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SF PERUSALS

# ECHO'S END

By Barney Norris

SAMUEL FRENCH

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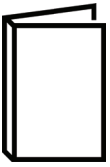

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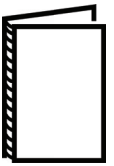

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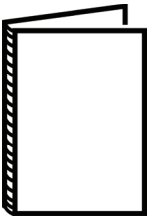

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barney Norris was born in Sussex in 1987. Upon leaving university he founded the touring theatre company Up In Arms with Alice Hamilton. His plays include *While We're Here* (Up In Arms, Bush Theatre and tour), *Echo's End* (Salisbury Playhouse), *Eventide* (Arcola Theatre, London and tour), the acclaimed *Visitors* (Up In Arms, Arcola Theatre and tour) and the short plays *Every You Every Me* (Salisbury Playhouse 2015 and tour 2017), *Fear Of Music* (Up In Arms/ Out of Joint) and *At First Sight* (Up In Arms, Latitude Festival and tour). His book, *To Bodies Gone: The Theatre of Peter Gill,* is published by Seren and his first novel, *Five Rivers Met On A Wooded Plain,* was published by Transworld in 2016. Barney was nominated for an *Evening Standard* Award in 2014 and won the Critics' Circle Most Promising New Playwright Award in the same year.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This play was written to mark the centenary of the Great War. A strange commission for me, because I only exist as a result of that conflict. My great-grandfather lost three sons, so had another in 1920 – and that was my grandfather. I've always felt the conflict to be much more vivid and living among us than people give credit, as a result, because until my grandfather passed away at the end of 2015, there was still a man living in the village where his brothers – his brothers, think about that, a century later – were commemorated on the war memorial. I've always wanted to write a play about what that conflict cost us, and *Echo's End* is the result. Salisbury Playhouse asked me to turn my eye to the Plain, where I passed my childhood, and over years of travelling and reading, the idea grew of a world that had been snuffed out in that wild and empty landscape, an old life that had collided with our way of life and been drowned completely in the sound and fury of this new world. I thought it might be moving to dramatise a dream of its last gasp, and this is that drama. It is a people's story of the Great War and the impact it had on families and communities; a play suffused with the voices of Laurie Lee and Edward Thomas. It was a deeply emotional project to work on, as it allowed me to make work on the main stage of my home theatre, and to speak to the whole of that community. It taught me more than any other project I've worked on, and I hope there are lessons hidden within it for acting companies too. This is our history, after all, this is what happened to these islands – it is thrilling to me to share that news with people, and humanise the numbers and dates we all know so well.

## ECHO'S END

*Echo's End* was first presented at Salisbury Playhouse on 29th March 2017, with the following company:

| | |
|---|---|
| **ARNOLD** | David Beames |
| **JOHN** | Tom Byrne |
| **JACK HOWARD** | Oliver Hembrough |
| **ANNA** | Katie Moore |
| **MARGARET** | Sadie Shimmin |
| **JASPER** | Robin Soans |

Director – Alice Hamilton
Designer – Tom Rogers
Lighting Designer – Howard Hudson
Sound Designer – Helen Skiera
Company Stage Manager – Eleanor Randall
Deputy Stage Manager – Christine Hollinshead
Assistant Stage Manager – Jennifer Hunter

Within this reduced space of fifteen by twenty miles the Plain is nothing but the Plain. As for the military camps, nothing may be seen of them for days beyond the white tents gleaming in the sun like sheep or clouds. When they are out of sight the tumuli and ancient earthworks that abound bring to mind more forcibly than anywhere else the fact that, as the poet said – the dead are more numerous than the living.

