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*Dramatic Publishing*

# **A WOMAN CALLED TRUTH**

**A play in two acts  
celebrating the life  
of Sojourner Truth**

**by  
SANDRA FENICHEL ASHER**



**Dramatic Publishing**  
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(A WOMAN CALLED TRUTH)

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# A WOMAN CALLED TRUTH

*(formerly: GOD AND A WOMAN)*

A Play in Two Acts  
For One Woman and Others\*

## CHARACTERS

SOJOURNER TRUTH . . . . . also referred to as “Belle,”  
a tall, muscular, handsome black woman with a forceful  
speaking and singing voice

### \*OTHERS

Two women and three men play a variety  
of supporting roles, as follows:

FIRST WOMAN . . . . . black, also plays MAMA, SISSY,  
and OLD WOMAN

SECOND WOMAN . . . . . white, also plays MRS. NEELY,  
MRS. GEDNEY, MARIA VAN WAGENER,  
and MRS. WHITING

FIRST MAN . . . . . white, also plays BAUMFREY,  
JOHN NEELY, CATLIN, VAN WAGENER,  
SQUIRE CHIP, OLD MAN, and FIRST REVEREND

SECOND MAN . . . . . white, also plays AUCTIONEER,  
JOHN DUMONT, SOLOMON GEDNEY, OFFICER,  
and SECOND REVEREND

THIRD MAN . . . . . black, also plays brother PETER, BOB,  
son PETE, and SLAVE BOY

TIME: Approximately 1810-1866.

PLACE: In and around Ulster County, New York,  
New York City, and Akron, Ohio.

Very special thanks go to  
Paul Iddings, Amie Brockway, Nan Siegmund,  
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for invaluable help and encouragement.

This play was first produced in a two-act version, entitled *God and a Woman*, by the Greensleeve Players, Mercyhurst College, Erie, PA, on February 18, 1987, as part of the National Playwrights Showcase. It featured the following cast and crew:

SOJOURNER TRUTH ..... Cheryl Horton-Jong

Multiple roles, as written:

|                         |                     |
|-------------------------|---------------------|
| Jim Skiff               | John E. Graves      |
| Adriane Robinson-McIver | Jeff Sansom         |
| C. R. Schmitt           | Carolyn Brust-Skiff |

CHORUS

|             |                  |            |
|-------------|------------------|------------|
| Matty Lucia | Jennifer Montani | Pam Verity |
|-------------|------------------|------------|

DANCERS

|              |              |               |
|--------------|--------------|---------------|
| Ishel Huelat | James Harris | Lisa Veshecco |
|--------------|--------------|---------------|

HARMONICA

Ben Small

|  |                       |
|--|-----------------------|
| Directed and Designed by .....           | Paul C. Iddings       |
| Original Music and Music Direction ..... | Jim Skiff             |
| Choreography .....                       | June Hines            |
| Lighting Design .....                    | David Bateman         |
|  | Amy Halperin          |
| Stage Manager and Properties .....       | Kimberly G.           |
| Set Construction .....                   | David Lee Dunkle, Jr. |
|  | Darryl M. Lewis       |
|  | James Place           |
|  | <u>Lisa Sabatino</u>  |

Lighting and Production ..... David Bateman  
David Lee Dunkle, Jr.  
Poster Design ..... Michael Lipiec  
Lobby Display ..... Bobbie Gaydos  
Photography ..... Igor Stalsky  
Special Scenic Photography ..... Paul C. Iddings

The one-act version of *A WOMAN CALLED TRUTH* was developed through readings and productions at The Open Eye: New Stagings, New York; Main Street Theatre, Houston; and the Children's Theatre Symposium, Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis.

## ACT ONE

*AT RISE: The stage is bare except for six cubes or stools, a lectern, a prop table, and hat racks. Five cubes are arranged U. The lectern is DR; the sixth cube, DR of it. The table and racks are at sides of stage and hold costume changes and props. OTHERS are seated on U cubes in shadow. FIRST WOMAN and THIRD MAN wear slave cloth, a rough strip of undyed material with a neck hole; the rest, street dress typical of the early 1800s. SOJOURNER, also clad in slave cloth, sits on the D cube in a pool of light. OTHERS' voices are heard out of darkness.*

FIRST WOMAN. Tell your story, Belle. It must be told.

SECOND WOMAN (*disdainfully*). Well, wouldn't you just know it?

FIRST MAN. Is something wrong?

THIRD MAN. Tell your story, Belle.

FIRST WOMAN. It must be told.

