Why Penguins Can't Fly,
and Other Tales of Antarctica
by T. James Belich

CHARACTERS

LORI (F), a king penguin
LANNIE (F), her younger sister
LEROY (M), their younger brother
SAM, a fur seal
GIL, an albatross
SANDY, a snow petrel
BILL (M), a leopard seal
SUE (F), a skua bird
A BLUE WHALE
A CRAB
THE HEAD OF THE SQUID
THE SQUID TENTACLES (Minimum of 4)
KARI (F), a krill
A FISH
EARL (M), an elephant seal
SAM'S FISH, a cartoonish-looking fish from SAM's imagination
AN ORCA

TOTAL ROLES: 20 (4 female, 3 male, 13 male or female)

Plus additional PENGUINS, SEABIRDS, SEALS and TENTACLES as desired
SYNOPSIS

Welcome to Antarctica! Home of the South Pole, the world's coldest desert, and the only uninhabited continent on Earth. Uninhabited by you folks, that is. Lori the penguin here. My brother and sister and I have come to show you all around this charming little continent of ours. At least that was the plan until Bill the leopard seal showed up and threatened to eat us if we don't find the magical Fallen Star that once gave penguins the ability to fly (that's the story, anyway). Throw in a hyperactive seal, a conniving little skua bird, several hungry carnivores and... Well, if I make it home in time for dinner it'll be a miracle. But along the way we'll share a few of my favorite stories while we do our best to stay off everyone's dinner menu and discover the truth of Why Penguins Can't Fly.

SETTING

The Antarctic Peninsula, the present day
SCENE 1

(Antarctica, somewhere along the coast of the Antarctic Peninsula where the landscape is a mixture of ice, rock, and water. As the audience settles in a KING PENGUIN enters and waddles across the stage. About halfway across the PENGUIN stops, sees the audience, squawks in surprise and quickly scuttles off stage again. After a few moments the PENGUIN returns with a SECOND PENGUIN. They both poke their heads out furtively, looking at the audience. When they realize the audience is watching them they both squawk and disappear again. They then emerge and quickly scuttle across the stage, trying not to make eye contact with the audience. After they exit again we hear them squawking excitedly.)

LORI

(Offstage)

What, now?

(LORI, another penguin, waddles on and inspects the audience. The first two PENGUINS poke their heads on, afraid to venture any further.)

Hi there!

(She waves to the audience. To the other PENGUINS)

Don't be shy, they won't bite.

(They don't move and so she pushes the two PENGUINS back onto stage.)

Oh for krill's sake!

(To the audience)

Don't mind them. We're not much used to humans in this part of the world.

(As LORI talks the other PENGUINS secretly exit, still nervous around the audience.)

Hi, I'm Lori, a king penguin. Welcome to Antarctica! The world's coldest desert, home of the South Pole, and the only uninhabited continent on Earth. Uninhabited by you folks, that is. You must have had quite a journey to get here. Here on the Antarctic Peninsula we're still over 600 miles from the southern tip of South America. You know, I just flew in from Chile and boy are my flippers tired!

(Slight pause as she waits for laughter.)

It's funny because I'm a penguin.

(Over explaining)

And penguins can't...

(She flaps her flippers.)

Never mind. My brother and sister and I are here to show you around this wonderful little continent of ours. Now if you'll all just follow me we'll take a look at...

(Suddenly we hear the other PENGUINS squawking offstage.)

Oh for the love of fish! Now what?
LORI
We should make a wish.

LANNIE
I wish that penguins could fly.

LEROY
Yeah!

LORI
And the wish came true!

(LANNIE and LEROY retrieve a pair of beautiful, multi-colored wings from offstage and dress LORI in them.)

Suddenly the penguins had the most beautiful wings in all Antarctica. And fly, boy could they fly!

(She "flies" around the stage.)

LANNIE and LEROY
Wow!

(LANNIE and LEROY run offstage and return with handfuls of colored feathers that they use to "fly" and follow LORI. GIL and SANDY enter.)

SANDY
Is that...?

GIL
It can't be!

SANDY
(Entranced)
It is! They're beautiful...

LORI
With their new wings the penguins became the kings of the ice. They could fly, they could swim, no other bird could match them. Which made them more than a little bit jealous.

(LANNIE and LEROY "fly" in a circle around GIL and SANDY. SUE the skua bird enters.)

