

NICHOLAS, A Garland of Tales for the Nights before Christmas

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Informal welcome by JONATHAN. Please ask people to put away their cell phones.

All join in singing “Jolly Old Saint Nicholas” led by JOE.

(Two PLAYERS enter with decorated brooms. While each is declaiming, the other sweeps – claiming the space for theater. The PLAYERS should feel free to be silly.)

FIRST PLAYER

Sweep, sweep, sweep the floor,
and make a place for Nicholas here!
Sweep in the songs, sweep in the stories,
sweep in Memory, sweep in Glory.

FIRST AND SECOND PLAYER TOGETHER

Sweep the floor! Sweep the floor!

SECOND PLAYER

Sweep, sweep, sweep the ceiling,
Sweep in a cloud of joyful feelings!
Sweep out anger, greed, and folly,
Sweep in evergreen and holly.

FIRST AND SECOND PLAYER TOGETHER

Sweep the floor! Sweep the floor!

FIRST PLAYER

Sweep, sweep, sweep this place, Sweep in a time for holy grace.
Comfort your heart with a swing of the broom
And sweep Saint Nicholas into this room.

FIRST AND SECOND PLAYER TOGETHER

Sweep the floor! Sweep the floor!

(CHOIR begins Intonent Hodie.)

(STORYTELLER and NICHOLAS [in COPE and with CROZIER] process into the room after the first verse of the song, ceremonially greet each part of the audience and go to

their chairs, remaining standing until the end of the song, when they bow to one another .STORYTELLER sits down, NICHOLAS takes of cope and sits down.)

(During silence between songs, PLAYERS present an exaggerated focus.)

(CHOIR, Gaudens in Domino. PLAYERS encourage children- individually - to come sit around the STORYTELLER on the carpet. TWO AND A HALF MINUTES)

STORYTELLER

Long before your grandparents' grandparents' grandparents were born, back when years were counted in only three numbers, in the city of Myra there lived a fine and generous Bishop named Nicholas.

When he could not finish his dinner he would say to his cook,

NICHOLAS

Here, Cook, give these leftovers to some hungry family.

STORYTELLER

If he had old clothes he would say to his washerwoman,

NICHOLAS

Here, Washerwoman! I don't need these things any more. Let them be given to some poor fellow!

STORYTELLER

Each year on Easter Sunday a grand procession of deacons, acolytes and torch-bearers paraded out of the great church at the top of the hill and all around the streets of the city. Bishop Nicholas walked at the end of the procession, the position of greatest honor, wearing a splendid cloak of silk brocade and carrying a mighty silver-and-cedarwood staff. On these occasions, if he saw beggars in the streets he would tell his deacons,

NICHOLAS

(Stands up, gestures to Players.)

Come, brothers, make a note of these people's names and see that they are attended to.

(Sits down.) (PLAYERS note things with pads and pencils, miming puzzlement.)

STORYTELLER

Oh yes, Nicholas lived in comfort and ease, but it was his daily habit to turn his heart and mind towards the great mystery at the center of all things, the mystery that loves us and knows our names.

(NICHOLAS kneels.)

STORYTELLER

This mystery was working a change in him. As Nicholas sat down to his meat and wine he found himself wondering if anyone in the city of Myra had only a crust of bread for dinner. As he went to sleep in his soft bed with its warm woolen blankets, he wondered if anyone in Myra had to sleep on the hard, cold ground.

So Nicholas's comfort became bitter to him, and one night after church he put aside his splendid cloak and his mighty staff. Over his robe of white wool he wrapped an old, ragged cloak.

(NICHOLAS stands up, puts on ragged cloak, walks to center front of nave.)

He took up a plain wooden staff and slipped out, unseen and alone, into the streets of Myra. Nicholas walked through the clean, quiet streets near the church.

NICHOLAS

What grand, handsome houses! These people seem to lead most comfortable lives.

STORYTELLER

Down the hill he walked, down to the harbor, where the city was livelier. He had never seen this part of Myra after dark.

(NICHOLAS walks wonderingly towards the back of the nave.)

