My Name is John Good, Servant of the Servant

by John Chesley

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STAGE SET UP.

The scene is the site of a talk by John Good to an audience of ordinary people in or around 1913. John would be as close in appearance to that described below as the actor can get (probably in his early 60's but very fit). He would be dressed up as best he could afford (which would be much below the standard of the audience) and he would look uncomfortable in being so dressed up.

It would be desirable, but not essential, to have a small table or podium near one side of the room that had a vase with a single rose in it and to be able to dim the lights in the room with a single light on the table/podium with the rose. This symbolizes the person of `Abdu'l-Baha when the talk the Master gave at the Bowery Mission is being read offstage. Otherwise John Good is simply standing at the front of the room talking to the audience in as friendly and sincere way as he can.
A chair is useful to give the actor a place to put his coat, sit during the talk, or to use as a prop at other times.

You might consider starting and/or ending the piece with the playing of the song " Look at Me, Follow Me, Be as I am, `Abdu'l-Baha" (especially the first verse "Behold a candle how it gives its light...") or other suitable mood-setting music. We also have used Santoor music as a background to `Abdu'l-Baha's talk.

REFERENCES:

The places, events and people named in this play are real as derived from the reference material. The character of John Good has been expanded and I don't know if he ever gave such a talk. The main material for this characterization is derived from The Diary of Juliet Thompson (pp. 254-262) and an account by Kate Carew for the New York Tribune and published in 239 Days: `Abdu'l-Baha's Journey in America (pp. 32-36) and supplemented with other accounts of `Abdu'l-Baha's visits to New York (eg. Portals to Freedom, pp. 61-68) and accounts of friends who visited the Bowery Mission while attending the 1992 Baha'i World Congress. Excerpts from `Abdu'l-Baha's talk at the Bowery Mission are from Promulgation of Universal Peace (pp. 32-34). The Talk has been shortened a bit to help maintain the "relationship between the stage

character and the audience."

NOTES:

John Good is described by Juliet Thompson as "an enormous man with a head like a lion and a great shock of white hair. From his boyhood he had spent his life in one prison or another and now, in his old age, had behaved so rebelliously in Sing Sing (prison)" that they had hung him by his thumbs (Diary, p. 255).

Obviously John Good had lived a hard life in prison and on the streets and, by Juliet Thompson's continued contact with him as referred to later in her account, he was, no doubt deeply affected by his contact with `Abdu'l-Baha. It is doubtful if Miss Thompson would have kept in touch with him if he was back in a life of crime.

I picture John Good in this play as having become a Baha'i and feeling compelled to go out and tell others about his experience with `Abdu'l-Baha by giving public talks. (It is even possible, although there is no proof of this, that `Abdu'l-Baha may have told him to go out and to "tell his story" from the perspective of a poor, street person.) I have had to embellish on and have expanded on the limited descriptions in the Diary.

Here is my vision of John Good's life and character.

He was born in a small town in upstate New York to a low income family. His parents would have been under the "normal" pressure of the time to have him Christened as a baby in the local church. His parents, especially his father, may have been alcoholic and abusive and John rebelled against this. He would have had a relatively loveless family life.
Facing a clash with the "rule" of the father of the house and as a big, strong 10 year old, he may have been shipped off or indentured to a farmer in the area and lived there for a number of years working for room and board.
He learned to deal with aggression by using his fists and with his strength and size he didn't lose too many "arguments". This eventually got him into more and more trouble. He also would have become discontented with working for nothing on a farm in rural New York. The two circumstances may have pushed him to head for New York City at some time in his late teens or early twenties.
With no one there and a lot of internal anger, he drifted into life on the streets. He eventually would have found some "place" among thieves, drunks and other dispossessed people. He would have subsisted by stealing and preying on others weaker than himself although he always had some inbred code of honour that allowed him to rationalize his life and placed some limits on his actions.
He would have run afoul of the law many times and served various jail sentences; dealing with the aggression in the jail by fighting it to the point "that they had hung him by his thumbs". Although he would never admit it or even show it much, after more than 50 years, John Good was getting tired of his life and having to fight everyone and everything and never letting himself

be loved or give love.
He never got married despite "knowing" several women. He was never trapped by alcohol. He always felt an emptiness that he couldn't fill. He was smart enough to see the exploitation by and privilege of the wealthy and powerful. His dreams were of having anything he wanted "for the takin'".
As indicated in the play, he was transformed by meeting `Abdu'l-Baha. He suddenly felt love for the first time in his life. He suddenly felt "a sense of shame" for his past deeds that, deep down, he knew were wrong -- a major transformation for John Good.
In what I feel is a typical character trait for John Good, things were now very clear to him. He rarely saw any "greys" or reasons to procrastinate once he has decided something is "right". He had made a commitment to `Abdu'l-Baha and to God and he was going to keep his word with all of the strength of body and will that he had shown all of his life. He willingly accepted the "deal" of offering the rest of his life to doing good in exchange for all of the wrongs he had done up to the point he had met the Master.
At this stage of his transformation he might slip occasionally back into a confrontational style and bring to the fore his long-held dislike of the rich and privileged. He will evolve in this transformation as time goes on and as he receives the Divine confirmations from doing what `Abdu'l-Baha has told him to do -- to teach.

