metal—its underwater lights illuminating the surrounding water.)*

ARONNAX *(cont'd, V.O.)*. Five castaways, then—in a small boat. Atop an underground lake. Within a vast cavern. At

the center of a volcano. On an island. Surrounded by a world of water as deep and deadly as the cruelty of men.

*(As they approach, CAPTAIN CYRUS SMITH and GIDEON SPILLET rise.)*

SMITH. Well, I'll be damned. I'll be damned all to hell. It's real, after all.

GIDEON. It sure is.

*(HARBERT, PENCROFF and NEB take it in.)*

HARBERT. Sure is what?

PENCROFF. That's what I'd like to know, too. How do you figure—?

*(SMITH gestures silence, pointing to the top of the hull. Light shines from an open hatch there.*

*They off-load onto the deck.)*

PENCROFF *(cont'd, low)*. How do you figure this thing sunk in here in the first place, Captain?

NEB. Rockslide, most like. Just sealed 'er up in here. She's too big to come through the tunnel we did.

GIDEON. If she's the same ship we've read about, boys—she's not sunk.

SMITH. No—she's a submersible.

HARBERT. A submersible.

SMITH. A submarine boat. She came into the cavern from open water through a passage underneath, must have—then just resurfaced on the lake.

HARBERT. A passage underneath what?

SMITH. Underneath the water.

PENCROFF. That can't be right. A ship this big?

SMITH. That's what she was built to do.

PENCROFF. Well, I'll swan.

NEB. You two seen this thing before?

GIDEON. No—just read a book about it.

NEB. A fact book or a fiction book?

GIDEON. Fiction—that a whole lot of people who ain't me believed to be fact. But the egg's on my face now, boys—here she sits.

*(SMITH gathers them in, keeping his voice low.)*

SMITH. Both sides had submersibles in the war—just not nearly so big or scientifically advanced as this one. She's watertight and airtight—made out of steel plating. 'Bout two hundred and / something—

GIDEON. Thirty or eighty, I've / forgotten.

SMITH. Yeah—feet long, tip to rudder. See how she tapers smooth into that big spike up forward? She's built that way so she can ram a ship under the water line—and not get hung up passing on through the hull.

PENCROFF. My God.

*(Suddenly, HARBERT strikes the side of the hull with his pistol butt. All freeze.)*

PENCROFF *(cont'd)*. What do you think you're doin', son?

HARBERT. I was just seein' what it's made out of, Daddy.

PENCROFF. Like to scare me / into next week.

NEB. *Steel*, boy. Like the captain said—

PENCROFF (*to NEB*). Hey—I'll take care of him. You don't need to be—

SMITH (*low*). Quiet down.

(*They do so.*)

SMITH (*cont'd*). The people who man this boat are hostile, as a rule. It's a warship.

(*Silence.*)

NEB. I don't get it—they invited us here in the first place, didn't they?

(*SMITH pulls papers from his coat.*)

SMITH. Somebody sent us this note and map here, but that's about all we know.

NEB. You figure they're our guardian angels, Captain?

PENCROFF. Who else could it be? There ain't nobody else on the island except us.

SMITH. No, it has to be them that's been helping us all along. I just don't know why. And I'd sure like to before I send somebody down that hatch over there.

GIDEON. What are you thinkin', Cyrus?

SMITH. I got two worries. (*To the others.*) A French professor named Aronnax wrote that book— (*To GIDEON.*) what, fourteen years ago?

GIDEON. 'Bout that, yeah. We serialized it at the paper.

SMITH. The story goes the submarine sank the ship Aronnax was on. He went overboard, and this captain did save him—picked him and a couple other boys up out of the water. But then he turned around and held all three prisoner on board for the better part of a year.

PENCROFF. Lord—that's against new maritime law, ain't it?

GIDEON. This captain makes his own law.

SMITH. And I worry has he got the same kind of treatment planned for us? That's one. Here's two: the professor wrote that this entire ship was lost with all hands on board after he and his mates managed to escape. They saw it go down.

