

Thomas Breakwell – Glimpses of the Life of an English Luminary

A Play by Becky Maude

**This play is dedicated to Thomas Breakwell and all those involved in Bahá'í
Community Schools and Children's Classes, with love.**

Bahá'ís in Paris around 1901 – 1902

Thomas Breakwell is seated on the floor, front row, 5th from the left. May Bolles is seated next to him, 6th from the left. Hippolyte Dreyfus Barney is standing in the back row, 4th from the left. Laura Clifford Barney is standing next to him, 5th from the left.

Introduction – to be read at the start of the play

Thomas Breakwell was a very special person. He was the first English man to become a Bahá'í but more importantly he was a wonderful soul. Although he died less than a year after becoming a Bahá'í, he lived his life as a Bahá'í to the full. May Bolles described him as “the guiding star”¹ of the Bahá'í community in Paris. Thomas was the first Bahá'í in the West to pay Huqúqu'lláh² and the first English Bahá'í pilgrim to visit Akká. Shoghi Effendi called him a “luminary in the Cause of God”³.

¹ Quoted in “The Life of Thomas Breakwell”, Rajwantee Lakshman-Lepain, p.38

² “The Life of Thomas Breakwell”, Rajwantee Lakshman-Lepain, p.33

³ Bahá'í World, Vol XIII, p.845, cited in “Some Early Bahá'ís of the West!” O.Z. Whitehead, p.72

Scene 1 – The Discovery

Characters: **May Bolles**

Thomas Breakwell

May is sitting in an armchair, stage right, reminiscing about Thomas.

May Dear Thomas, I smile when I think of him. He was a very spiritual man. You could see it shining from his eyes. The beloved Master had told me to stay in Paris and I know now why he insisted. If I had left I would not have met Thomas. I remember him very clearly, coming to see me that day with his special news.

May moves across to stand centre stage.

As she does so, a doorbell rings / doorknocker sounds. May moves to answer the door, stage left. Thomas enters.

May Good afternoon Mr. Breakwell. Please come in. It is good to see you again. I enjoyed our conversation yesterday.

Thomas Please call me Thomas.

May Then you shall call me May.

Thomas I apologise for coming to see you again so soon but I felt I had to come.

They both move to centre stage, where there are two chairs either side of a table with a tea tray, a pot of tea and two teacups and saucers.

May Please take a seat.

She sits. He sits just after her.

Would you like some tea?

May pours the tea.

Thomas Yes, thank-you.

May hands Thomas the cup. He takes it and then puts it down again. He looks very excited and a bit worried as well. He leans forward in his chair to speak.

When I came to see you yesterday, I felt something very special. I felt very close to God here, I felt at peace.

May smiles and nods.

May Go on.

Thomas stands up and starts to pace. He turns towards May and stops.

Thomas After I left you yesterday, I walked alone down The Champs Elysées. The air was warm and still and suddenly ...

Thomas pauses and May leans forward.

May Yes, go on.

Thomas I felt a wind whirling round me and then I heard the sweetest voice say “Christ has come again! Christ has come again!”

Thomas looks at May.

Do you think I am going insane?

May smiles.

May No, you are just becoming sane.

Thomas walks back to his seat and sits down. He looks relieved

Thomas You seem so sure.

May I have a wonderful story to tell you which begins in Persia nearly 60 years ago. It is a long story with many twists and turns.

Thomas Please tell me.

May Our story begins with a young man from Shíráz called the Báb, meaning “the gate”. He suffered greatly for the message he gave but His message was so important it had to be told. His message was of the Promised One to come, a Messenger of God we call Bahá’u’lláh, meaning the Glory of God. Bahá’u’lláh’s wonderful mission is to unite the world – He is the return of Christ that you heard

of in the street¹. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá – Bahá’u’lláh’s son – is carrying on His great work and spreading this wonderful message.

Thomas Tell me more May. I must know more.

May Of course, I have some books that I’m sure you would like to read.

Thomas I would like that very much.

May Please come to the other room and we shall choose some together.

Thomas Wonderful, wonderful.

They stand and start to move stage right.

May You can tell me what you think the next time we meet and ask more questions – if you have them.

They smile at each other.

Thomas Oh, I’m sure I shall.

They exit together, stage right.