THANKS

My thanks to Leslie Hennen who first produced and directed this play. To the late Fred Turley who acted as John Good in the version performed in my area. Several others helped this play evolve by finding venues, by doing the reading, by providing music and advice and helping in many other ways.

An audio version of a performance of the play is available on Baha'i Blog \ Youtube LINK
It would improve the introduction of some instrumental or other music played before John Good enters (e.g. "Behold a Candle" LINK2)

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START

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(Consider having John Good meet people at the door, in character, welcoming them in a warm but somewhat uncomfortably familiar way (eg. shakes hands too firmly or too vigorously), otherwise just have him enter the stage and begin).

Evenin Folks.

I wanna thank ya for coming here tonight. You must be real special people to have come out to hear someone the likes of me talk to ya.

I was Christened some 60 years ago John Good. When ya hear more about me you're gonna think that's real funny that they took me to a church, sprinkled some holy water on me and asked God to make John Good be good.

The fact of the matter is, I ain't been very good most of my life and I sure ain't been able to look God straight in the eye or tell Him what a fine upstanding fella I am.

Truth be told, it wasn't that long ago I would just have soon robbed fine folks like yourselves as talk to ya. *(Point and look at audience. Pause for effect)*

And not that long ago I was fresh out of another stint in Sing Sing prison. Ya see, prisons and the streets have pretty well been my home for as long as I can remember.
(pause)

But I ain't here to talk to ya about the sad tale of my life. I want to tell you about what changed John Good into someone who don't rob folks no more, who thinks about someone besides himself, who can even feel ashamed about the things I done in the past.

Now if you were one of my buddies on the street or in the Pen, you'd say nothin' is gonna break John Good. Being kicked out on the streets when I was 10 didn't do it. 20 years in jail couldn't do it. Even being hung up by my thumbs in the "joint" up at Sing Sing didn't do it. They'd say "It'd take a miracle to change John Good."
(thoughtful pause)

Well, ya know, I figure it was a miracle that changed John Good. It's that miracle that I got to tell you about.

It's a story about the Servant.

I call `Abdu'l-Baha, the Servant. Others called him the Master but I heard him say he didn't much like that name. That what he wanted to be called was the Servant of God. That that was the only thing he ever wanted to be was a Servant.

I been disobeying God all my life and I said I was going to stop. So if the Son of a Messenger from God tells me he wants to be called the Servant -- that's good enough for me. So I call him Servant.

Guess what I'm trying to be is a good servant of the Servant.

This miracle started for me back in February of 1912.

I was just out of Sing Sing and wandering the streets . It was cold and was blowing a snow storm that night so me and the other guys all headed to the Bowery Mission to get some grub and get warm.

Later that night a fine society lady, Miss Juliet Thompson, come to talk to us along with this other gentleman, a Dr. Hallimond. She wasn't the first "goodie two shoes", we called them, to come to the Bowery Mission to try to give us religion, so we thought we'd give her a listen and maybe get a few laughs out of it.

But she didn't say nothin we was expectin'.

Miss Thompson said that a special man from the Holy Land was coming to New York. She said he had spent 40 years of his life in jail. That got our attention -- lots of us knew about jail and I ain't never met anyone who spent more time in jail than me.

But she said somethin' else. Miss Thompson said that this man had come out of prison full of love for the whole world. That really got our attention. Most of us had come out of jail full of hate for the whole world.

So, when she asked us to vote if we wanted to have him come to talk to us, all 300 of us stood up to show we voted, "Yes".

Even Hannegan, who could barely stand up most of the time from boozing, jumped right up.

(Pause. Take off coat and put on chair.)

I don't know what it was but I kept my nose clean till April and on the 19th I made sure I was first in line when they opened the steel doors that night at the Bowery Mission. And I made sure that I had a seat right up front
(perhaps move chair into place)
where I could see this Holy man -- this man who could come out of prison loving the world.

After supper there was a big fuss outside and some cars drove up.

Pretty soon in walks the Holy man surrounded by a bunch of people the likes we ain't never seen at the Mission. There was Miss Thompson again. And there was a lady reporter for the New York Tribune, Miss Kate Carew,
(emphasize her high society stature with a hand gesture)
and about 5 other guys all wearing pillbox-type hats they called a "fez" and lookin' like they come from Eygpt or Persia or somewhere strange.

They met the Reverend who runs the Mission and then got up on this little stage they set up at one end of the Mission and where they had put a table and some flowers. *(look at table and flower on stage).*

Miss Thompson introduced this Holy Man who they called `Abdu'l-Bahá or the Master.

He was kinda small and was old - 68, they told me. He had a beard -- white like snow -- and his hair was silver and reached down to his shoulder. His face had a lot of furrows which were deep like those in a well-plowed field. His eyes*...(pause, reflectively)*; they were blue but had a power in them that kinda stirred up my guts inside -- mysterious-like. He wore a long white cloak that ran down to the floor and a light-coloured fez, like the other fellas, but it was wrapped

in a white turban.

