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Dramatic Publishing

A WOMAN CALLED TRUTH

by

Sandra Fenichel Asher

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(A WOMAN CALLED TRUTH)

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A WOMAN CALLED TRUTH

**A Play in One Act
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 roles as follows:

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

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

FIRST MAN white, also plays **BAUMFREY**,
NEELY, **CATLIN**, **ISAAC**, **CHIP**, **OLD MAN**,
and **FIRST REVEREND**

SECOND MAN white, also plays **AUCTIONEER**,
DUMONT, **GEDNEY**, **OFFICER**,
and **SECOND REVEREND**

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

TIME: Approximately 1810-1855

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,
Dorothy Beck Webb, Max Bush,
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and the National Endowment for the Arts
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
Lisa Sabatino
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 current script 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.

A WOMAN CALLED TRUTH

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 the sides of stage and hold props and costume changes. OTHERS are seated on U cubes in shadow. FIRST WOMAN and THIRD MAN wear slave cloth; the rest, street dress suggesting the 1800's. SOJOURNER, also in slave cloth, a rough strip of undyed material with a neck hole, sits on DR cube in a pool of light. OTHERS' voices are heard out of darkness.*

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

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

FIRST MAN. Is something wrong?

THIRD MAN. Tell your story.

SECOND WOMAN. Don't you see her? Sitting on the steps of the podium as if she owned the place? This is no woman's rights convention. This is an abolitionist affair. Get her down from there.

FIRST WOMAN. Tell your story.

SOJOURNER. But who will listen? Who will hear?

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

(SOJOURNER rises as OTHERS sing first verse of "Somebody Callin' My Name.")

OTHERS.

**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?**

SOJOURNER *(moves behind lectern and begins her narrative in a mature but not overly aged voice).* My name? *(Laughs, shakes her head.)* Which one is 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, so there was talk going on about changing the laws. Took its time doing me any good. Must have been seventeen ninety-something I came into this world. On a bed of straw in the slave cellar. We were part of the livestock, Mama, Papa, my brother Peter, and me. There were other children, too, but I never knew them. All sold away. Mama called me Isabelle, but that 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.

MAMA (*in darkness*). Where are you going, Baumfrey?

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

BAUMFREY (*in darkness*). 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. Peter and I fell asleep, but Mama kept watch.

(PETER comes forward into light as SOJOURNER moves in front of lectern. They huddle on floor, asleep. 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?

(MAMA hurries forward into light, whispering.)

MAMA. Isabelle! Peter! Wake up.

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

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 am 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 remember to ask. Will you?

PETER. Yes, Mama.

SOJOURNER. I'll remember.

MAMA. Good. Now, look. Look up at the stars. Do you see them?

SOJOURNER. I see them.

MAMA. Those 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, right now, warm and close. No matter where we go, when we look up at those stars, we will be together.

(MAMA sings "African Lullaby.")

MAMA.

**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. 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. It means she remembered, way back 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. Only what they mean.

BAUMFREY *(in darkness)*. Mama Betts?

MAMA. Baumfrey? Is that you?

BAUMFREY. Ya, it's me. Master Hardenburgh—he's dead.

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

(Lights come up on AUCTIONEER, who places a cube C and immediately begins his spiel. MAMA, SOJOURNER, and PETER rise. PETER and MAMA move away, holding SOJOURNER as long as they can.)

AUCTIONEER. I want to thank you folks for coming here today.

SOJOURNER. Mama?

AUCTIONEER. You all knew Charles Hardenburgh, and he knew quality. He demanded it. Keep that in mind while bidding on the goods we are offering you today. (*Pushes SOJOURNER toward cube.*) 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. Who bids, gentlemen? What do you bid for her? Five dollars! Do I hear ten? Come, gentlemen, how much do you bid? Ten dollars! Who'll bid fifteen? Look at that arm, near strong as a man's. Turn around, girl. A broad back. A strong back. Go on, keep turning. Now, I know all about the 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. 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 tend them.

(NEELY steps forward, speaks reluctantly).

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

AUCTIONEER. Sold to Mr. John Neely for one hundred dollars! *(Turns and leaves scene.)*

NEELY *(to SOJOURNER, uncomfortably)*. Well, come on then, girl. Get those sheep moving.