Scene 2 – The Apple Cart

Characters: **May Bolles**

Thomas Breakwell

Old Lady

May is sitting in an armchair, stage right, reminiscing about Thomas.

May Ah dear Thomas – he was so kind and loving. He helped people in so many ways. I remember one particular bus journey.

May moves to join the main scene where she is sitting with Thomas on the top deck of a bus (two chairs placed side by side stage left).

Thomas What a beautiful day – see how the sun is sparkling on the river.

May Yes, Paris is a wonderful city in the sunshine.

Thomas Look down there.

Thomas points out of the window.

May What?

Thomas smiles and gets up.

Thomas Excuse me May.

May Thomas, wait – this isn’t our stop - we don’t get off here – Thomas.

Thomas continues walking, going down the stairs and gets off the bus.

May Where’s he gone I wonder?

She looks out of the window.

May Ah!

She smiles and exits stage left.

The scene moves to stage right. Thomas walks up to an old lady pushing a heavy handcart piled high with apples.

Thomas Bonjour Madame. What a beautiful day – here let me help you.

Thomas takes hold of the handle of the applecart and they start pushing together back and forth across the stage.

Old Lady (*Sounding Breathless*) Merci Monsieur – yes this cart is certainly heavy to push up the slope.

Thomas These apples smell wonderful.

Old Lady Yes Monsieur, they are fine apples grown in the orchards just outside the city.

Thomas Will you sell them in the market?

Old Lady Yes Monsieur, I am there with my fruit and vegetables every Thursday from spring to autumn.

Thomas I'm sure you do a fine trade with beautiful fruit like this.

Old Lady Oh certainly Monsieur. The first apples of the season are always well received and these are particularly sweet and juicy.
After pushing the cart together for a distance the old lady stops.

Thomas Do you need a rest Madame? Can I fetch something for you?

Old Lady Oh no Monsieur – this is where I will sell my apples. This is a good spot here in the square – not too sunny and not too shady.

Thomas Then I will wish you a fruitful market day.
The old lady smiles.

Old Lady Oh very amusing Monsieur.

Thomas Is there anything else I can do for you?

Old Lady Oh no Monsieur, you have been a great help.

Thomas In that case I will bid you au revoir.

Old Lady Merci Monsieur. Please take one of my apples with you for your trouble.

Thomas It was my pleasure Madame.
The old lady gives Thomas the apple and he takes it.

Thomas Thank-you.
The old lady takes Thomas's hand in hers and looks into his eyes.

Old Lady You have very kind eyes Monsieur – God bless you and au revoir.

Thomas Au revoir.
Thomas walks off smiling and rubbing the apple on his jacket to polish it.

Scene 3 – The Visit

Characters **May Bolles**
Thomas Breakwell
Herbert Hopper (a young American Bahá'í, also taught the Faith by May Bolles, who visited Akká with Thomas)
Hippolyte Dreyfus (the first Frenchman to become a Bahá'í)
Laura Clifford Barney
Marie Squires
Hellen Ellis Cole
Edith Sanderson
May is sitting in an armchair, stage right, reminiscing about Thomas.

May Thomas dearly loved the Master and the Master dearly loved Him. I remember that evening in Paris when Thomas and Herbert were telling our group of their recent visit to the Holy Land. Their faces were shining and their happiness filled the room when they told us of their time in 'Akká.
The group is sitting round the room in various chairs with Thomas and Herbert in the centre of the group. May moves to sit in the empty chair stage left. Everyone is very excited and eager to hear about their trip. When Thomas and Herbert speak the characters sit forward in their seats with their eyes fixed on the faces of Thomas and Herbert.

May Thomas! Herbert! Tell us about your wonderful trip.

Herbert Where we do we start? We have so much to say – I don't know how to begin.
Thomas, you say something.

Thomas The visit was so wonderful. I didn't want to leave. I felt I'd found my spiritual home. And the Master – His love, His guidance.

Herbert Such knowledge, such wisdom reflected in His face.