Edward Thomas, *In Pursuit of Spring*

*For Frank and Elizabeth.*

*With thanks to Alice; Gareth, Sebastian and everyone at Salisbury Playhouse; Rebecca Maciejewski; Richard Osgood; T.S. Crawford and Neil Hall; Salisbury Museum and Salisbury Military Museum; George Spender and Oberon Books; Rozzy and Judy Daish Associates; Matt Ward; Dad; the company, and Charlie.*

## CHARACTERS

**JOHN**

**ANNA**

**MARGARET** – John's mother

**ARNOLD** – Anna's father

**JACK HOWARD** – from New Zealand

**JASPER** – disabled by a stroke

# ACT ONE

## Scene One

*A stretch of grass in front of the cottages where the two families live. The remnants of a meal are on the stage.* **JASPER** *stands before* **ARNOLD**, **MARGARET**, **ANNA** *and* **JOHN**, *and sings the first verse of* ***"BANKS OF SWEET PRIMROSES"*** *while* **MARGARET** *tops up everyone's cups from a beaker of cider. Then* **ARNOLD** *takes up the second verse.* **MARGARET** *takes the third.* **ANNA** *takes the fourth, handing her food bowl back to* **MARGARET** *while she sings.* **MARGARET** *piles it up with her own, preparing to take things back inside. The others hand their bowls back too, over the verse.* **JOHN** *takes the fifth verse and when the song ends, the group burst into applause. As the scene plays out, when people empty their cups, they reach for the beaker and top up.*

**JASPER** Bravo!

**MARGARET** Good song, that.

**ARNOLD** Your boy sings well, dun he?

**MARGARET** So does your daughter.

**ANNA** We're right here, you know.

**ARNOLD** And we're glad that you are. *(He turns to* **JASPER.***)* You can still sing, just about, Jasper.

**JASPER** Only just, mind.

**ARNOLD** Yeah, that's all I'd say for you.

**ANNA** Dad.

**ARNOLD** Even a croak's still a fair sound to get from an old pair of bellows in their seventy-first year.

**JASPER** Of course, I might be well into that already.

**ARNOLD** What?

**JASPER** Well, I don't really know when my birthday is.

**MARGARET** You're joking.

**JASPER** I've never known, my mother never told me.

**ARNOLD** And he don't know who his father is to ask.

**MARGARET** Arnold! Are you serious? We've always celebrated today.

**JASPER** I know, I've always wondered why.

**MARGARET** You must have told us once this was the day though.

**JASPER** I think I thought this was as good a day as any, midsummer's evening, the light lingers late. And it's usually warmer, so you can stay outside.

**ARNOLD** What are you to do with midsummer though, man? You've a face like a field in December.

**JASPER** I am life itself, my friend, and don't you forget it.

**JOHN** I don't understand how you can't know your birthday.

**MARGARET** Why haven't you told us before?

**JASPER** You never asked.

**ANNA** Then why tell us now?

**JASPER** I don't know. I suppose I thought of it.

**ARNOLD** You're making it up.

**JOHN** He probably is.

**JASPER** I hope no wolves return to England in my lifetime, for no one shall believe me if I see them bearing down.

**ARNOLD** Indeed not.

**MARGARET** Do you even know your proper age?

**JASPER** What I know is that I've lived long, and been lucky. I've seen two generations of my people pass through, as the old book said, they flew like sparrows through the hall for a moment and then out again. I have been blessed to know many more good people than I might have done, had I not lived so long. But I've never known such good people as you who're round me now.

**MARGARET** We're blessed ourselves to have you here, I'm sure.

**ARNOLD** Getting under our feet.

**JASPER** Being the age I am, I can't make out the din of the war as some others seem to. I'd like to listen closer, but I've heard the tune before, and other things seem more pressing somehow when you know you've had more days already than you'll have days to come. Some things fade to distant drumming, that might have mattered once. But I hear you lot very clear. I hear your friendship ringing round me, and it is my comfort, now I've had to give up on so much. It is my privilege to see out these years in this company.

**MARGARET** And may there be many years to come.

**ANNA** Hear, hear.

**JOHN** This time a year ago the world was very different.

**JASPER** Wasn't it so?

**ARNOLD** Weren't even at war then, were we. They'd only just shot that bloke.

**MARGARET** Don't let's talk about that now.

**JASPER** All I'd like to say is that I'm glad. This is most probably not my birthday. And it's only guesswork arrives me at my age. But I am glad of the excuse for a knees-up with all of you.