LANNIE and LEROY
Whee!

SANDY
Careful!

(GIL has found a fish and is about to eat it.)
LEROY

Yum!

(He snatches the fish from GIL and "flies" away with LANNIE.)

GIL

Why you lousy, no-good little ice rats...

SUE

Got yourselves a little penguin problem, have ya?

SANDY

It's because of those wings. Those gorgeous, gorgeous wings...

GIL

I say we gather up all the other birds and –

SUE

And what? Have ya seen how many of 'em there are? Naw, what ya need here is a different approach.

(The SEABIRDS huddle as SUE whispers to the others.)

LORI

Skua birds. They'll steal anything and everything from anyone. They'll even eat carrion. You know, not too fresh. No one likes a skua bird, though you can't argue that they're clever.

SUE

So...?

GIL

Not bad, Sue, I like it. Sandy?

SANDY

Let's do it!

(GIL and SANDY exit.)

LORI

Now as the penguins' new wings didn't work very well in the water they always left them behind when they went swimming along with one penguin to guard them.

(LANNIE and LEROY hand their feathers over to LORI who puts them with the Star.)

See you later, have a nice swim!

(LANNIE and LEROY wave to LORI and run towards the water.)

LANNIE

Last one in's a rotten egg!
CRAB

Hey, hey!

BILL

Crabby, my favorite crustacean.

CRAB

You're a nice seal, yeah, yeah!

(The CRAB starts to leave, sees EARL, purposely avoids him, and exits. SUE slides over to BILL.)

SUE

Mornin', Bill.

BILL

Sue!

(They clap each other on the back.)

Good to see ye. How's the chicks?

SUE

Still squawkin'.

BILL

Glad to hear it.

SAM

Arf, arf! Hi, Uncle Bill!

BILL

Sammy, come here you. My favorite nephew of no relation.

(To the audience)

Yes, everyone loved the leopard seal. Everyone, that is, except...

LORI

Let me guess...

BILL and LORI

...the penguins.

SAM

No!
BILL
Oh how these wretched little birds tormented him! They teased him...
  (LANNIE and LEROY sneak up behind BILL, tap him on one shoulder, and hide as he turns around. They then tap him on the other shoulder and hide, laughing, as he turns again.)
...and insulted him...

LANNIE
Is that your face or did you cough up a sea urchin?
  (She and LEROY continue to laugh.)

BILL
...and soon the seal was laughed at everywhere he went.
  (The CRAB enters and BILL catches it.)
Got ye!

CRAB
Hey, hey! You're that leopard seal, right? Right?

Yes...

BILL
Ah ha ha ha ha! Ah ha ha ha ha!

CRAB
I think I've lost me appetite.
  (He lets the CRAB go and it scuttles away.)

Ah ha ha ha ha!
  (It exits.)

BILL
And when the leopard seal settled down fer his afternoon nap how little he suspected what else those dastardly penguins had in store.
  (BILL closes his eyes and starts to snore. The PENGUINS sneak up and place a few eggs in front of him.)

LORI
THIEF!!!
  (GIL and SANDY enter as LORI points at BILL, who wakes up.)
Thief! The leopard seal has stolen our eggs!

SANDY
I never would have thought it.
GIL

Why the lousy, no-good mammal...

(GIL and SANDY exit in disgust.)

EARL

I am disappointed in you, cousin. Stealing eggs, really.

(He stalks away. As the story continues LANNIE whispers in LEROY’s ear. LEROY nods and with KARI's help they sneak off and exit.)

BILL

Thanks to the penguins the leopard seal lost all of his friends and was forced to become a solitary predator.

(By this point SAM is bawling. SUE puts the Fallen Star in place for the rest of the story.)

SAM

That is so mean!

SUE

Say there, I couldn't help but seein' that shameful little setup. How'd ya like ta get back at those rotten penguins, huh?

BILL

What did ye have in mind?

SUE

You just leave it ta me.

(She sneaks over to LORI.)

Psst, hey! Penguin! That was quite a number ya did on that leopard seal.

LORI

(Chuckling)

Yeah.

SUE

You're a brave little bird, which gets me thinkin'...

LORI

Yeah?

SUE

Do ya ever wonder what it's like ta fly? Soarin' through the air, all the world beneath ya?

LORI

(Longingly)

Yeah.