Edith Tell us the details. What does He look like? What is His voice like?
 Laura What questions did you ask Him? What did He answer?
 Hippolyte What did He say is important?
 Marie Give Thomas and Herbert a chance. I'm sure if we listen they'll tell us.
 Thomas We'll try to answer all your questions, won't we Herbert.
Herbert nods
 Well then, in order, The Master is a very dignified figure. He usually wears a white turban and long robes. He has shining blue eyes which at times have a loving twinkle in them and they always see what is in your heart. His voice – how to describe it Herbert?
 Herbert I only know I could listen to it for hours.
 Thomas The way He speaks – listening to his voice made my entire soul vibrate.
 Herbert It is not loud but penetrating, so penetrating.
 Thomas It sounded so beautiful – so musical.
 Laura And the questions – what did you speak about?
 Thomas I told Him of my work in the United States and my doubts about using child labour in the mills.
 Edith What did He say?
 Thomas He said I should cable my resignation.
 Hellen And did you?
 Thomas Yes, at once.
A pause – All characters sit back and are in silent thought for a moment.
 Marie What will you do now Thomas?
Everyone sits forward again.
 Thomas I shall stay in Paris and serve the community here as the Master asked me to.
 May Wonderful, wonderful.
 Hippolyte But tell us more of what the Master said. What did He tell us we should do?
 Herbert He told us our hearts should be full of love.
 Thomas And to serve the Cause of God in whatever way we can. To work now towards the future.
 Herbert Like a gardener.
 Thomas He told us of His love for all of us and said that the ties of the spirit are all important.
 Herbert He said we are all as waves of one sea.
 Thomas We did not want to leave His beloved company. My only consolation is that I can correspond with the Master's secretary Yunis Khán.
 May Now I think it is time for tea and we can continue afterwards.
May gets up.
 Hellen & Marie Let us help you
Hellen & Marie get up. May, Hellen and Marie exit stage left.
 Thomas Come Herbert. We will carry in the all important tea tray.
Thomas and Herbert exit stage left. Those left on stage chat together quietly. After a moment, Laura stands and walks to the front of the stage while Hippolyte and Edith remain seated and in silence. Laura addresses the audience.
 Laura Thomas died in Paris in 1902 at the age of 30 from Tuberculosis. After his death 'Abdu'l-Bahá revealed a prayer of visitation for him saying to Yúnis Khán who translated it, "You must translate it well, so that whoever reads it will weep."² I would like to read a verse from that prayer.
Laura takes out a book and reads.

“O Breakwell, O my dear one! Thou art now a bird of Heaven, thou hast quit thine earthly nest, and soared away to a garden of holiness in the kingdom of thy Lord. Thou hast risen to a station filled with light.”³

Notes

Stage right and stage left are the actors right and left, respectively, as they face the audience.

This play is intended for performance by those in the junior / secondary age range. It will almost certainly be necessary to adapt the play to your circumstances. On the simplest level it can be read as a play with the script. It can be performed in a variety of ways depending on the number of children / junior youth in the group, their confidence and time available for rehearsal.

For example, there could be different May and Thomas for each of the scenes to spread the burden of learning the lines. In scene 2, extra passengers could be added to the bus, and extra store holders for the market could be included if more parts are required. In scene three, some of the minor characters could be left out if there is a shortage of performers. Individual scenes can be performed in isolation if this fits with the theme of what a class or group is doing at the time. I would recommend the use of a prompt as the performers may possibly forget their lines. Children / junior youth who do not want to take part on stage could be responsible for props, scenery, stage management, tickets programmes, refreshments and other aspects of a performance.

It would be helpful to the performers to understand some extra details about the story of Thomas Breakwell, which there is not the space to include here. They can be found in the following:

Sources for the Play include:

The Life of Thomas Breakwell, *Rajwantee Lakshman-Lepain*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust (UK)

Some Early Bahá'ís of the West, *O.Z. Whitehead*, George Ronald, pp.65-72

An Early Pilgrimage, *May Maxwell*, George Ronald

A Basic Bahá'í Chronology, *Glenn Cameron with Wendi Momen*, George Ronald, pp.144-151

'Abdu'l-Bahá, *H.M. Balyuzi*, George Ronald, p.237

The Chosen Highway, *Lady Blomfield*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust (UK), p.235

God Passes By, *Shoghi Effendi*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust (US), p.94

¹ See God Passes By, p.94

² Quoted in “The Life of Thomas Breakwell”, *Rajwantee Lakshman-Lepain*, p.45

³ Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p.188