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SF PERUSALS

Samuel French Acting Edition

How to Survive an Apocalypse

by Jordan Hall

SAMUEL FRENCH

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HOW TO SURVIVE AN APOCALYPSE was initially created during an artistic residency at Pi Theatre with support from the British Columbia Arts Council. Subsequent to this, the play was developed through Flying Start, a partnership of Touchstone Theatre and the Playwrights Theatre Centre giving a stage to new professional playwrights.

HOW TO SURVIVE AN APOCALYPSE premiered at the Firehall Arts Centre on June 2, 2016 in Vancouver, British Columbia. It was premiered by Touchstone Theatre in association with the Playwrights Theatre Centre and the Firehall Arts Centre. The director was Katrina Dunn, with sets by David Roberts, costumes by Christopher David Gauthier, lighting by Adrian Muir, and sound by Elliot Vaughan. The dramaturg was Kathleen Flaherty and the stage manager was Rebecca Mulvihill. The cast was as follows:

JEN . . . . . Claire Hesselgrave
TIM . . . . . .Sebastien Archibald
ABBY. . . . . Lindsey Angell
BRUCE . . . . . .Zahf Paroo

Awards and Distinctions:
2014 PGC Tom Hendry Award – Comedy *(Shortlisted)*
2015 La Mama Umbria International Playwrights Retreat *(Official Selection)*
2016 Flying Start Award – Playwrights Theatre Centre, Touchstone Theatre, Firehall Arts Centre *(First Prize)*

CHARACTERS

JEN – late-twenties/early thirties-ish, a little bit hip, successful enough

TIM – the same, maybe not quite as hip

ABBY – almost thirty, hoping for enlightenment

BRUCE – early thirties, slick-as-hell

AUTHOR'S NOTES

An **Apocalypse** (Ancient Greek: ἀποκάλυψις, from ἀπό and καλύπτω meaning "uncovering"), translated literally from Greek, is a disclosure of knowledge, i.e. a lifting of the veil or revelation.

I think it was 2013 when I started thinking seriously about the Apocalypse. As a fan of mythology and science fiction, I've always loved its various incarnations: Wars of the gods, zombies, meteors, plagues, environmental disaster. Give me a struggling dystopia or a post-apocalyptic wasteland and I'm hooked.

But in 2013 – as we limped back from the 2008 financial crisis; as Edward Snowden disclosed a massive government surveillance program; as one of the warmest years on record concluded with the devastation of Typhoon Haiyan – the end of the world took on a different character. Why was I so fascinated by fictional devastation when there was so much real disaster to go around? I realized that what I loved about the Apocalypse wasn't the event itself, but the stories of what came after – I found disaster compelling because I thought I was going to survive it.

I wasn't alone. All over North America, there were people who felt the exact same way: Preppers. On the surface, Prepping made perfect sense. We were destroying our environment; corporations and the one percent were grinding the bones of the impoverished to make their bread – human civilization was clearly doomed. Why not stockpile canned goods and a couple of rifles in the hopes you could outlast everyone else's stupidity?

Except...the more I researched, the more Prepping seemed like another fantasy. The idea that any amount of preparation could protect me from such vast forces? It was like believing perfect grades could save you from failure; or that a perfect life could save you from death. And suddenly there was Jen, and there was Tim, and of course the best way to grapple with my anxiety about the Apocalypse was to write a play about it.

At its heart, *How to Survive an Apocalypse* is a comedy of remarriage – a sub-genre of the romantic comedy that I came to love through plays like *Private Lives* and films like *The Philadelphia Story*. It's a genre in which the mistakes and misconceptions of the past have to be cleared away before we can begin again, and so it is for Jen and Tim and many young adults these days. The old milestones of success and adulthood may well be unattainable for us. If we're going to build lasting relationships and lives, we have to figure out what old ideas to clear away, and where to begin again.

So here's to our Apocalypse. May we all find a way to survive it.

