Acting Edition

THE PROMISE

and

AT THE POINT OF NEED

Two plays by Paul Unwin

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SAMUEL FRENCH

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NOTE

This edition reflects a rehearsal draft of the script and may differ from the final production.

THE PROMISE

THE PROMISE was originally produced by Chichester Festival Theatre, and was first performed at the Minerva Theatre on 19 July 2024. The cast and creative team were as follows:

ELLEN WILKINSON ..... Clare Burt
CLEMENT ATTLEE ..... Andrew Woodall
VIOLET ATTLEE ..... Suzanne Burden
HERBERT MORRISON ..... Reece Dinsdale
ERNIE BEVIN ..... Clive Wood
NYE BEVAN ..... Richard Harrington
JENNIE LEE ..... Allison McKenzie
HUGH DALTON ..... Miles Richardson
RICHARD STAFFORD CRIPPS ..... Peter Hamilton Dyer
LORD MORAN (CHARLIE WILSON) ..... David Robb
WINSTON CHURCHILL ..... Martyn Ellis
JOAN VINCENT ..... Felixe Forde
PHOTOGRAPHER/THOMAS MERRIMAN ..... Majid Mehdizadeh-Valoujerdy

Writer ..... Paul Unwin
Director ..... Jonathan Kent
Set Designer ..... Joanna Parker
Costume Designer & Supervisor ..... Deborah Andrews
Lighting and Video Designer ..... Peter Mumford
Composer ..... Gary Yershon
Sound Designer ..... Christopher Shutt
Casting Director ..... Annelie Powell CDG
Dramaturg ..... Harry Mackrill
Associate Set Designer ..... Christophe Eynde
Assistant Director ..... Sydney Stevenson
Production Manager ..... Matt Ledbury
Props Supervisor ..... Fahmida Bakht
Company Stage Manager ..... Alison Rankin
Deputy Stage Manager ..... Caitlin Shay
Assistant Stage Manager ..... Emily Humphrys

CHARACTERS

Based on real people:

ELLEN WILKINSON – In her mid-fifties, she is a powerful, passionate woman. The only woman in the 1945 Labour Cabinet.

CLEMENT ATTLEE – In his early sixties. Stiff, diffident but a cool political operator.

VIOLET ATTLEE – Attlee's wife. Upper-middle-class and dynamic.

HERBERT MORRISON – In his late fifties. A politician to his marrow.

ERNIE BEVIN – Mid-sixties. A powerful old school Labour and Union politician. Loyal.

NYE BEVAN – Mid-fifties. A charismatic and inspiring insurgent.

JENNIE LEE – Early fifties. More than Bevan's wife – one of the great Labour MPs. Scottish, vivacious.

HUGH DALTON – Late fifties. Four square, tough, arrogant.

RICHARD STAFFORD CRIPPS – Late fifties, possibly feels older. Has an edgy fragility, but a formidable intellect.

LORD MORAN (CHARLIE WILSON) – A senior doctor.

WINSTON CHURCHILL

Invented:

JOAN VINCENT – A young black Labour Party worker.

THOMAS MERRIMAN – A young architecture student.

YOUNG PHOTOGRAPHER

LABOUR PARTY WORKERS

A SENIOR NURSE

A DOCTOR

WAITERS

A BOY SINGER

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Promise is set in England between the 25th of May 1945 and 7th of February 1947.

Although *The Promise* is based on detailed research and all but two of the characters are inspired by real people, the play is a work of imagination.

For Katie, with all my love.

ACT ONE

Scene One

(Dolphin Square, London/the Blackpool Winter Gardens.)

(The setting is spare but beautiful. A wall and a floor are made of wood. They have lustre and depth. A **WOMAN** *with red hair lies foetal centre stage. She is dressed in a delicate silk kimono. Snow swirls around her. Shouts offstage.)*

PORTER 1. You tried knocking?

PORTER 2. She's not answering…

(The sound of knocking. A third voice – young working-class Londoner – **JOAN VINCENT**.*)*

JOAN. Miss? Miss?