NICHOLAS

How different things are here by the docks! All the noises seem so particularly loud.

STORYTELLER

He pulled his old cloak tight around him and wished he'd brought a deacon or two for company. No one in these crowded streets paid any attention to Nicholas. Without his silk and brocade cloak and his silver-and-cedarwood staff, who could possibly know that he was the Bishop of Myra?

(STORYTELLER cues CHOIR for tavern noise, closes when ready.)

Golden lamplight spilled out of every tavern door, along with the smells of garlic and olive oil. The sailors in the taverns sang and shouted for more wine, and there were streams of laughter from the tavern girls in their bright, dirty clothes.

NICHOLAS

Look at those children running around. Why are they awake? Surely it is past their bedtime. Can it be that they have no place to sleep? Can even little children be hungry and in need?

STORYTELLER

Near the docks men sat alone with a wineskin or slept right on the street.

NICHOLAS

Why don't they go home? Do they have homes? Are they happy? I don't understand their lives at all."

STORYTELLER

At last Nicholas found a quiet place and looked out at the great, wide, sea, considering all the people he had seen.

(NICHOLAS returns to his chair and sits down.)

NICHOLAS

I want to help them, but they are so different from anyone I have ever known before. Suppose I do the wrong thing! I could make them angry – I could even make them ashamed. And it seems to me that there are more problems here than one person can solve, even if that person is the Bishop of Myra.

(SONG: OPEN WIDE YOUR HAND, Jonathan and Deborah, at Back Center light.)

STORYTELLER

Sorely troubled, Nicholas turned his heart and mind towards the mystery at the center of all things and waited for love to guide him. After a while he got up and walked to the street market, where a few stalls were open late.

(NICHOLAS takes a small bag of gold and walks to kneeler on west side of church – near the piano.)

STORYTELLER

First, he went to the stall that sold bread.

(NICHOLAS addresses FIRST PLAYER.)

NICHOLAS

I would like to buy --- twenty. Twenty loaves of bread, please.

FIRST PLAYER, AS BAKER

Are these all for yourself, old fellow?

NICHOLAS

(Hesitantly.) Oh, no -- no, no – they are for – several people.

FIRST PLAYER, AS BAKER

Hah, this poor old geezer must have a big family. I'll tuck in a few extra loaves.

(Puts bread loaves in sack. Gives NICHOLAS the sack.)

(NICHOLAS to SECOND PLAYER.)

NICHOLAS

If you please, sir, I would like to buy blankets. Ten of them. Ten blankets.

SECOND PLAYER, AS STALLKEEPER

Why, certainly! Are these all for your own bed, good sir?

STORYTELLER

Why did these strangers keep asking him questions?

NICHOLAS

Oh, no, they are not all for me.

SECOND PLAYER, AS STALLKEEPER

Hah, he must know someone who needs help. I'll put in a few extra.

(NICHOLAS, picks up sack. Mimes, it's heavy! And he walks away.)

During the STORYTELLER's next paragraph, NICHOLAS can wander around, tucking bread into the arms of audience members and covering them with blankets.)

STORYTELLER

And – that very night -- curious things began to happen among the people who lived down by the harbor. This young mother, sleeping with her babes in an alley - how did she happen to find a beautiful loaf of new bread in her arms? She and her children ate it for breakfast and shared it with their friends. And that shiftless old man who passed out in the middle of the street – how did that warm blanket get tucked around him, from his toes to his whiskery chin? All over the city, people were getting presents – but nobody knew where they came from!

Night after night, Nicholas wandered. The baker sold him bread, always with a few extra loaves. Clearly this old man must be feeding a houseful of hungry people! The other stallkeepers filled up his great sack with clothes and blankets and little odds and ends.

(NICHOLAS comes to back of nave, leans against kneeler.)

Late one night he came to a small, shabby home where the lamp still was lighted. Inside, people were talking. Or -- were they weeping? He stopped to listen. *(Listens.)* It was a mother and father, grieving together about their oldest daughter. In those days a young

woman needed a certain amount of money to get married, and these people were so poor that they could not set up their daughter in a decent home.