Some Brief Thoughts on Retrofitting and Set Design

Retrofitting

I tend to write plays for a specific time and place, and *How to Survive an Apocalypse* is very much a portrait of young adults in the post-financial crash reality of Vancouver, British Columbia. That said, I suspect that much of what is resonant for Vancouver may well be resonant for other large urban centres – and that references to specific locations in the play can usually be adjusted to fit a new city very easily. In general, I've found that audiences respond to the immediacy of a play set in their environs more personally than to one that seems geographically removed. If, as a producer, such a retrofitting of the text interests you, please reach out to your Samuel French licensing representative.

Set Design

As a piece that tackles materialism, and which uses the sheer accumulation of "stuff" to provide both a sense of the overwhelming ethos of the times and as a metaphor for the difficulties and claustrophobia of a relationship, *How to Survive an Apocalypse* is a prop-heavy show. It is essential to a successful staging to let the gradual influx, first of survival supplies and then of wires and other simulation accessories, move the aesthetic of the apartment set from streamlined to cluttered and chaotic over the course of the show. In particular, I would recommend a staging where Tim and Jen's apartment is central, and serves as a locus for this accumulation, and where other locales – Jen's office, restaurants, and even the camping scenes – are outgrowths of the apartment set. Not only does this allow the growing chaos of the apartment to inflect the scenes in other locales, but allowing props to move into the set and then remain there prevents long and time-consuming set changes. On a personal note, most of the clutter described is made up of common household items and emergency supplies – if you must purchase it instead of sourcing it from within the production and company, please do your best to have it absorbed by the company after the show, in an effort to reduce the production's footprint.

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Delvin Solkinson & Gaiacraft Vancouver
Daniel Zomparelli
James Daniell

A Special Note

If you are a Housing Equity Organization or similar type of charity considering staging an amateur production of *How to Survive an Apocalypse* as a fundraiser, please contact your licensing representative at Samuel French, as the playwright has made provisions for the donation of her portion of the play's royalties back to your organization, provided your group and the proposed production meet certain criteria.

For Dave, with whom I would share a 300-square-foot fallout shelter.
And for Charlie, in the hope that none of us have to.

"So I think the world will come to an end amid the general applause
from all the wits who believe that it is a joke."
– Søren Kierkegaard

ACT ONE

Scene One

(A hipster-chic loft. Maybe trying a little too hard. **JEN GREEN***, less pretty than cool, applies eyeliner while her husband,* **TIM GREEN***, weedy and goateed, lies propped up on the couch, clicking away at a laptop.)*

JEN. ...So she's up there, in front of the whole board – having already hired this consultant, mind you – going on about how we have to focus on our "target identity." As though the issue is even a marketing issue and not a by-product of the collapse of Western Civilization –

TIM. ...Uh-huh.

JEN. And she explains that our target identity – this imbecilic "person who the magazine should be"? Should be a hipster. But not some retro-loser hipster – the implication being *me* or really anybody without a trust fund. Not that hipster, no.

TIM. ...Uh-huh.

JEN. Our magazine is the kind of hipster who collects seven hundred dollar sneakers and has an all-white penthouse in Gastown. So – a douchebag. The whole publishing industry is in a decade-long death-spiral, and Elspeth thinks the solution is to rebrand my magazine as some guy she did at a house party one time. But it's fine, because she gets to spend money we don't have hiring this corporate snake oil salesman to "save us." Like, shit. Face facts. Don't just put on a tin-foil hat and call it a silver lining.

TIM. ...Uh-huh.

JEN. Sweetie. Pay less attention. Your apathy's hot.

TIM. Sorry. I'm just trying to tweak these splatter physics. Something's off in the blood dynamics.

JEN. The trials and tribulations of working with zombies.

(Beat.)

How much longer is that going to take? We should have left five minutes ago.

TIM. I have to finish this, Jen. My portfolio is like ninety percent of getting the job. A former gig coding world engines for indies doesn't make me a shoe-in for a zombie slasher franchise.

JEN. Who are these guys again?

TIM. They're the ones making Torso IV. Or maybe V. There have been a lot of Torsos.

JEN. God. I can't believe you're even putting in a portfolio.