Then He got up and talked to us. I know he was saying the words in some other language and then one of the men in the fez would say the words in English. I gotta say, though, it seemed like he was the only one talking and like he was talkin' just to me.

I can remember most of what He said as though it was yesterday:

[Possibly dim lights and have spot light shining on Table with rose. You might also consider having someone off stage with a good reading voice speak the words or have this on tape. John Good could sit in the chair and be listening to 'Abdu'l-Baha while looking at the table and rose.]

"TONIGHT I am very happy, for I have come here to meet my friends. I consider you my relatives, my companions; and I am your comrade.

"You must be thankful to God that you are poor, for Jesus Christ has said, `Blessed are the poor.' He never said, `Blessed are the rich.' He said, too, that the Kingdom is for the poor and that it is easier for a camel to enter a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter God's Kingdom. Therefore, you must be thankful to God that although in this world you are indigent, yet the treasures of God are within your reach; and although in the material realm you are poor, yet in the Kingdom of God you are precious. Jesus Himself was poor. He did not belong to the rich. He passed His time in the desert, traveling among the poor, and lived upon the herbs of the field. He had no place to lay His head, no home. He was exposed in the open to heat, cold and frost -- to inclement weather of all kinds -- yet He chose this rather than riches. If riches were considered a glory, the Prophet Moses would have chosen them; Jesus would have been a rich man. When Jesus Christ appeared, it was the poor who first accepted Him, not the rich. Therefore, you are the disciples of Jesus Christ; you are His comrades, for He outwardly was poor, not rich.

"Even this earth's happiness does not depend upon wealth. You will find many of the wealthy exposed to dangers and troubled by difficulties, and in their last moments upon the bed of death there remains the regret that they must be separated from that to which their hearts are so attached. They come into this world naked, and they must go from it naked. All they possess they must leave behind

and pass away solitary, alone...Praise be to God! Our hope is in the mercy of God, and there is no doubt that the divine compassion is bestowed upon the poor. Jesus Christ said so; Baha'u'llah said so. While Baha'u'llah was in Baghdad, still in possession of great wealth, He left all He had and went alone from the city, living two years among the poor. They were His comrades. He ate with them, slept with them and gloried in being one of them. He chose for one of His names the title of The Poor One and often in His Writings refers to Himself as Darvish, which in Persian means Poor; and of this title He was very proud. He admonished all that we must be the servants of the poor, helpers of the poor, remember the sorrows of the poor, associate with them; for thereby we may inherit the Kingdom of heaven. God has not said that there are mansions prepared for us if we pass our time associating with the rich, but He has said there are many mansions prepared for the servants of the poor, for the poor are very dear to God. The mercies and bounties of God are with them....

"So, my comrades, you are following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. Your lives are similar to His life; your attitude is like unto His; you resemble Him more than the rich do. Therefore, we will thank God that we have been so blessed with real riches. And in conclusion, I ask you to accept 'Abdu'l-Baha as your servant."
[*NOTE: Nemat Sobhani accompanied by Saeed Foroughi on the Santur as given in the audio version, do an excellent version of this LINK.*]

[Back up to normal lighting]

Afterward, `Abdu'l-Baha, the Servant, went down past the Tables and stood near the door where we had to leave. As each of us got to him, he shook our hand and looked in our eyes and quiet-like, so no one could see, put a quarter in our hands. Those who were real bad off he gave 4 or 5 quarters. For all 300 of us he did this -- gave us the price of a bed for the night and a meal we could pay for ourselves.

[Thoughtful pause]

I can't tell ya exactly what I felt when the Servant got to me and when he looked in my eyes. It was something I'd never felt before. All I can call it is "Love". The warmest, kindest, deepest love, I reckin' a man can feel during his time on this earth.
Maybe, I felt that same Love when they sprinkled that Holy water on me back in church 60 years ago. Maybe they knew somethin' when, in God's name, they

named me John Good -- servant of the Servant.

(Pause. Put on jacket. Look back as an after thought.)

Ya know, if you're lucky in this life ya wise up and realize that God has a special love for ya -- just there for the takin'. All ya got to do is love Him.[1]

And that if you're poor or been dealt some bad cards, ya shouldn't let it get ya down or let it turn ya into something that ain't no better than an animal -- 'cause that Love from God is better for ya than anything money can buy.

(Perhaps a little angrily pointing at people in the audience) And if you're rich ya shouldn't be too happy about it neither unless ya think havin' a coffin full of money is going to do ya any good in the next life while ya let the poor suffer all around ya in this life.[2]

(Calmer)

Well I better finish off here. You can tell I'm startin' to preach at ya, when what I really want to do is thank you for coming here to listen to what a crude, uneducated, fella like me has to say.

It's <u>real</u> important to me to be able to tell other folks about my miracle. The miracle the Servant gave to me. I really pray that all of you might be touched by the same miracle -- it's just there for the takin'. *(reach up, look up and close fist* grasping the miracle)

G'night to ya all. END

[1]Based loosely on <u>Arabic Hidden Word</u>, No. 5

[2]Based loosely on: <u>Persian Hidden Words</u>, No. 49