*(***ELLEN WILKINSON** *stands behind a collection of microphones. She is small but powerful and driven.)*

ELLEN. Conference, our people have been through dark times. We have been through dark times. Our people have been challenged to their core. They have felt dread. They have experienced terrible loss. But listen. Do you hear that? No air raid sirens. Just a fun fair on the promenade! A child laughing! This has been a war that has hit at the heart of our country and of our people.

ELLEN. We are gathered here in Blackpool to remember, to pay gratitude, but most, to look forward.

(The knocking grows.)

JOAN. Miss? Miss? Can you hear us?

ELLEN. Today, conference, we face a choice. Through the war, Labour put to one side our vision of the kind of society we dream of and got on with the urgent business of saving our entire way of life from evil. We have been in a coalition government with Mr Churchill and have served shoulder to shoulder with men who otherwise would be our bitter enemies. But now, conference, the question we face is: do we go on playing second fiddle? Or do we fight for a Labour future…?

(Knocking. **JOAN***'s voice is now desperate.)*

JOAN. Open the door, please, please!

ELLEN. We know an election will be a vicious fight. But can we ignore what we have learned? Remember how the Conservatives promised half a million new homes after the Great War? They didn't build seven hundred! They promised jobs! A year after the Armistice? Over two million men were unemployed, and hundreds of thousands of our people were short of food.

(She's now flying.)

Can we go through that again? No! No! No! There will be those here who will say now is not the time. The Tories will call us Communists. Revolutionaries! Their newspapers will attack us. But I say conference: VOTE. Vote for today's motion to smash our coalition with Conservative Mr Churchill, end the National Government and turn to face the country in a General Election as a Labour Party. We have a chance to take power. That chance may not come again in our lifetime.

Win this election, and we have a real hope of building in Britain, on these beloved islands, the civilisation we so passionately desire, and our people so deserve.

(Applause and the thumping on the door continue until...)

Scene Two

(The Admiral's Bar at the Blackpool Grand.)

*(Labour Party Conference, May 1945. Dance music off.** **CLEMENT ATTLEE** *sits in front of a* **YOUNG PHOTOGRAPHER**. **CLEM** *is stiff and diffident. His wife* **VIOLET** *is upper-middle-class and dynamic. The* **PHOTOGRAPHER***'s camera flashes.)*

VIOLET. Oh, Clem, not the pipe.

CLEM. No one will recognise me without my pipe.

VIOLET. Chin up, then.

(Private.) You look exhausted.

(He is.)

Well at least do sit up straight.

(The **PHOTOGRAPHER** *adjusts something. He is nervous facing such a famous man.)*

CLEM. You from round here, lad?

PHOTOGRAPHER. *(Lancastrian.)* Sir.

CLEM. I imagine you would rather be photographing donkey rides on the beach.

PHOTOGRAPHER. Oh no, Mr Attlee.

VIOLET. Well, do say cheese, Clem.

(Flash! **ERNIE BEVIN** *arrives carrying chips. He's a powerful man dressed in an enormous overcoat.)*

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ERNIE. The Labour Party is a pitiful collection of holier-than-thou, bloody fools. No, they are worse than that. We are going to need to keep our strength up: chip, Clem? Violet?

VIOLET. Oh. No, no. Thank you, though, Mr Bevin.

ERNIE. Lad?

(The **PHOTOGRAPHER** *is awestruck by* **ERNIE**.*)*

Either shut your mouth or put a chip in it.

(The **PHOTOGRAPHER** *takes a chip.)*

Do you like fireworks? There's going to be a display on the Pier any second now. You don't want to miss them, do you, lad?

(Getting the prompt, the **PHOTOGRAPHER** *picks up his things.)*

PHOTOGRAPHER. Yes, sir.

CLEM. *(To the* **PHOTOGRAPHER**.*)* Best of everything.

PHOTOGRAPHER. And good luck, Mr Attlee.

(He goes.)

CLEM. Super chap.

ERNIE. *(Coming in hard.)* This is insanity, Clem. We cannot let them dissolve the National Government.

CLEM. But conference voted…

ERNIE. (Loud.) The fighting in Germany is only just finished. It is all over-excited nonsense, you know that.

VIOLET. Please, Ernie, the poor man is exhausted. You are Clem!