FIRST PLAYER, AS MOTHER

What will become of her? She'll never have a husband, or a little house, or even a garden to grow roses and herbs.

SECOND PLAYER, AS FATHER

Perhaps she will have to work in the taverns, dear wife, and bring wine to the sailors until daybreak. Hard work, rough work, for our precious girl. Oh, my heart will break!

(They cling to one another, grieving.)

NICHOLAS

Now, I have a small bag of gold that would help this family – but I don't want them to feel that I expect something in return. How can I get it to them without being seen?

STORYTELLER

He leaned against the wall of the house and waited for love to give him an idea.

There was a chimney in the roof of the house where smoke came out from the cooking fire, but at this time of night there was no fire on the hearth. Nicholas tossed the bag of gold straight into the chimney.

(NICHOLAS tosses gold.)

There was a terrific puff of ashes.

(NICHOLAS hustles back to his chair. He takes off the old cloak, sits.)

FIRST PLAYER, AS MOTHER

Mercy on us, husband, the chimney is exploding!

SECOND PLAYER, AS FATHER

No, no, wife, look, it's gold! Gold! Soon we'll dance at our daughter's wedding!

FIRST PLAYER, AS MOTHER

Get up, get up – see who threw this!

STORYTELLER

And they ran outdoors to see where the gold had come from, but Nicholas had already hurried away into the night.

Now, there was a rich young man in Myra who killed a friend in a fight over a game of cards.

FIRST PLAYER, AS RICH YOUNG MAN

What trouble! Surely I shouldn't have to be punished for this little problem."

STORYTELLER

So he cooked up a story and came to his trial with a fat bag of money.

(SECOND PLAYER at Center Front on step, FIRST PLAYER below step.)

FIRST PLAYER, AS RICH YOUNG MAN

(Overacting!) I stand before you for judgment, honored judge – perhaps this little gift will help to convince you that I am innocent! A gang of rowdy sailors attacked me and my friend. They stole all our money and when we tried to fight them off, the sailors stabbed my friend.

STORYTELLER

What a liar! And he didn't stop there.

SECOND PLAYER, AS JUDGE

How shocking! Are you able to identify these dangerous criminals?

FIRST PLAYER, AS RICH YOUNG MAN

(Obviously random pointing to CHOIR.) Why yes! Him, and him, and that tall one over there.

(CHOIR reacts.)

SECOND PLAYER, AS JUDGE

Most excellent! Tomorrow, these miscreants will pay for their crimes with their lives.

(JUDGE, RICH YOUNG MAN bow to one another and go into Sacristy using separate doors.)

(CHOIR unobtrusively and slowly falls asleep during next paragraph.)

STORYTELLER

Down by the harbor that night, no one could talk about anything else but this terrible injustice. Nicholas heard them talking as he wandered with his sack of bread. Everyone knew about the bag of money and the lies, but people were afraid to stand up to the wicked judge.

(NICHOLAS stands, puts on brocade cope, kneels.)

All night, Nicholas sat awake in the church and turned his heart towards the great mystery at the center of all things, the mystery that loves us and knows our names. At dawn, he woke up his choir, his deacons, his acolytes.

(NICHOLAS crosses to CHOIR, loud.)

NICHOLAS

Wake up! Wake up! Pray! Sing! We are going to pay a call on the honorable judge.

(CHOIR wakes up, pulls itself together. NICHOLAS hurries them along.)

(CHOIR: Singing Nicholae presulum, in procession to sacristy door. LONG SONG = BIG PROCESSION. NICHOLAS follows choir, knocks on door with his crozier.)

NICHOLAS

Ho, Judge! Honorable Judge! Most Honorable Judge! Surely your heart is troubled. After all, it is no small thing to sentence three men to death. The Bishop of Myra is here to say your morning prayers with you.

STORYTELLER

So Nicholas went in.

(NICHOLAS enters sacristy, shuts door.)

A silent, uneasy crowd waited outside the judge's house until the judge appeared on his balcony.

(NICHOLAS comes out at ALTAR DOOR OF SACRISTY with JUDGE and RICH YOUNG MAN as verdict is read.)