TIM. Yeah, well, after six months on the dole, I'm putting in a portfolio for everything. You can't keep me in Pabst and hummus chips forever.

JEN. You mean I won't be coming home to a grown man who's been sitting around in his boxers all day?

(Off **TIM***'s look:)*

No. I don't mean that. What I mean is it's shitty Ergodic Arts went under. You're a genius. You shouldn't have to chase jobs coding for some brainless gore fest.

TIM. Yeah. Well. In surprising news, life's not fair.

JEN. Don't I know it. If we don't get to this thing and start running damage control, Elspeth'll have this guy lobotomizing my magazine before they've finished the appies.

(She darts into another room and returns with a pair of slacks.)

Pants.

*(***TIM** *dutifully puts on the pants, but promptly goes back to working on the laptop.)*

TIM. Oh c'mon, Elspeth couldn't get the rest of the board to change a font size without you.

JEN. That was back when I was the hot new thing, with ambitious plans and a surplus to match. Our operating deficit is making the board twitchy.

(She notices something amiss with her eyeliner and pulls out a compact to correct it.)

It's making me twitchy.

TIM. You're still the coolest girl in the room.

(He puts aside his laptop and pulls her down onto the couch. She doesn't stop fixing her eyeliner.)

Editor of Vancouver's answer to the *New Yorker* –

JEN. With a board chair who's gunning for my job –

TIM. With her cushy pad –

JEN. A rental *we* can barely afford anymore –

TIM. And her devilishly handsome husband…

(He starts kissing her neck.)

JEN. Stop that! It took me like half-an-hour to get this eyeliner right.

TIM. You don't need it.

JEN. You're sweet. But yes I do.

(She puts away the compact and heads to the closet to pick out a dress shirt and a jacket.)

We pretend to be all progressive but no one listens to ugly feminists. If you aren't better looking than fifty percent of the room, they write you off as biased.

TIM. All you have to do is start talking and it's Shock and Awe, and you know it.

JEN. Which is *exactly* why I need you to put on a decent jacket and be the adoring husband. On my own I'm that bitch who won't stop talking. With you on my arm I'm abrasive, but charming.

TIM. I am a versatile accessory.

JEN. As status symbols go, husbands are right up there.

(She pecks him on the cheek.)

Now get a move on.

(She's draping the shirt and jacket over his shoulders, but he shoos her hands away and puts the jacket on over his t-shirt. This done, he opens up the laptop again.)

TIM. You know if I land this job, it'll take some of the pressure off you.

JEN. What's going to take the pressure off is getting to this dinner, and figuring out whether this guy they've hired really is some hot-shit TEDx-er, with his "Brand Positioning as Predation" videos, or if Elspeth just got distracted by his hair and jawline and shoulders, y'know?

TIM. I remember when I was a genius – with hair and a jawline and shoulders. I don't recall Elspeth getting all flustered over me.

JEN. You're adorable when you're jealous.

(She closes the laptop.)

TIM. I'm not jealous. I just take issue with my exclusion from the sexy genius club.

JEN. You know how Elspeth is. It's primitive. The guy looks like an alpha.

TIM. Colour me reassured.

(She hands him his shoes.)

JEN. Please. Alphas are useless now. What the hell good is the ability to kill a bison when you can order your groceries delivered on the internet? These days the real alphas are identified by their sexy, subterranean pallor. That's the mark of an Internet God.

TIM. I dunno, I think if I were a god I'd be entitled to more handmaidens or something.

JEN. Don't push your luck, buster.

*(**JEN** starts dragging him toward the door.)*

TIM. Some of them might even be virgins.

JEN. Come on, let's go get a look at the enemy.

TIM. *(As he's pulled along after her.)* Poor guy. He has no idea what he's in for.

Scene Two

(The offices of Belle Vie *– hip, but starting to look shabby in places.* **JEN** *in her office, unhappily staring at budgets.* **BRUCE** *– early thirties, slick-as-hell – knocks.)*

JEN. And you're early.

BRUCE. After the – awkwardness at dinner, I thought we could get some coffee and talk.