ERNIE. I'm sorry but if we go to the country now we will lose. You…we…need to put a stop to this before…

(He stops as **ELLEN** *and* **HERBERT MORRISON** *appear. She has a pronounced limp. They are both breathing hard from dancing.)*

HERBERT. *(Suave.)* Violet, why have you hidden Clem away in here!?

*(***VIOLET** *is about to speak when…)*

ELLEN. Wow, Mr Morrison. That was quite a spin he took me on.

ERNIE. Dancing is suicidal at our age.

HERBERT. What a perfect conference! It was a real rally. It pulled the party together.

CLEM. Our chairwoman was most rousing!

ERNIE. Miss Wilkinson, has roused a party of lemmings.

ELLEN. Oh, Ernie, smile. Try it every once in a while.

(But she starts to gasp for air.)

ERNIE. Why would I smile? You have cajoled us into taking on Britain's most beloved leader, since Queen Elizabeth saw off the Armada. Insanity…

*(***ELLEN** *can't breathe.)*

Ellen?

ELLEN. M-y ch-est is m-y Achilles.

*(***ELLEN** *tries to look like this is nothing serious, but she is gasping…)*

VIOLET. Let me get you some water.

ELLEN. It's n-o-thing!

HERBERT. Miss Wilkinson, a chair, let me…

ELLEN. I'm f-f-ine – for p-p-ity's sake!

*(**ELLEN** is now breathing easier.)*

ERNIE. I blame you, Herbert – jitterbuggering away like that…

ELLEN. I led Mr Morrison, Ernie! Herbert dances like my father did. Summat from the bar and I'll be 100 percent.

*(Grinning, **ELLEN** lights a cigarette.)*

CLEM. Ellen, what can I set you up with?

*(He stands – but is stopped by **ERNIE** going.)*

ERNIE. The war with the Japanese is not over! What's the damn rush?

ELLEN. None of us are going to live forever, and this is our best chance…

ERNIE. We cannot defeat Winston. Certainly not with nearly half million lads still fighting in the Pacific. It is insanity. Insanity. I am sorry Ellen, but it bloody well is.

MORRISON. *(Calm.)* With proper organisation and leadership throughout the party I – and I know many Comrades – agree with Miss Wilkinson: this is our moment. Ernie, we can organise the service vote! Easily. Clem could we drag you away just for a moment…

VIOLET. *(Changing the subject.)* Do you know, Mr Attlee and my ancient bones are so enjoying a constitution every morning. The sea air, the promenade. And to watch the young, at last, relaxing! Really marvellous.

ELLEN. *(Keeping it light.)* I'm never convinced by seagulls, Mrs Attlee.

(Turning.) Clem if you wouldn't mind...

VIOLET. But why did you both have to go all the way to San Francisco! I simply cannot understand why the United Nations couldn't have met in Bognor Regis, for, example. Perfectly nice hotels. Clean carpets.

ERNIE. *(Laughing.)* If the rooms in Blackpool guest houses and hotels could talk!

HERBERT. And what exactly is that supposed to mean?

ERNIE. Touched a nerve, Morrison?

(There is absolutely no love lost between **ERNIE** *and* **HERBERT**.*)*

HERBERT. Clem – if we could just discuss this, Ellen and I…

ERNIE. Give me strength.

(He takes out a hip flask and drinks.)

ELLEN. San Francisco was wonderful wasn't it Clem? The talk. And the people.

CLEM. *(Enthused.)* It was quite something! The world is changing. Really!

VIOLET. *(Interrupting.)* AAnd then the moment you both staggered off those frightful aeroplanes, Mr Attlee was off again – you were, my dear. It's no good looking at your shoes like that –

*(***CLEM** *is looking at his shoes.)*

to Berlin with Winston. And the girls are home pining for their father. Clem is exhausted. Enough.

CLEM. *(Smiling.)* A couple of hours deadheading will put everything to rights.

ELLEN. *(Firm.)* Clem, Herbert and I really would like a…

CLEM. Your drink! Oh gosh, Ellen, how terribly rude of me.

*(***CLEM** *turns to go to the bar.* **HERBERT** *and* **ELLEN** *start to follow, but* **ERNIE** *is suddenly blocking her way.* **VIOLET** *moves to* **ELLEN***'s other flank.)*

ERNIE. Lass.

