

The English Theatre of Hamburg

Established 1976

presents

I'LL BE BACK BEFORE MIDNIGHT!

A Thriller by Peter Colley

Premiere on 7 September, 2017

Preview Performances on 4, 5, and 6 September

Performances Tuesday to Saturday at 19.30 Hours;
Matinee Performances at 11.30 Hours on Tuesdays
and Fridays Beginning 12 September

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I'LL BE BACK BEFORE MIDNIGHT!

Dear English Teachers and Friends,

The English Theatre of Hamburg will premiere **I'LL BE BACK BEFORE MIDNIGHT!** by Peter Colley on 7 September, 2017, with the usual preview performances at reduced prices on 4, 5, and 6 September. Bookings for this popular thriller have already started. See the cover of this study guide for dates and times of performances. The text of the play may be obtained at theatre@samuelfrench-london.co.uk or www.amazon.com Teachers interested in being invited to a dress rehearsal of the play should write to marketing@englishtheatre.de .

THE ENGLISH THEATRE OF HAMBURG

About the Playwright

Peter Colley is an award-winning British/Canadian writer based in Los Angeles. His stage plays have been produced in 30 countries, 48 of the 50 states in the USA and every province in Canada. He was nominated for the 2000 Humanitas Prize for screenwriting and his award winning musical, **CAGNEY**, just completed a sell-out run in New York in January, 2017. From his start as one of the youngest playwrights ever produced at Canada's National Arts Centre, he has gone on to win one international, eight national and six regional awards for writing. In addition to **I'LL BE BACK BEFORE MIDNIGHT!** Mr. Colley's most popular plays include **YOU'LL GET USED TO IT—THE WAR SHOW** (a musical about Canada's involvement in World War II), the historical drama **THE DONNELLYS**, the thriller **THE MARK OF CAIN**, the comedy **WHEN THE REAPER CALLS, STOLEN LIVES—THE ALBERT WALKER STORY**, **MAN OF THE DESERT** and **MURDER IN NOIRVILLE**. Screenplays by Mr. Colley include **I'LL BE BACK BEFORE MIDNIGHT!** and **SHOWTIME**. He has written extensively for American, Canadian and British Television. Among his TV work: the TV series **WATERSHIP DOWN** for British (ITV) and Canadian television, **THE MYTHIC WARRIORS** (CBS) and **THE ZACK FILES** (Fox Family Channel).

About the Play

In a retrospective on Canadian theatre in the Toronto Globe & Mail, **I'LL BE BACK BEFORE MIDNIGHT!** was called "probably the most produced Canadian play ever." It has had countless productions in Canada, the USA and Europe, placing the author among the top playwrights working in the mystery thriller genre today. The play is an exciting mixture of suspense and shocks, with just the right amount of comedy added. The author, Peter Colley, writes this about himself: "I have a certain sense of humour, a kind of tongue-in-cheek approach, if you like, that finds its way into my work. Comedy is very important. You have to walk a tightrope between suspense and comedy." The story concerns a young woman, Jan, who is brought to a lonely farmhouse by her husband Greg to recover from a nervous breakdown. But frightening things start to happen almost as soon as they arrive. Then Greg's sister, Laura, with whom he seems to have an unnaturally close relationship, appears unexpectedly. There is also George, the rather strange old farmer who lives nearby, with his tales of murders and ghosts in the neighbourhood. And then there are the flickering lights, the mysterious heartbeats, the hand at the window, the blood on the floor, the corpse in the hallway . . . a nightmare, with twist after twist.

Summary of Peter Colley's
I'LL BE BACK BEFORE MIDNIGHT!

Setting: The living room of an old English farmhouse.

Time: The Present. Early spring.

Act I, Scene 1

It is evening. Jan has just been released from the hospital where she was treated for a nervous breakdown. Her husband, Greg, has brought her to an old house in the country to recover. He is working on his Ph.D., researching how men used to make Stone Age tools out of rocks. Greg has been living alone in the house for a while and has put samples of prehistoric tools and weapons, which he found in a quarry nearby, on the living room walls. Jan finds the house primitive and uncomfortable.

When Greg uses petrol to make a fire in the wood stove, there is an explosion which startles Jan. He puts some music on to relieve his wife's tension but the music has a quality that only increases Jan's nervousness. As she listens to the music she discovers that she is alone and calls out to her husband. She backs up against the kitchen hatch which suddenly flies open with a loud bang. She screams. It is only Greg who has gone to the kitchen.

When Jan has recovered from the shock, Greg tells her he rented the house from George Willowby, a farmer who lives nearby. He also informs her that his sister, Laura, will be arriving by bus any minute. Jan is upset by this news because she knows that Laura is very attached to Greg and suspects that Laura is jealous of her. Greg explains that Laura will be going to America soon and this may be the last chance he has to see her for years.