SECOND WOMAN. Over there, Reverend. Don't you see her? Sitting on the steps of the podium as if she owned the place?

SECOND MAN. Tell your story.

THIRD MAN. It must be told.

SECOND WOMAN (*disgusted*). This is no woman's rights convention. This is an abolitionist affair. Frances? Where's Frances? This is Ohio, not New York. We're not accus-



tomed to this sort of thing. Frances, get her down from there.

FIRST WOMAN. Tell your story, Belle.

SOJOURNER (*raising her head*). But who will listen? Who will hear?

FIRST WOMAN. They'll listen. They'll hear.

(SONG: "SOMEBODY CALLIN' MY NAME")

SOJOURNER (*sings. OTHERS may join in*).

HUSH, HUSH, SOMEBODY CALLIN' MY NAME,  
HUSH, HUSH, SOMEBODY CALLIN' MY NAME,  
HUSH, HUSH, SOMEBODY CALLIN' MY NAME,  
OH, MY LORD, OH, MY LORD, WHAT SHALL I DO?

I'M SO GLAD THAT TROUBLE DON'T LAST  
ALWAYS,  
I'M SO GLAD THAT TROUBLE DON'T LAST  
ALWAYS,  
I'M SO GLAD THAT TROUBLE DON'T LAST  
ALWAYS,  
OH, MY LORD, OH, MY LORD, WHAT SHALL I DO?

HUSH, HUSH, SOMEBODY CALLIN' MY NAME,  
HUSH, HUSH, SOMEBODY CALLIN' MY NAME,  
HUSH, HUSH, SOMEBODY CALLIN' MY NAME,  
OH, MY LORD, OH, MY LORD, WHAT SHALL I DO?  
OH, HUSH, HUSH, SOMEBODY CALLIN' MY NAME.

(*She moves behind the lectern and begins her narrative in a mature but not overly aged voice.*)

My name? (*Laughs, shakes her head.*) Which one's that, I wonder? Oh, I've had a bunch of them in my day. And a bunch of days for each of them. Yes, indeed, I've lived a

life, I have. "What if there is no heaven?" a fellow once asked me. "What if you never get there? What'll you say then?" "I'll say, 'Bless the Lord,'" I told him, "I had a good time thinking I would!" (*OTHERS ad lib responses of "Amen," etc., as if at a lecture or tent meeting.*)

I was born a slave in Ulster County, New York. Oh, yes, there were slaves up there, too. Not so many as in the South, and not so profitable, either, so there was some talk going on up in the capital about changing the laws, but it took its time doing me any good. Must have been 1790-something I came into this world. On a bed of straw in the slave cellar. Nobody bothered to make note of my birthday. Nobody made note of a calf's birthday, either, not even its mama. We were part of the livestock, Mama, Papa, my brother Peter and me. There were other children, too, that Mama and Papa talked about all the time, but I never knew them. All sold away. Mama called me Isabelle, but that soon got shortened to Belle. My last name belonged to my master, just like me. Belle Hardenburgh. Master Hardenburgh's Belle.

Papa's name was Baumfrey, a Dutch word. Ulster County was Dutch country, you see. Everybody spoke Dutch up there, master and slave alike. Baumfrey means tall, strong tree. By the time I came along, the trunk was stooping over, and the limbs were growing weak.

MAMA (*from beyond the spotlight*). Where are you going, Baumfrey?

SOJOURNER (*continuing her narrative*). Master Hardenburgh was a kindly man, but like Papa Baumfrey, he was getting old.

BAUMFREY (*also beyond the spotlight*). Up to the sickroom, Mama Betts. I've been called.

MAMA. Is Master that bad?

BAUMFREY. Bad, Mama Betts. Bad sick. I've got to go.

SOJOURNER. There was an awful quiet in the slave cellar that night. Families huddled together, waiting. It had been raining for days and you could still hear muddy water sloshing up between the broken floor boards. A pine knot flickered a little light. No heat. Peter and I fell asleep, but Mama kept watch with the others.

*(PETER comes forward into light as SOJOURNER moves in front of lectern. They huddle on floor, asleep. As they take their places, OTHERS sing following verse of "Somebody Callin' My Name.")*

OTHERS.

EARLY ONE MORNIN', DEATH CAME  
KNOCKIN' AT MY DOOR,  
EARLY ONE MORNIN', DEATH CAME  
KNOCKIN' AT MY DOOR,  
EARLY ONE MORNIN', DEATH CAME  
KNOCKIN' AT MY DOOR,  
OH, MY LORD, OH, MY LORD, WHAT SHALL I DO?  
OH, HUSH, HUSH, SOMEBODY CALLIN' MY NAME.