GIDEON. So how'd she get here, then?

*(Beat.)*

NEB. Who were they at war with, Captain?

SMITH. Aronnax wouldn't say in the book.

GIDEON. Well, that may not have been his choice to make, Cyrus. That smells to me like the book publisher trying to protect his foreign sales.

PENCROFF. What are you talking about?

GIDEON. A publisher wants to sell books all over the world, right?

PENCROFF. If you say so.

GIDEON. So it's not a good idea to have the villain in the book be Russian, say, if you want to sell your book in Russia, see?

PENCROFF. OK.

GIDEON. So they kept it a secret where this captain was from—and who he was at war with—to sell more books.

SMITH *(personal)*. The captain lived for revenge. He was at war with himself.

*(Beat.)*

PENCROFF. I thought you said the man who wrote the book was *French*.

NEB. You can't read, anyway, Pencroff.

HARBERT. I got a question.

PENCROFF. Son, don't be askin' anything stupid, right now.

SMITH. No—let him ask. Go ahead, Harbert.

HARBERT. Can this submarine boat take us back home?

*(Silence.)*

GIDEON. That's a goddamned good question, Harbert.

NEB. I didn't even think of that.

PENCROFF. That's my boy.

GIDEON. What do you think, Cyrus?

*(SMITH considers—then stands.)*

SMITH. I think it's worth the risk finding out.

*(They approach the hatch.)*

SMITH *(cont'd)*. But I'll go first. Let's keep our wits about us here, boys.

*(They climb down into the submarine.)*

## SCENE 2

*(The lounge of the submarine in disarray.)*

*SMITH and his group enter, one by one.*

*Near a massive, reinforced window where one may view life beneath the ocean's surface, a robed older man, CAPTAIN NEMO, stands alone.*

*SMITH moves forward to address him.)*

SMITH. I believe you left us a message, Captain. So—we've come. *(Beat.)* Are you alone on board, sir? *(Beat.)* You are Captain Nemo, are you not?

*(NEMO looks to SMITH.)*

NEMO. I am Nemo. I am no one. And I am alone here.

SMITH. And this ship is the *Nautilus*?

NEMO. The *Nautilus*, yes. For thirty years I have had little contact with the outside world. Thirty years in the oceans' depths—the one place on Earth that gives me my independence. My freedom—Captain Smith. And yet, you seem to know these things. Who betrayed me?

SMITH. Someone not bound to you or this ship. So maybe someone not guilty of—betrayal, exactly.

NEMO. Ah—the woman.

*(Beat.)*

SMITH. No—it was a French scientist who sailed with you and believed you dead: Professor Morgan Aronnax of the Natural History Museum of Paris.

*(Silence.)*

NEMO. I see—the professor and his two companions—of course. All three survived the Norway maelstrom?

SMITH. They did—but they assumed you and your crew had not.

NEMO. Only myself and a handful of others lived through it. All dead now. I am the last.

HARBERT. What's a maelstrom?



PENCROFF. It's a big damn whirlpool, boy, that you want to avoid in your life. Now, hush.

NEMO. Captain—I take it you've never *met* Professor Aronnax?

SMITH. No—but I am an avid reader of his books.

NEMO. And did the professor happen to write a book recounting his experiences aboard the *Nautilus*?

SMITH. He did—a very famous one, in fact.

NEMO. Tell me about this book.

SMITH. It's an account of your history, under the title *Twenty Thousand Leag—*

NEMO. A few short *months* of my history, sir.

SMITH. And yet, the book has introduced you to the world as—

NEMO. As a *terrorist*, no doubt. Hm?

*(SMITH hesitates.)*

NEMO *(cont'd)*. Yes—a mass murderer? A war criminal, perhaps?

SMITH. Captain, it's not for us to—

NEMO. The monster they always believed me to be—unfit for the world of civilized men? What exactly *was* the professor's judgment?