**MARGARET** Here's to that.

**JASPER** And now I think I ought to go to bed.

**ARNOLD** Surely not.

**JASPER** I've drunk quite enough for one evening. I shall keel over if I don't take care.

**ARNOLD** Perhaps that explains the sound of your singing.

**JASPER** Who shall be the lucky one to help me hobble home?

**ARNOLD** You can whistle if you think I'm walking all the way to your cottage, you can make it well enough.

**JASPER** On account of that cold inhumanity, I insist it should be you.

**ARNOLD** You can make it on your own, man.

**JASPER** No, come on. I'll race you. And the last shall be first, as they learn us on Sundays. Come on, up with you, up on your feet!

**ARNOLD** By God.

**ANNA** Blasphemer.

**ARNOLD** You'd blaspheme an' all if you'd put up with him long as I have.

**JASPER** Now then, old friend.

**ARNOLD** You know I'm only joking.

**JASPER** Good night Margaret. A wonderful meal.

**MARGARET** I'm glad you enjoyed it.

**JASPER** It's strange, you're still the young woman I first met in my eyes, and almost a girl, but somewhere along the line you seem to have become a mother to me also.

**MARGARET** Oh—

**JASPER** Whatever happens to us? Isn't it enough to make you cry? Where does it go when it's gone, that's what I don't know. I'd love to know where to go and steal it back.

**JOHN** You wouldn't want her for a mother.

**JASPER** No one was ever luckier, young man, and don't you forget it. Good night, young ones.

**ARNOLD** Not so young any more.

**JASPER** Don't wish it away from them. Come on, come on.

**ANNA** We'd wish you happy birthday once again, but it sounds like we'd be wrong to.

**JASPER** You never know. There's a chance it was today.

**ARNOLD** *and* **JASPER** *exit, singing.*

**MARGARET** Funny old men.

**ANNA** They are, they are. Funny to think he's old. I always assume he's going to live for ever.

**MARGARET** I'm sure if you asked him he'd tell you no one's yet proved he isn't immortal. We all like to tell ourselves that, I think. I should take in these things.

**ANNA** I can do that.

**MARGARET** No, it's my bowls, it's my washing-up. There's still more light left, why don't you two stay out? There's cider in the beaker.

**JOHN** Might as well, yeah.

**ANNA** Don't you want any help?

**MARGARET** I'm all right. You come in when it's dark, enjoy the evening.

**ANNA** Thank you.

**MARGARET** I'll see you in a while John, all right?

**JOHN** All right.

**MARGARET** Beautiful evening. Well. In a while then.

**MARGARET** *exits.*

**JOHN** Want any more of this?

**ANNA** Yeah, all right.

**JOHN** *pours out the last of the cider.*

Thank you.

**JOHN** Do the potatoes tomorrow.

**ANNA** Yeah.

**JOHN** Does my back in.

**ANNA** Heavy work. But it must be done.

**JOHN** What you looking at?

**ANNA** Just the sunset.

**JOHN** Yeah. What you thinkin'?

**ANNA** I dunno. You all right? You're quiet.

**JOHN** Yeah. I'm all right. Wanna go for a walk?

## Scene Two

*Rows of potatoes fill the stage. In the middle of the field stands a barrel, and around the barrel stand* **MARGARET** *and* **ANNA**. *They carry backpacks of potato spray, a container in the backpack connected to a nozzle by a hose. They're filling their sprayers with liquid from the barrel.* **MARGARET** *has been working for some time.* **ANNA** *has just arrived.*

**ANNA** Where's John?

**MARGARET** You haven't heard?

**ANNA** What?

**MARGARET** He's signed up.

**ANNA** When?

**MARGARET** Last night.

**ANNA** No.

**MARGARET** I'm out my mind. I think he must be out of his an' all.

**ANNA** Oh, Margaret.

**MARGARET** Just went and did it.

**ANNA** What are you going to do?

**MARGARET** I don't know. There's nothing I can say to him.

**ANNA** Can he change his mind?

**MARGARET** I don't know. He won't hear me.

**ANNA** They'll take him?

**MARGARET** What if you talked to him?

**ANNA** And said what?

**MARGARET** He'll listen to you, you could tell him.

**ANNA** I don't know how much he'd listen me if he won't hear it from his mother.

**MARGARET** All his life he's listened to you.

**ANNA** I don't know what I'd say.

**MARGARET** He'll die, Anna. He'll die if you don't. You'd find the words. You have to.

**ANNA** Please.

**MARGARET** You could change his mind.

*Enter* **ARNOLD** *and* **JOHN**.