*(MAMA hurries forward into light.)*

MAMA (*calling in a whisper*). Isabelle! Peter! Wake up.

SOJOURNER (*in a child's voice*). Mama? What is it?

MAMA. Hush. Not so loud. There are babies sleeping.

SOJOURNER. Has something happened?

MAMA. Just listen to me, child. Pay attention, now. I want you to show me you remember everything I've been teaching you.

PETER. I'm tired, Mama. I want to sleep.

MAMA. No time for that now. You must swear to me that you will never lie.

SOJOURNER. Mama, why are you—

MAMA. Isabelle, do as I say!

SOJOURNER. Yes, Mama.

MAMA. Will you ever lie?

SOJOURNER and PETER. No, Mama.

MAMA. And you will never steal?

SOJOURNER and PETER. No, Mama.

MAMA. And you will always obey your master?

SOJOURNER and PETER. Yes, Mama.

MAMA. Good. Now, children, listen hard to what I tell you tonight, even if I have told it all before. I want you to remember it always, because you will be told many things after I'm gone.

SOJOURNER. Where are you going, Mama?

MAMA. Just listen. There is a God, and He sees everything and He knows everything. You must never forget Him, you hear? He lives in the sky, high, high up in the sky. And if ever you are beaten or cruelly treated—

SOJOURNER. Master doesn't beat us, Mama.

MAMA. Isabelle, will you hush? *Listen to me.*

SOJOURNER. Yes, Mama.

MAMA. Whenever you fall into any kind of trouble, you must ask God for help. Talk to Him. Listen to Him. He will always hear you and help you, if you just remember to ask. Will you remember?

PETER. Yes, Mama.

SOJOURNER. I'll remember.

MAMA. Good. Good. Now, look. Out there through the window. Look up at those stars. Do you see those stars?

SOJOURNER. I see them.

MAMA. Fill yourselves up full with those stars, children. They are the same stars that shine down on your brothers and sisters, the very stars they see as they look up, though they are far away from us and from each other. Remember them. Remember us here, the way we are right now, the way we feel, warm and close. No matter where we go, when we look up at that sky, we'll see the same stars at the same time and we will be...together.

(SONG: "AFRICAN LULLABY")

MAMA (*sings. OTHERS may join in*).

**DO BANA COBA  
GE-NE ME, GE-NE ME!**

**DO BANA COBA  
GE-NE ME, GE-NE ME!**

**BEN D'NU-LI, NU-LI, NU-LI, NU-LI,  
BEN D' LE.**

SOJOURNER (*spoken*). What does it mean, Mama, that song you sing?

MAMA. It means I remember.

SOJOURNER. Remember what?

MAMA. My mama, who sang it to me, a long, long time ago. It means she remembered, way back, even before that. To Africa—where she was born, and the song was, too.

SOJOURNER. The words say all that?

MAMA. I don't know what the words say, Isabelle, only what they mean.

BAUMFREY (*a voice out of the darkness*). Mama Betts?

MAMA. Baumfrey? Is that you?

BAUMFREY. Yah. It's me. Master Hardenburgh—he's dead.

MAMA (*clutching SOJOURNER and PETER*). So soon? Oh, Lord, so soon!

*(Lights come up on AUCTIONEER, who places a cube C and immediately begins his spiel. As he comes down into the light, SOJOURNER, PETER and MAMA rise. PETER and MAMA move away, holding onto SOJOURNER as long as they can.)*

AUCTIONEER. I want to thank you folks for coming here today. That wind is fierce and I know it can't be too comfortable for you. But maybe we can warm things up a bit before we're through.

SOJOURNER. Mama?

AUCTIONEER. Now, you all knew Charles Hardenburgh. He was a good man; he was an educated man. Charles Hardenburgh knew quality; he demanded it. I expect you'll want to keep that in mind when bidding on the goods we are offering you today. (*He pushes SOJOURNER toward the empty table.*) Get on up there, girl.

SOJOURNER. Mama?