JEN. Awkwardness? My publishing board foists you on me without so much as a "By-the-by, Jenny" and you think a quick chat is going to make us best friends?

BRUCE. No. But I like a challenge.

*(***JEN** *doesn't dignify that with a response.)*

A little light reading?

JEN. I'm trying to pull 50k out of our overhead. It's like trying to decide which finger to cut off.

BRUCE. 50k is a Band-Aid on a bullet hole. Your operating deficit is twice that.

JEN. I know how big my deficit is.

BRUCE. No, you don't.

(He pulls a set of papers from his case.)

You scored a couple of big gifts back in 2014, and your accountants have been using them as a buffer, but as of this fiscal your safety net is gone.

JEN. *(Flipping through the papers.)* That's not – Finance would have said something if that were –

BRUCE. Your former GM? She was shopping for her new position for at least a year. My guess? She thought the 100k hole might take the sheen off her CV.

JEN. Oh my god.

BRUCE. Now, I know that comes as a shock, but you don't have to let it knock you back –

(But **JEN** *is already moving on.)*

JEN. Yeah-yeah-yeah. Look. I appreciate the heads-up. And you seem – competent, but you aren't going to charm me into forgetting you're here because the trophy-wife running my board thinks she'd be better at my job than I am.

BRUCE. So, it's not me, it's the rebranding?

JEN. Oh no. It's also you.

BRUCE. You *just* said I was charming.

JEN. Yes. But you're also the kind of patriarchal throwback who uses anecdotes about his hunting trips to justify *laissez-faire* capitalism –

BRUCE. That's hardly –

JEN. You're here to rebrand my magazine and I'd bet my eye teeth you'd never seen an issue before last night –

BRUCE. Hey –

JEN. And I'm pretty sure you're sleeping with the aforementioned Board Chair.

(A beat.)

BRUCE. ...Well.

JEN. These things happen.

BRUCE. Just the once.

JEN. I see. That makes it all alright then.

BRUCE. You didn't like my hunting anecdotes?

JEN. They made you very relatable, if you like that nascent serial killer sort of thing.

BRUCE. You should have stayed for the duck fat ice cream.

JEN. My husband had work to finish up at home.

BRUCE. Your husband? The one with the jacket over the ironic t-shirt?

JEN. He works in games. It's a different dress code.

BRUCE. Married long?

JEN. Five years.

BRUCE. Kids?

JEN. Nope.

BRUCE. Want 'em?

JEN. Big on boundaries, I see.

BRUCE. Happy?

JEN. Ridiculously.

(With a huff:)

Let's get this over with. Go on, roll out Elspeth's plan to turn us into a luxury lifestyle magazine.

BRUCE. Yeah. I don't think you should do that.

(A beat.)

JEN. That's a plot twist. Alright. Impress me. What would Davy Crockett do?

BRUCE. Strip it right down to its core.

JEN. *Belle Vie*'s mandate is "your guide to the ideal life." We don't really go in for austerity.

BRUCE. Depends on whose ideal life we're talking about. Right now, your magazine is all post-modern veneer. It's ironic, clever, and deeply unsatisfying.

JEN. Did you just call my magazine shallow?

BRUCE. Out of touch would be more accurate.

JEN. This from a man whose hobbies date to the Palaeolithic.

BRUCE. The primitive is always compelling.

JEN. So is the aspirational.

(Beat.)

From the time you're a child, what do you imagine except your ideal life? The things you'll do, the people you'll meet, the brave new person you'll be – it's always there, on the horizon.

BRUCE. You think people's ideal lives have anything to do with "The new political avant-garde" or "How to live your life as art" anymore? You might as well be hawking luxury goods. That kind of optimism evaporated in 2008.

JEN. We adjusted our hopes and dreams for the downturn?

BRUCE. Not just the downturn. The environment. The corporate state. Genocides.

JEN. So you think the world is ending and I should rebrand my magazine to match? Oooo. We could call it *The Sandwichboard.*

BRUCE. What I think, is that you are deeply unhappy.