**JOHN** Arnold says we ought to talk, and not be off on our own.

**ARNOLD** No point skulking. He was up a tree, scowling at the hills.

**JOHN** I was not up a tree, I was having some quiet.

**ARNOLD** Doesn't mean you weren't up a tree though, does it. Thought I'd shake him down.

**MARGARET** Thank you.

**JOHN** He didn't really shake me down, I didn't fall out of no tree.

**ARNOLD** D'you want us to leave you both to it?

**MARGARET** No, we all know the whole of it. Well then?

*They look to* **JOHN**.

**ARNOLD** Go on, speak up for yourself.

**JOHN** Why can't you feel proud of me?

**MARGARET** I was holding you in my arms, seems like an hour ago. I never thought how small it made a person feel for their child to grow. How left behind it would all feel suddenly. This might be the start of the end of the world, the way I feel it.

**JOHN** Don't say that.

**MARGARET** There'll be no one young left here. All of you led off into the hill.

**JOHN** I'll come back.

**MARGARET** Will you? Can you promise that?

**JOHN** The war will only end, Mum, if we get on and end it.

**MARGARET** *cries.*

**ARNOLD** All right.

**MARGARET** I can't talk to you. I can't. I need to go home. I wanted to get this done but I don't know. I think I need to lie down. I don't know what to say to you now. Will you help me home?

**ARNOLD** All right.

**MARGARET** Anna? Please.

**ANNA** All right.

**MARGARET** Someone needs to do this work.

**ANNA** We can do that.

**MARGARET** I have to go home.

**JOHN** I'm sorry I've hurt you.

**MARGARET** I just want you to think of what you're doing. I don't believe you're thinking.

**JOHN** I know you don't.

**MARGARET** Talk to Anna. Listen to her. Try and think what's best for everyone.

**ARNOLD** Come on. I'll walk you home, shall I?

**MARGARET** Thank you.

**ARNOLD** You won't be long?

**ANNA** No, I'll follow.

**ARNOLD** All right. I'll say good day then.

**JOHN** I'll see you.

**ARNOLD** *and* **MARGARET** *exit.* **JOHN** *and* **ANNA** *look at each other.*

I don't want to talk about it all, all right? You know what's the whole thing already anyway, better than them.

**ANNA** You can't lay it at my door.

**JOHN** Well I do, so you'll have to deal with that.

**ANNA** That's cruel.

**JOHN** Now you know how it feels, then.

**ANNA** And it's a cruel thing to do to your mother.

**JOHN** She didn't have to feel that way. She might have been proud if she chose. *(***JOHN** *sets about picking up his mother's pack.)* Shall we do this then?

**ANNA** I guess we better had.

**JOHN** I'll put the pack on you.

**ANNA** Thanks.

**JOHN** *puts the pack on* **ANNA**, *then puts on his own.* **ANNA** *sprays him with her spray.*

**JOHN** What's that for?

**ANNA** Just testing.

**JOHN** 'At's chemical, that is, you'll muss me all up.

**ANNA** I didn't spray it at your eyes.

**JOHN** Hope not.

**ANNA** *sprays it at him again.*

Don't muck about. I don't want to play games.

**ANNA** All right. Just trying to cheer you up.

**JOHN** It's not gonna cheer me up if I'm soaked or the stuff's in my eyes and I go blind, I don't think.

**ANNA** Is it that strong?

**JOHN** Wanna test an' find out?

**ANNA** I'd rather not.

**JOHN** Let's work, then.

**ANNA** All right.

*They make a start.* **JOHN** *stops almost immediately.*

You all right?