SECOND PLAYER, AS JUDGE

It is my wish that Myra should be known as a merciful and compassionate city. Therefore, I officially pardon these three sailors and they are free to go.

(Wildly enthusiastic cheering! Choir returns to seats, congratulating one another. PLAYERS vanish.)

(NICHOLAS to chair, puts down crozier, removes brocade cope, puts on old cloak, takes another small bag of gold. Walks slowly down towards back of church again.)

STORYTELLER

The people of Myra thought this was a fine story. Think of that crafty old judge being hauled out of bed at dawn to say his prayers! And as for the wicked judge and the rich young man, they knew that Nicholas's eye was on them, and they mended their ways.

(MOTHER and FATHER to AREA B. NICHOLAS wanders around and listens in.)

A year passed, and another, and Nicholas still walked through the streets of the city at night, wrapped in an old cloak and carrying a great sack filled with secret presents. A coin here, a coin there, a few loaves of bread inside this gate -- he found many ways to ease the sufferings of the poor. But no one knew who was doing it!

One night he happened to walk past the home of the family whose first daughter he had helped with a bag of gold. The lamps were lit, so he listened by the window.

There were the mother and father, weeping and worrying.

SECOND PLAYER, AS FATHER

Dear wife, here is our second daughter, just as precious as our first. What's to become of her? We have no money for a dowry. We barely have enough money for food!

FIRST PLAYER, AS MOTHER

If only we knew who helped us before! He must be a good man, a kind man. We could go and be his servants for the rest of our lives if he would let us have a little gold.

STORYTELLER

Nicholas heard, he smiled, his hand went to the pouch of gold at his belt.

(NICHOLAS tosses bag.)

Splash! went the ashes, and the mother and father jumped for joy.

(NICHOLAS hustles back to his chair. Takes off old cloak, sits.)

BOTH PLAYERS AS MOTHER AND FATHER TOGETHER

Come in! Come in!

STORYTELLER

...but Nicholas was already gone.

Word got around among the sailors about how Nicholas had stood up to the wicked judge and saved the lives of three of their comrades. Soon, whenever a ship came to the harbor at Myra, some of the sailors would climb up the hill to the church. They'd stand outside the door, hoping to meet Nicholas.

(Both PLAYERS to NICHOLAS's chair. NICHOLAS rises, puts on brocade cope, mimes to greet them.)

FIRST PLAYER, AS SAILOR

Pray for us, Bishop, when there are storms at sea.

NICHOLAS

Of course I will. We all will, here at the church, every morning and every evening.

(NICHOLAS kneels. PLAYERS stand behind his chair.)

STORYTELLER

Then a great famine came upon the city of Myra and all the countryside around it. The price of food went up and up, and poor people could not buy enough to eat. In the streets of the city, poor people begged for bread. Night and morning, Nicholas prayed for the city of Myra as parents pray for a sick child. This was how things stood until the day a great ship arrived in the harbor, loaded with wheat.

(CAPTAIN appears at CENTER BACK.)

STORYTELLER

The merchants of Myra were weak and hungry but they put on their finest clothes and went out to the ship in a rowboat to buy wheat. The Captain would not sell it to them.

CAPTAIN

This wheat is the property of the rich sea-princes of Alexandria. If I sell it to you, they will throw me to the sharks! Some other ship will come along soon with food for Myra. I cannot spare any.

(During the next paragraph, NICHOLAS puts on the brocade cope and picks up the crozier. He goes out to the center front of the nave and the two PLAYERS mime rowing him back to the CAPTAIN.)

STORYTELLER

When Nicholas heard the news he put on his splendid cloak and picked up his silver-and-cedarwood staff. He hastened down to the harbor and was rowed across to the great ship.

(NICHOLAS hands crozier to Player.)

He climbed up a rope ladder to the deck of the ship and said to the Captain,

NICHOLAS

I have come to speak with you, my son, concerning the poor people of Myra, who suffer from hunger. They need this wheat.

CAPTAIN

The poor are liars, honored Nicholas. They are playing on your pity, they are not really hungry. Give them food and they will only gamble it away or sell it to buy wine. The poor are lazy scoundrels! You do not know the poor!