(Beat.)

JEN. I'm not.

BRUCE. Everything about you screams it. And it isn't just job stress or your marriage. It goes so much deeper. How long has it been since you felt like that ideal life of yours was in reach? That somehow, despite the climate melting down, real estate skyrocketing, job security vanishing like a pipe dream – there was a way for you to get there? And you aren't alone. There's a whole generation out there wondering what happened to their lives. You need to stop selling them a dead dream, and offer them something they need instead.

JEN. And what's that?

BRUCE. A way to get through it all.

JEN. You want me to start planning the "off-grid" issue?

BRUCE. Maybe. Why not?

JEN. We're a culture mag. Your idea of a good time may be killing an elk with your teeth, but our readers want lit reviews and the hottest new place to have brunch.

BRUCE. Is that what you're looking for?

JEN. That's – not the point.

BRUCE. Your declining readership argues otherwise. I think you are your readers, and I think you know your whole life – the indie rock concerts, the organic produce, the hipster hubby – is on borrowed time. Your prosperity is hollowing out beneath you. And I think you want what everybody wants – a life on the other side.

JEN. And you're going to lead us through the wilderness?

BRUCE. Laugh all you want, but the hunting trips and survival training? What they mean is: I don't need any of this. I don't need people to hire me, or to buy my magazine. I don't need grocery stores or access to

an ATM or running water. I don't have to depend on anyone. And when you know that, in your bones? The rest of the noise of life fades into nothing. Leaves you free to pursue exactly what you want.

JEN. And what do you want?

BRUCE. Well, I'm not interested in sleeping with your board chair again.

(Beat.)

JEN. Still married.

BRUCE. Never said you weren't.

(He gathers up his papers and heads for the door, holding it open for her to come with.)

Now, are we going to get some coffee and save this place?

(Reluctantly, **JEN** *follows him out.)*

Scene Three

(The loft. **TIM** *coding on the couch, drinking something violently orange from a mason jar.* **JEN** *enters, still unsettled by her conversation with* **BRUCE**.*)*

TIM. Hey, sweets.

JEN. Hey.

TIM. Abby called while you were at work.

JEN. Uh-huh.

TIM. I don't think she's coping with the move back to her mom's. She sounded – unstable. Like *Streetcar Named Desire* unstable.

JEN. Uh-huh.

TIM. Okay. What happened?

JEN. *(Distracted.)* What?

TIM. Did round one with Mr. Hair and Shoulders really go that badly?

JEN. Well, the patriarchal cliché figured out our deficit is twice what I thought, so...

*(***TIM** *takes a sip of his orange drink and makes a face.* **JEN** *notices.)*

What is that and why are you drinking it?

TIM. Ah. I was looking at this month's credit card bill –

(He gestures toward a small stack of bills on the coffee table.)

– and that didn't seem like the sort of thing I could face without a cocktail. Considering the state of said credit card bill, though, I thought I should try to make do with existing stock.

JEN. Which was?

TIM. Tang crystals and a fifth of gin. I'm calling it the Tang-mosa.

JEN. *(Picking up the bills and beginning to sift through them.)* Resourceful. Sad and desperate, but resourceful.

TIM. Oh no, no, you do not want to look at those.

*(**JEN**'s eye catches on a figure.)*

JEN. Goddammit. I thought we were cutting back.

*(She flops on the couch and **TIM** hands her the Tang-mosa without a word.)*

This is not where I'm supposed to be right now, y'know? You go to school and pay your dues and work hard. You're not supposed to end up about to lose your apartment, and having some Cro-Magnon question your ability to engage with reality.

TIM. What did he say?

JEN. He said…stuff.

TIM. How dare he.

JEN. It's hard to make a counterargument with a 100k deficit. It's like a scarlet letter, the scarlet "I" of insolvency, or incompetence, or irrelevance –

TIM. So, did Mr. Sexy Genius have any actual thoughts on how to dig you out?

JEN. Yeah. He's got – a plan.

(She lets herself sink into his shoulder. Beat.)