VIOLET. A little birdy tells me you've moved into a flat in Dolphin Square. Is it really full of spies and mistresses? How thrilling.

ELLEN. Maiden aunts and rather handsome officers from the Household Cavalry, more like. Will you excuse me – I'd like to join Mr Attlee and Herbert…

ERNIE. *(About* **HERBERT** *and* **CLEM**.*)* Skulduggery, Miss Wilkinson??

ELLEN. Just dull procedural business! Herbert wants Clem…

VIOLET. *(Lethal.)* Youngest of ten, I developed a nose for liars before I could speak Ellen.

(A firework goes off outside.)

ERNIE. *(Calling.)* We should show our faces, Clem!

ELLEN. I'll wait for Mr Morrison.

ERNIE. Everyone will think it's the Blitz having a final parade. Ellen, your appearance will calm the foot soldiers. Come.

VIOLET. I loathe fireworks: vile noise, squeals of delight. All rather pointless. Come on.

(Reluctantly, **ELLEN** *follows* **VIOLET** *and* **ERNIE**. *Fireworks.)*

HERBERT. Clem, you know where I stand in the Party, don't you?

CLEM. The centre. And, I must tell you, Winston thinks you have been an outstanding Home Secretary.

HERBERT. London is mine…

CLEM. And, as you say, London is yours.

HERBERT. Churchill will make mincemeat of us and ride straight back into Number 10…

*(***CLEM** *has the drinks.)*

CLEM. Oh. They've gone.

(Earnest, to **HERBERT**.*)* I'm not sure I don't agree with Ernie that breaking with the National government is folly. Will the people forgive us? Your political instincts are terribly sharp.

HERBERT. *(This is the moment.)* Clem, you won't win, not against Winston. You can't win.

CLEM. But Conference has voted…

HERBERT. Yes! For us to break with Winston. But to win, we need change. I want the leadership.

CLEM. Oh, I know what you want, Herbert, but there isn't a vacancy, don't you see?

(Fireworks outside.)

Scene Three

(A Blackpool hotel room.)

(The thump-thump-thump and fireworks evolve – the sounds could now be footsteps. Indistinguishable voices off – the mental chatter of insomnia, a bed, and a bedside light. **ELLEN** *is in bed.)*

ELLEN. *(Loud.)* Will you go ta'yer bed? Can we get some rest? Can we get some sleep?

(Desperate, she pulls the pillow over her head. There is a tap on the door.)

For pity's sake, it's nearly five AM!

*(***ELLEN** *reaches for her kimono. There is more noise around the room. The tap, again.* **ELLEN** *opens the door.* **HERBERT** *is holding his shoes. He smiles.)*

Not sure what you're grinning about Herbert.

(Noise from the next room.)

HERBERT. Gawd – he's up early... Ellen, I can't stay in the corridor! Really, someone might see...

ELLEN. Then go back to your room.

HERBERT. Ellen, don't be angry. Not tonight. It was the wrong moment, that's all.

*(***HERBERT** *slips into the room.)*

I feel so alive.

ELLEN. And I just want some sleep.

(More noise from next room.)

ELLEN. He's been pacing all night. My head feels like it's going to explode. You should go.

*(***HERBERT** *feels the silk of* **ELLEN***'s kimono.)*

HERBERT. This is nice.

ELLEN. You ought to be with your wife, Herbert.

HERBERT. She caught the train to London the moment Attlee finished his speech. Duty done.

(He tries to kiss her.)

ELLEN. Damn near cleaned me out of dollars. In my next life I'm going to make a fortune importing lingerie for the socialist woman. You are married.

HERBERT. It is the coldest place you can imagine. Her contempt for me.

ELLEN. Margaret doesn't have contempt for you.

HERBERT. You've never been in a marriage that is dying, Ellen.

ELLEN. I've never been in a marriage at all, which may be the secret.

*(***HERBERT** *presses against* **ELLEN**.*)*

If you are going to lead the party, we have to be careful. Very.

HERBERT. The war is bloody nearly over. Everything is different! Ellen, come on…

ELLEN. Listen to me: you do have a lot of support right through the Party…

HERBERT. Clem said I had great political instincts.