NICHOLAS

You are mistaken, my son. I know the poor. I know their suffering. The merchants asked to buy your wheat and you refused them. I ask you now to give your wheat to the poor people of Myra.

CAPTAIN

Hah! Give away this wheat? What an absolutely ... *(freezes, listening.)*
(This next is played quickly and broadly, miming secrecy.)

PLAYER TWO

Oh, no! Listen! The Captain is mocking Bishop Nicholas!

PLAYER ONE

Nicholas, our friend? The Captain of our ship is showing disrespect to the Bishop of Myra?

PLAYER TWO

No good can come of this.

PLAYER ONE

Indeed. Had I known this would happen, I would never, never have embarked on this voyage.

PLAYER TWO

This ship is certain to sink in a storm, now.

PLAYER ONE

A storm? Hah! The Captain should be so lucky! A sea monster will arise out of the deeps and its enormous jaws will snap this ship in two like a breadstick.

PLAYER TWO

Of a certainty, you are right! Let us go tell all the other sailors, so that every single sailor may escape from this doomed vessel at once!

CAPTAIN

(An abrupt change of mood, fawning.) ...absolutely wonderful idea. I'd be happy to give this grain to your city, Most Reverend Bishop. Here – have your sailors row you back to shore. I will start unload grain for the poor people of Myra at once.

(CAPTAIN vanishes. NICHOLAS is rowed back, puts down crozier, takes off his brocade cope, sits in his chair.)

STORYTELLER

The people of Myra feasted on new bread that night. As for the Captain, when he got to Alexandria, his ship was full of wheat again. Maybe he bought it himself, so the sea-princes of Alexandria wouldn't throw him to the sharks. The sailors told everyone that angels brought it. Who knows? Perhaps it was a present from Nicholas!

Indeed, it was good to be alive in Myra when Nicholas was Bishop. The city prospered because the sailors loved it and came there to trade and to repair their ships. The people who ran the city knew that Nicholas was keeping an eye on them. Those who were kind and wise grew stronger, and those who were greedy and wicked were ashamed and tried to mend their ways. And, year after year, a remarkable thing kept happening in Myra. Someone gave secret presents that eased the sufferings of the poor. But nobody knew who was doing it!

(SONG, Give Your Love, Jonathan and Deborah, from CENTER BACK LIGHT.)

(At end of song, NICHOLAS puts on old cloak, puts the hood up. He takes small bag of gold AND sack of bread and blankets. Gets up and starts wandering again.

PLAYERS are in place as Mother and Father, at the back of the nave.)

STORYTELLER

The poor couple whose two daughters had received those mysterious bags of gold had one more daughter, and when she was all grown up and ready to leave home they decided to find out who had helped them. So it happened that one more time as Nicholas walked down by the harbor he came upon their lighted window and heard the mother's voice weeping and worrying.

(NICHOLAS leans into kneeler at back of church.)

Nicholas looked in the window. Only the mother was awake. The youngest daughter slept with her head in her mother's lap. The two older daughters and their husbands slept on the floor with their children next to them. How many grandchildren were there now? Surely he could see at least three! In his heart he spoke a great word of thanksgiving to the mystery that created them, loved them, and knew their names. Then once again he tossed a bag of gold onto the cold hearth.

(NICHOLAS tosses bag.)

But the father of this family was hiding and watching in the garden, and when he saw the ashes fly up, he ran to greet Nicholas.

(SECOND PLAYER falls to his knees before Nicholas and holds him.)

SECOND PLAYER, AS FATHER

My friend, my benefactor, please let us see your face!

STORYTELLER

And then the whole family came streaming out with torches and plates of sweet cakes and tangerines. No one had been asleep at all!

Nicholas knew he was caught. He threw back his hood.

(NICHOLAS throws back his hood.)

SECOND PLAYER, AS FATHER

It's Nicholas! It's Nicholas the Bishop! Come and see!

FIRST PLAYER, AS MOTHER

Come and see! Bishop Nicholas is the one who's been helping us!"