SOJOURNER. Mama!

MAMA. Better go, Isabelle. You belong to Master Neely now.

(OTHERS sing "Goodbye, Brother" as MAMA and SOJOURNER embrace.)

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.**

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

Now my name was Belle Neely—and the war was begun. Master Neely beat me often, he beat me hard,

and I never knew why. He and his wife, they came from Massachusetts. They spoke English; I spoke 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. (*Drops to her knees beside lectern, hands above her head as if tied.*)

MRS. NEELY (*in 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. I'm afraid! He hurt me, Mama. Master Neely hurt me bad. Mama? (*Pause.*) Gone. (*She calms herself, realizes, in a childlike way, that she has an alternative.*) God? God, you know it isn't right for Master 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? (*Pause.*) Could you find me another Master? I'll be waiting for your answer. Mama says, if I ask, 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 (*emphatically*). It's the Dutch who spite us, not the girl. For God's sake, hear me! 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 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.

MRS. NEELY. They never change, but we do.

NEELY. What?

MRS. NEELY. We've been changing ever since we came here. Changing and changing, and it's all been for the worse. We've never owned slaves. We've never raised a hand in anger to anyone. It's this place. We mustn't stay here any longer. Take me home, John. I want to go home.

NEELY. This is the only home we've got.

MRS. NEELY. Sell it. Sell the land, the store, the girl. Let them have it all and get us out of here before there's nothing left of us worth saving. (*She clings to his arm, pleading.*) Sell it, John, please, and let us go...

(*NEELY regards her for a moment, then pats her hand and nods. She relaxes against him. Lights dim on them and come up on SOJOURNER.*)

SOJOURNER (*with a child's delight and awe*). I thank you, God. (*As she slips on a dress and apron, OTHERS hum "Round the Corn, Sally." They continue as she returns to lectern and narrative.*) Once again, I was walking down a country road, following a flock of sheep, barefoot and weary. I had no idea where I was headed, but it had to be better than where I'd been. I was Belle Scriver for a while. Master Scriver owned a tavern. Oh, times were lively there!

(*OTHERS sing and dance to "Round the Corn, Sally."*)

OTHERS.

HOORAY, HOORAY, HO! ROUND THE CORN,
SALLY,
HOORAY FOR ALL THE LOVELY LADIES,
ROUND THE CORN, SALLY.

THIS LOVE'S THE THING THAT'S SURE TO
HAVE YOU,
ROUND THE CORN, SALLY.
HE HOLDS YOU TIGHT WHEN ONCE HE
GRABS YOU,
ROUND THE CORN, SALLY.

HOORAY, HOORAY, HO! ROUND THE CORN,
SALLY,
HOORAY FOR ALL THE LOVELY LADIES,
ROUND THE CORN, SALLY.

SOJOURNER. Word got out about Master Scriver's Belle, big and strong as a tree—just like Papa! Smart and hard-working, too, with a singing voice some folks

thought was worth the listening. A quiet-speaking man named John Dumont happened by. Offered Master Scriver three hundred dollars for me. Master Scriver hated to see me go, but three hundred dollars? Well. My name was Belle Dumont now.

(She takes up a laundry basket and begins sorting clothes. An African drum is heard, slow and faint at first, then rising in intensity, reaching full crescendo at Bob's entrance. SISSY steps forward.)

SISSY. Put that laundry away, Belle. No work today. It's Pinxter.

SOJOURNER. Pinxter?

SISSY. Slaves' holiday. Don't you hear that drum?

SOJOURNER. Yes, I hear it.

SISSY. That means Bob Catlin's getting ready to dance.

No man, woman, or child can out-dance that boy.

Don't they have Pinxter where you come from?

SOJOURNER. Uh-uh.

SISSY. Oooh, come along with me, child. You have got a treat in store.

SOJOURNER. What about Master's shirts?

SISSY. No masters today, child. No master all week. This is Pinxter, hear? Come on!

(BOB leaps into C. Dressed in rags and bits of colored ribbon, he performs a dance to the primitive drumbeat meant to exorcise the past 51 weeks of slavery, if not the past 100 years. When he finishes, SISSY and OTHERS move U to dance in shadows. BOB moves D to SOJOURNER.)