ELLEN. I wouldn't bet more than five bob, but we might just win this election.

HERBERT. With the right leader, a slender majority is possible, I suppose, Ellen. At a push.

ELLEN. With Clem gone, you could be Prime Minister, I suppose, Mr Morrison. At a push.

HERBERT. *(Not seeing she's playing him.)* I know. You are right. It is my time. But what about you? What will you want, Ellen?

ELLEN. What I've always wanted: a socialist government that creates a radically different country.

HERBERT. I rather meant what ministry? In Whitehall? With a driver...

*(***HERBERT** *presses against her.)*

ELLEN. Bloody heck, Herbert, no. Get some sleep.

HERBERT. I'm not at all tired.

(There's more noise – thump-thump-thump – from next door.)

ELLEN. *(Laughing.)* It's Winston – the crafty old bugger – come to spy on Conference. Can you smell that? His cigar smoke?

*(***HERBERT** *sniffs.)*

I'm joking – it's some insomniac door-to-door salesman. Been up all night. I've not slept.

HERBERT. Everyone is so drunk downstairs the King and Queen could walk through the bar and no one would notice us. It's nearly dawn. Come on, Ellen, just once: together. Let's watch the sun come up. Let's stand on the beach – hand in hand – and breathe in tomorrow.

ELLEN. *(Laughing.)* Are you getting romantic in yer old age? What a terrifying bloody thought.

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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AT THE POINT OF NEED

AT THE POINT OF NEED was first performed at the Old Vic Theatre in 2018 as part of The Greatest Wealth – In Celebration of the NHS. The performance starred David Threlfall and was directed by Adrian Lester.

(He is white, working class, middle-aged, not in great shape. He has an engaging laugh. He stands alone onstage. He wears a black suit, white shirt, dark tie. This is the suit he will be buried in.)

HIM. It's warm. Thump. Whoosh. Thump. Suddenly everything is urgent. Pressure, colour, light. Green cloth. And now I am gulping. Gasping. Now, hot flesh. What I'll learn is a smile.

White enamelled tin, hard, towel, a blanket. Him holding me. Smell of tobacco.

Home. The little fire. They don't have much. For me they have everything and more!

Wow that hurts! Brushed steel, a tiny cloud of cotton wool, the stinging… but we lads are brave.

Crates of milk, peeling the tops back, drinking, loving, but wretchin' also.

Teacher has hair on her chin. Luke's arms aren't there: just fingers wriggling like worms. We stare at him. Sometimes someone makes a joke. But mostly we just look away.

"Nineteen sixty!" he says, "Who'd 'ave effing thought it." And I am sent to bed and there's laughing downstairs.

Father has it behind his back. She says – "Six years old, little man." Her eyes are hot, and proud. I run and take the shiny bike.

He holds the seat and starting with a walk, now running, making sure I stay straight. "Stay straight!"

Waiting for the doc', I ask her about the boy with the rusty red hair. Moulded to his front is a yellow tin with a slot and on his legs are moulded callipers. I am staring at the plastic statue. "What's a calliper?" I ask to stop thinking about how very very terrible my pain is, and the blood running down my leg. "You won't need to worry, children don't get polio any more."

She smiles. I love Mum.

Father has some squash. Wants a word… How would I like a brother or a sister?

He is right. Everything changes. Mum is tired.

She is kneeling in the khazi, her back retching. She pushes the door shut.

He says "leave-well-alone" and winks. She's gone and Nan comes and Father and me – we-do-what-we-are told!

The hospital. Rows of beds, women, people, kids like me, visiting. Nurses, flowers. Faces smiling.

The baby is noisy – things do change! I am breaking some flower pots in the garden. "You want to leave my pots alone, sunny Jim." I didn't know Dad was watching and feel bad.

We four go to the sea-side. Sister and I sleep in bunks and Father and Mother share up front in the caravan. The sun burns the glass and the metal around it in the morning.

With some boys I play war. We have a tin helmet. The real McCoy. I get hit by a brick – a stick grenade – and the next thing I know is my eye is swollen. Father tells the nurse "It's real shiner." But as a precaution, I stay in for the night. It's dark – just light down the ward and I am bein' sick. It's all over the sheet.