STORYTELLER

All the neighbors woke up. Soon the street was full of people.

FIRST PLAYER, AS MOTHER

(To the children.) The silver, the loaves of bread, all those blankets – look, it was Bishop Nicholas who brought them!

SECOND PLAYER, AS FATHER

(To the audience.) Will you look at that sack? It's stuffed full of presents!

STORYTELLER

More and more people joined the crowd, thanking Nicholas for gifts without number. As for the sailors, when they heard the news they shouted it all over the harbor.

The crews of every ship ran to join the commotion. They brought food and wine from the taverns to place a great feast around the feet Nicholas, their friend.

(NICHOLAS returns to chair, takes off old cloak, sits.)

(SONG: Shalom, Jonathan and Deborah, from CENTER BACK LIGHT.)

STORYTELLER

After that night, it became the delight and joy of the people of Myra to surprise one another with secret presents. How they loved to pretend that Nicholas had given them!

(PLAYERS do extensive mime throughout this, involving audience.)

That warm shawl that appeared around the shoulders of an old woman in the market? Of course Nicholas gave her that! Didn't you see him, sneaking around with that sack of his?

The great pot of soup that appeared on a sick man's table? Nicholas brought it – no question about that. He hung the handle on his great staff and carried it down the hill from the church. And he didn't spill a drop!

The doll that seemed to drop from the sky into the arms of a child? Ah, well, Bishop Nicholas must have been flying by. Didn't you see his cloak, blowing in the wind?

When Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, came to the day of his death and returned to the mystery that loved him and knew his name, there was great weeping among the people of the city. "Our helper is gone," they said to one another. "There will be no more presents from Nicholas now."

(CHOIR: SONG, Sainte Nicholaes, Goddes Druth)

(During this song, the STORYTELLER crosses to NICHOLAS, curtsseys, extends a hand in invitation.)

NICHOLAS meets the Storyteller at center front and they slowly walk out together towards the vestibule.)

(STORYTELLER returns to CENTER BACK LIGHT.)

STORYTELLER

But the presents did not stop! Indeed, hundred and hundreds of years have passed – and the secret presents have never stopped. All over the world, every December, there are more and more mysterious secret presents.

And Bishop Nicholas has never been forgotten. People call him Papa Noel, or Father Christmas, or Saint Nicholas, or Sinter Klaas, or Santa Claus. They say he sails in a fine, great ship, or walks along with a dog team, or flies in a sleigh pulled by reindeer. But he always has his great sack full of presents!

Certainly, at my house at this time of year, mysterious secret presents arrive. People say that Saint Nicholas brings them. What do you think?

(STORYTELLER and NICHOLAS return to nave and bow. Players return and bow. All four join hands and bow together. Wait for applause to end, then find a chair.)

Informal invitation to bring food forward by JONATHAN

JONATHAN blesses the food offering.

JONATHAN offers closing Blessing.

Leader There is nothing I can give you, which you have not;
 But there is much, very much, that while I cannot give it, you can take.

People No heaven can come to us unless our hearts find rest in today.

Leader Take heaven!

People No peace lies in the future which is not hidden in this present instant.

Leader Take peace!

People The gloom of the world is but a shadow.
 Behind it, yet within our reach, is joy.

Leader Take joy!

People There is a radiance and glory in the darkness, could we but see,
 and to see we have only to look.

Leader I beseech you to look.

People Life is so generous a giver, but we, judging its gifts by their covering,
 cast them away as ugly, or heavy or hard.

Leader Remove the covering, and you will find beneath it a living splendor,
 woven of love, by wisdom, with power. Welcome it, grasp it,
 and you touch the angel's hand that brings it to you.

People Everything we call a trial, a sorrow, or a duty, that angel's hand is there;

Leader The gift is there, and the wonder of an overshadowing presence.

People Our joys too: be not content with them as joys.

 They, too, conceal diviner gifts.

Leader And so, at this time, I greet you.

Not quite as the world sends greetings,
but with profound esteem and with the prayer
that for you now and forever,
the day breaks, and the shadows flee away.

People

Amen.

(Fra Giovanni 1513 A.D.)