**JOHN** Something in my shoe.

**ANNA** Your foot, you mean.

**JOHN** Have to stop.

**ANNA** What is it?

**JOHN** Sharp, is what it is. Hang on.

**ANNA** Let me have a look.

**JOHN** I can sort it.

**ANNA** Let me help. Be easier for me.

**JOHN** All right. If you want. Thanks.

**ANNA** Sit down then.

**JOHN** All right.

*He sits down. She undoes his boot and takes it off.*

**ANNA** Yeah, it's a thorn in here. How long's that been there, then? Been limping all day?

**JOHN** Only jus' started hurting now.

*She takes out the thorn.*

**ANNA** There you go. Must have been down by the toe, and moved.

**JOHN** Thanks.

**ANNA** You could have done it, you were right.

**JOHN** Thanks anyway.

*He puts his sock and his boot back on.* **ANNA** *watches him at first, then sprays him again.*

I'll hit you with this shoe!

**ANNA** All right, all right.

**ANNA** *turns away and continues spraying.*

So you just did it then, did you? Thought came into your head and you just went and did it, or what?

**JOHN** Not really. I'd thought of it before. I just wasn't going to go through with it till you said what you said.

**ANNA** How long you been thinking about it?

**JOHN** Dunno. A while. You just think about it. There's a war, and men are needed. You think about duty. And I'm not wanted 'ere.

**ANNA** Don't say that.

**JOHN** What?

**ANNA** Just don't.

**JOHN** I don't know what you mean.

**ANNA** So you'll go out there to get back at me, will you?

**JOHN** That's not what I've said. I just want to be out of this place a bit, that's all.

**ANNA** I don't know why.

**JOHN** You don't?

**ANNA** Farmers are needed much as soldiers, times like this. It's city folk that ought to go and die.

**JOHN** Yes.

**ANNA** But you want to go and see it for yourself. You'll be missed here.

**JOHN** Will I?

**ANNA** Of course.

**JOHN** By who?

**ANNA** All of us. By me.

**JOHN** Why would you ever miss me? I thought we were nothing to each other now.

**ANNA** That's not how it is.

**JOHN** Isn't it?

**ANNA** That's not what I said.

**JOHN** Just what you meant.

**ANNA** I only said we were too young for that. Just yet.

**JOHN** There you go, that's what I hate about this place. We won't go forward. You want to stay a child, you want to be a child again, when we're not any more. Why can't we be old enough to be man and woman?

**ANNA** I don't know. I don't know how to be ready for that. You're not nothing to me, John.

**JOHN** I'm sorry. I'm only angry. I'm only ashamed.

**ANNA** That can't be why you do it. Why you go.

**JOHN** What, would I stay here and have to keep passing you in the lane?

**ANNA** It's not fair if you go and die, and I've got that over me.

**JOHN** I won't die. I'll just be clear of here. And it's not all running away, you know. There's such a thing as duty. There's such a thing as country, it's not all about you.

**ANNA** I'm glad of that.

**JOHN** It's not about you.

**ANNA** All right then.

**JOHN** I want to do it.

**ANNA** Well.

**JOHN** *sprays her with his sprayer.* **ANNA** *screams in surprise.*

Hey!

**JOHN** Not so nice, is it.

**ANNA** You've ruined this.

**JOHN** No I haven't, I've just got it wet. You don't throw your clothes out every time it rains, do you?

**ANNA** Obviously not.

**JOHN** Then I haven't ruined it, have I.

**ANNA** What about all the chemicals in there?

**JOHN** They're not so bad.

**ANNA** You said you'd go blind.

**JOHN** I just didn't want you to spray me.

**ANNA** Oh, I see.

*A pause. Then both of them try and soak each other, and end up hiding behind different shelters on opposite sides of the stage.*

I'll be proud of you.

**JOHN** Will you?

**ANNA** Course.

**JOHN** Well then. I didn't know you'd think like that.

**ANNA** Course I do.

**JOHN** Well, thank you.

**ANNA** I only want you to be safe.

**JOHN** All right.

**ANNA** So we can be back here again before too long, and walking on the hills.

**JOHN** Yes.

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