SMITH. Well—he made it clear he never knew the circumstances that brought you to build the *Nautilus* and to quit mankind. As for your—actions—ah—

*(He looks to GIDEON.)*

GIDEON. Objective, fair—sure.

SMITH. Yes.

GIDEON. Even sympathetic, I'd say.

SMITH. That, too. He saw your—

NEMO. My what?

SMITH. He recognized—great pain in you.

NEMO. That will do.

*(NEMO retrieves an old logbook. He sets it on a stand, searching the pages.)*

SMITH. Only God's law may judge any of us, sir.

NEMO. If only he existed.

*(Beat.)*

SMITH. Captain Nemo—your hidden hand has shielded us from peril since we were cast away on this island. My men and I believe we owe you that debt of thanks—

NEMO. You owe me your lives, Captain. I delivered you, yourself, from drowning the day you arrived, four years ago. I left you all food. I left you the weapons that you carry. I left you tools for building. I gave you quinine sulphate and other medicines— *(He indicates HARBERT.)* that saved that young man's life.

PENCROFF. My boy and I will always be grateful to you, sir.

NEMO *(to SMITH)*. Shall I go on?

SMITH. No. The point is made. You have our thanks and gratitude, Captain—what more do you want from us?

NEMO. I want you to assist me in my death. *(Beat.)* But before that, I want you to hear my own testimony—hear the true story of Professor Morgan Aronnax and his two companions, who first came aboard this ship sixteen years ago. And then I invite you to pass your own judgment, as you may. After that, your debt will be paid.

SMITH. Agreed.

NEMO. According to the professor, then—*his* story began with a monster. I leave it to you gentlemen to judge whether it ends with one.

### SCENE 3

*(An upscale hotel room in New York City.)*

ARONNAX *(V.O.)*. The tide flows back to the past now, to an evening sixteen years ago—in the very civilized Third Avenue Hotel in New York City, Room 317.

*(Two smartly dressed women— ARONNAX and BRIGETTE CONSEIL—unlock the door and enter from the hallway.*

*ARONNAX carries a bundle of newspapers. CONSEIL reads a cablegram. They light lamps.)*

ARONNAX. I don't think I've ever been more uncomfortable in my life.

CONSEIL. Lucky for you, then.

ARONNAX. How is that lucky for me?

CONSEIL. According to this cable, it is well past time for us to change out of these clothes and into something much more practical for traveling.

ARONNAX. When does the cab arrive? Not till morning, yes? How much does it cost for a cab to Brooklyn, anyway?

CONSEIL. We're not paying for it, and you can ask the driver yourself in seven and three-quarters minutes.

*(Beat.)*

ARONNAX. No.

CONSEIL. I'm afraid so.

ARONNAX. But we'll never make it.

CONSEIL. *Bien sûr que nous y arriverons. (Of course, we will make it.)*

ARONNAX. *C'est ce qui est écrit sur le télégramme? (Is that what the cable says?)*

*(CONSEIL shows her.)*

ARONNAX *(cont'd)*. *Sept minutes? (Seven minutes?)*

CONSEIL. Courage.

*(Beat.)*

ARONNAX. *Mais, aidez donc, s'il vous plaît. Oh. (Oh, help then, please.)*

CONSEIL. *J'ai l'intention d'aider. (I intend to.)*

*(They set about undressing her. A screen stands nearby.)*

ARONNAX. Is it the sworn duty of every French minister to be as disgustingly obvious as possible?

CONSEIL. Only if their wives are within earshot.

ARONNAX. Can you imagine being married to such a creature?

CONSEIL. I cannot.

ARONNAX. It's bad enough we are required to continue this silly façade for the minister's benefit. He relishes his little political secrets so very much. I should have wrapped a candelabra around his fat neck—gone to the press and revealed the whole business for good and all.

CONSEIL. Oh, I like the candelabra part. There—you're on your own.