AUCTIONEER. The very best Gold Coast stock. Pure African. Nothing but the best for Charles Hardenburgh. Nothing but the best for you. What am I bid, gentlemen? Who bids, gentlemen? What do you bid for her? Five dollars! Do I hear ten? Ten? Ten? Come, gentlemen, how much do you bid? She's a strong one. She's a fine one. Got five, want ten. Ten dollars! Do I hear fifteen? Got ten dollars,

worth ten times ten. Look at that arm, strong as any boy's, near strong as a man's. Turn around, girl. A broad back. Straight back. Go on, keep turning. Now, I know all about that rumbling up in the capital. Old laws, new laws—doesn't mean a thing. This girl will serve you long, she'll serve you well, I'll warrant her. Bear a dozen children and never miss a day in the field. What am I bid, gentlemen? Let me hear fifteen. Tell you what I'll do. Got a fine flock of sheep. Give me a hundred for the sheep, take the girl for ten. Take them both, or don't take either. A hundred and ten for a fine flock of sheep and a sturdy wench to help you tend them. What do you say, gentlemen?

*(NEELY steps forward, speaks reluctantly).*

NEELY. I'll give you a hundred for both.

AUCTIONEER. One hundred. Do I hear a hundred and ten? Gentlemen, your final opportunity. Sold to Mr. John Neely for one hundred dollars. Thank you, sir. Thank you very much. *(He turns and leaves scene.)*

NEELY *(to SOJOURNER, uncomfortably)*. Well, come on then, girl. Get those sheep moving. *(He turns and leaves scene.)*

SOJOURNER. Mama!

MAMA. Better go, Isabelle. You belong to Master Neely now. *(OTHERS sing as SOJOURNER and MAMA embrace.)*

**(SONG: "GOODBYE, BROTHER")**

OTHERS.

**GOODBYE, BROTHER, GOODBYE, SISTER,  
IF I DON'T SEE YOU MORE,**

**NOW GOD BLESS YOU, NOW GOD BLESS YOU,  
IF I DON'T SEE YOU MORE.**

**WE PART IN BODY, BUT MEET IN SPIRIT,  
IF I DON'T SEE YOU MORE,  
WE'LL MEET IN HEAVEN, THE BLESSED  
KINGDOM,  
IF I DON'T SEE YOU MORE.  
GOODBYE, BROTHER, GOODBYE, SISTER,  
IF I DON'T SEE YOU MORE,  
NOW GOD BLESS YOU, NOW GOD BLESS YOU,  
IF I DON'T SEE YOU MORE.**

SOJOURNER (*returning to narrative and mature voice*).

Now my name was Belle Neely—and the war was begun. Master Neely beat me often, beat me hard, and I never understood why. Master Neely and his wife, they came from Massachusetts. They spoke English instead of Dutch. If they sent me for a frying pan, not knowing what they meant, perhaps I'd carry them the pothooks. Then, oh! how angry they'd be with me. (*Drops to her knees beside the lectern, hands held above her head as if tied.*)

MRS. NEELY (*a voice out of the darkness*). John Neely, look at this pan. Look at it!

NEELY (*in darkness*). Woman, what is it you want of me now?

SOJOURNER. One day, Master Neely dragged me out to the barn, tied my hands to a post, and whipped me till the blood stood in pools on the ground. (*A pause. She tries to rise, sinks back down, her hands freed now.*) Mama? Mama, I see you there. Don't go! Mama, please? He hurt me, Mama. Master Neely hurt me bad. Mama? (*A pause.*) Gone. (*Another pause. She calms herself down, realizes, in*



*a childlike way, that she has an alternative.*) God? God, you know it isn't right for Master Neely to beat me like that. I'm trying to learn English, but I can't learn it fast enough. Mama told me to do what's right. I'm trying. Why isn't he? Could you...kill him? *(She quickly reconsiders.)* No. No. Could you find me another master? I'll be waiting for your answer. Mama says you'll always hear me, so now it's up to you.

*(MRS. NEELY steps forward into light.)*

MRS. NEELY. I asked that girl three times to wash out this pan and she hasn't touched it. Now everything's stuck on there. John!

*(NEELY steps into light.)*

NEELY. I've already beaten the child till there's no place left on her to bleed. It does no good. She doesn't understand. She knows no English.

MRS. NEELY. She *does*. She must. She pretends to be ignorant to spite us.

NEELY *(slowly, emphatically)*. It's the Dutch who spite us, not the girl. She knows no English.

MRS. NEELY *(appalled at the ramifications of this)*. Oh, John, what have we done?

NEELY. All that we could and more. And still our store is empty. We do no trade. These stubborn New York Dutch want no part of us. I thought surely owning a slave as they do would help, but no. They never change. They go miles out of their way to trade with one of their own instead of us.

MRS. NEELY *(thoughtfully)*. They never change, but we do.

NEELY. What?