Tim, do you think we would survive…y'know…an emergency?

TIM. What?

JEN. I guess I never thought about it before. But you can't just drift through life expecting that nothing bad is ever going to happen, right? Things happen – like –

(She glances around, searching for – or possibly avoiding – something.)

– like oil spills, and recessions, and earthquakes.

TIM. Yeah. But the government… Ugh. I can't even complete that sentence.

(Beat.)

I guess we're supposed to have a kit? And shoes by the bed for some reason…

JEN. *(Wincing as she takes a sip.)* We can't be that bad. There must be a lot of things we could survive, easy. We'll just start with the simple stuff and work our way up. So…the power goes off! We could totally survive the power going off for a few days.

TIM. Yeah. Yeah… Well…

JEN. Well? Why is there a "well"?

TIM. How much water do we actually have in the apartment?

JEN. Why would we need to worry about water? It's not like the taps would just…

(Off **TIM***'s look:)*

The taps would stop running?

(Beat.)

Okay. Okay. So…

(She runs to check the fridge, the sink, the bathroom.)

We've got the water in the toilet and the gin you didn't use to make the Tang-mosa.

TIM. *(Raising the orange jar.)* Which is truly soul-destroying. I apologize.

JEN. You don't die of dehydration for like three days. We could last for three days.

TIM. On gin and toilet water? I'm pretty sure the gin would make our dehydration worse, and you're not supposed to drink the water in your toilet because of – oh, I don't know, dysentery?

JEN. Fine then. I'll head down to the corner store and buy some bottled water.

TIM. Okay. Sure, but…

JEN. But?

TIM. Do you have any actual cash on you? Or just your credit cards?

(Beat.)

JEN. Shit.

TIM. Also, we have no flashlight, candles, first-aid kit, or food.

JEN. Hey! I saw some goat cheese in the fridge…but I think it's moldy.

TIM. The goat cheese?

JEN. The fridge.

(Beat.)

Oh my god. If the power went out we'd die up here with our credit cards and dysentery.

*(**TIM** throws an arm around her to comfort her.)*

TIM. Shhh. Have some Tang-mosa.

JEN. We suck.

TIM. At least we suck together.

*(**JEN** takes a deep gulp of the Tang-mosa and shudders.)*

How about we put on some terrible movie where Bruce Willis has to save the world from a volcano, and have some epic, the-world-is-ending-and-we're-totally-doomed sex. That could be pretty hot.

*(**TIM** flips open his laptop and starts searching for a movie to set the mood. **JEN** is silent, brooding into the drink.)*

Armageddon? Oh – except Bruce Willis dies – that's always kinda depressing. Also, Ben Affleck. Hurk.

*(**JEN** doesn't respond. She looks at the credit card bill again.)*

Deep Impact? Euh. Yeah. Morgan Freeman and Elijah Wood. Not so much with the sexy.

*(Nothing. **JEN** puts down the credit card bill and starts to drift around their apartment, considering and then discarding books, records, decor…)*

Day After Tomorrow. The dialogue. *2012*. The plot. *Waterworld*. Euh. The jet skis.

(And now **JEN** *is staring at* **TIM** *as he continues his search.)*

What? You wanna go full-on retro? *Omega Man*?

(Beat.)

Come on baby. The world is going down in flames and all I wanna do is get blitzed and kiss you, isn't that romantic?

JEN. No.

TIM. Hey, I know that wasn't my best pitch, but –

JEN. No, I mean – yes that's romantic, but No. I haven't been working my ass off since I was fourteen to lose my job. Or end up as some shivering loser in a real-life disaster movie.

TIM. Okay. So…what do you wanna do?

JEN. We are not failures. I have never failed a single goddamn thing in my life. Not my driver's license, not a single test in school, not freaking share time in the second grade. Screw "prosperity hollowing out underneath us." This is us. We are young. Successful. Cool. We're going to make this survival bullshit our bitch.

(She grabs a pot from under the stove and heads into the bathroom. We hear the sound of a tap being turned on.)

TIM. Couldn't we just watch *Armageddon* instead?

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