"What's wrong soldier?" A different nurse comes out of the dark. I'm embarrassed. I am ten and should be able…but my head hurts and I am frightened and ask if I have polio like the boy with the calliper. She puts the hard glass of the thermometer under my tongue.

Measles. Isolation.

Their uniforms are crisp, they smile at me and I love the toast they have. Once a girl stops and stares through the doorway. I wave.

Father comes when others visit and brings a Commando comic. As he is going, he smiles: "You're good with people, son. Make friends, easily. That's something to treasure."

Nan is a bit wobbly on her feet and I go when I can after football. The top of her hands are blue and her nails silvery. I show her *Melody Maker*, she chats about the telly, the strikes, the Irish.

One afternoon she is sitting on the floor in her kitchen. I say: "Shall we go to the doctor, nan?"

They send an ambulance. I try and help pick her up but they say "We are Professionals." The tall one said I did the right thing to call and shakes my fucking hand!

My face looks like Vesuvius. But my hair is OK. Dad teases: "Feels like I am living with four women! All this flippin' shampoo." I like music – ELP, stuff like that. Jethro Tull. I don't care if that makes me a weirdo.

I go to see Nan in hospital. I reckon she is dead, then she winks at me and I nearly piss myself. Happy.

At her funeral, Mother is crying and shuddering. All I can think is there's been a mistake – my mind isn't really focussed.

It's raining cats and dogs. Mum and Dad sit up front. I am squeezed in the back amongst all my stuff.

"You are the first" Dad is saying, and I notice him turn away sort of shy. "He'll make friends, he's good with people." Mum is crying. He puts his hand on her as they go back to the car, and I feel alone.

Freshers week. I keep myself to myself. Man of mystery. But I'm good with people, make friends, girl-friends. One or three…

(He laughs.)

Fuck me this is *not* good. So. I am at the Casualty in town knowing I have fucked my life up. Geddit?

(He laughs.)

After five hours and a few smokes and a Marathon Bar a nurse takes me to a cubicle. I love the NHS. She's seen a nervous student before, I'd reckon. "Why are you here, love?" And I tell her about the fucking agonising pain when I piss. "Mind if we have a look"

(Horrified.) A look! Oh fuck never really thought this through. A look! "I can't understand what you are saying Mum!?"

Sally: "Father collapsed in the garden near the shed" … near where I broke the pots. "I'll come home" I say and I know DAD will be there, waiting for me: laughing at my hair, and knowin' – the way he catches my eye – that he understands who it is to be me.

But I am falling out of a plane. Don't know when I will hit the ground.

I can't breathe my ears are ringing. "They are fucking amazing…" I shout "What?" She smiles and turns away from me. So, we are smoking outside – it's too hot in there. The band is turned up to eleven.

Di'.

They say nothing is perfect but we are pressed into each other on my bed. This *is* perfect.

One photos shows it all. Her, me, Mum, the sisters, Barry and a few others. Smiling. Di' and me. Grinning.

"Push now, dear."

Di' is cursing: fuck you, fuck this, shit and fuck but the Professionals have done it all before. That here 'it' comes. And here it is. And all the joy and relief and confusion wrapped in a white towel. NHS embroidered on one side.

We call her Sophie. Di' has brought class to my clan. Sophie, then Annie.

I'm a father and a man who supports a football team, a man who works nine to five selling cars, a man who has a mortgage, a man who worries more than he shows. A man who loves his girls.

Things *change*, don't they, between men and women?

The goon at the Travelodge reception teases us: we shouldn't be there at the three in the afternoon.

I am more nervous than I can remember. I'm praying she won't come out of the loo but the door lock clicks. She lies beside me. Her belly is scarred, she says, as I pull at the lace she is wearing and we both blush.

This is *my* life. This is *her* life. Mrs Browning, from accounts. It has been coming, it has been brewing. The soft light of the Travelodge makes her skin soft and grey, me hairy, my skin pink, bruised looking.

Di' doesn't know, or notice, a thing. Does she care? Her mind is on other things. Work, the girls. She's taken up dancing.

But she is telling me something.

"I'm not sure I'm very well. I went to see Dr Verma, at the practice." One of the girls is upstairs and so I say "Keep your voice down."

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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