George Willowby drops in. He tells them he bought the house originally for his son, Robert, who left because he was not keen on farming. Since then George has rented it out, but the people who stay there often leave suddenly. He explains why. Fifty years ago a young woman about Jan's age was murdered by a hermit who lived up in the quarry. The murder occurred one evening just before midnight. Ever since then, a red stain shows up on the floor whenever there is a murder in the area. A lot of people claim to have seen the ghost of the old hermit who always appears holding a bloodstained knife with the sound of heartbeats in the background.

When Greg's sister Laura arrives, George assures her, in his crude country way, that she will soon be as happy there as a "pig in shit." Jan has made coffee for everyone. Greg tells her it tastes awful. Laura offers to make fresh coffee but Jan objects to her attempt to take over. Greg insists that Jan should let Laura help her by making a new pot of coffee. Jan reluctantly agrees. Laura says she wants to be friends with Jan. She wants the three of them to be "just one big happy family." Jan replies, "Shall I play the wife? Or shall you?"

Act I, Scene 2

Greg comes downstairs early the next morning dressed for jogging. Jan grabs his running shoes and says she will not let him leave until she has fed him a proper breakfast. He struggles playfully with her over the shoes, lifting her up in his arms. Laura enters and Greg puts Jan down quickly. After Jan goes into the kitchen, Laura begs Greg to stay and talk with her. He refuses, telling his sister she should try to get involved with other men. Laura points out that finding another relationship is not easy after all she and Greg have been through together. When Jan enters, Laura and Greg move apart and he leaves quickly.

Jan tells Laura that Greg used to be so happy but that he changed dramatically after his mother's funeral last autumn. When Jan mentions the happy way Greg picked her up in his arms just a few moments before, Laura claims that she did not see Greg do that. Jan insists that Laura must have seen it because she was there in the room with them. Laura suggests that Jan is imagining things and goes upstairs to dress. Hurt and confused, Jan gets her digital voice recorder and records a message for her doctor, reporting what has just happened. Her message is interrupted by the ringing of the telephone. When she picks up the receiver she hears only heavy breathing and hangs up. Laura returns and, when told about the phone call, says again that Jan is imagining things. When the phone rings a second time, Laura answers it. It is Greg, out of breath from jogging. He has fallen into a ditch and asks Laura to come and pick him up. Frightened at being left alone, Jan pleads with Laura to take her along, but Laura refuses. She tells Jan to pull herself together and adds, sarcastically, that she will be back before midnight.

Jan decides to lie on the couch and pretend that she is heavily drugged so that she can listen to what Greg and Laura talk about when they return. When Laura

and Greg arrive, he sees Jan on the couch and is convinced that she is out cold. He tells Laura that he thinks it was a mistake to switch Jan's pills, but she assures him that no one will find out. Laura tells Greg that Jan is weak, that he needs someone strong like her to give him support and comfort. She is upset that he does not kiss her anymore. This angers Greg who points out that Jan is his wife. Laura becomes furious and runs upstairs. Greg chases after her. Alone now, Jan, who has heard everything, sits up, opens her eyes and slowly looks around.

Act I, Scene 3

Jan has a nightmare in the middle of the night and wakes up screaming. She comes downstairs to make some hot chocolate. Greg follows her. He urges Jan to take one of her pills, but she prefers to stay awake after the horrible dream. She tells Greg that his sister's presence is making her nervous condition worse and threatens to check herself back into the hospital if he does not get rid of Laura in the morning. Jan suspects that Greg brought Laura there because he does not want to be alone with her, but Greg insists that if that were the case he would get a divorce. Jan is not so sure he would. She points out that their marriage is very useful to him because her father finances Greg's studies. When Greg's thesis is finished, Jan suspects she will no longer be needed. After protesting that this is not true, Greg returns to bed.

Jan now records another message for her doctor, reporting that Laura has some strange hold over Greg and that the two of them are working against her. Prepared to stay up until dawn, Jan gets a magazine. As she reads she hears the distant sound of a heartbeat. It fades and then comes back louder. Then she hears a scratching noise at the window. The heartbeat gets louder and louder and horrific chords of music fill the room. As she backs away in horror toward the stairs, the windows fly open and the lights go out. After calling out for Greg she finds a torch and shines it around the room. Suddenly, right in the beam of her torch, a figure leaps up from behind the sofa with a long knife in his hand. Laughing maniacally he lunges at Jan with the knife. The torch goes out. Jan screams and faints, and the music and heartbeat stop. Greg and Laura enter the room.

Greg checks the fuses and gets the lights back on. Recovered now, Jan describes the figure with the knife, but she can tell from their faces that Greg and Laura do not believe her. Laura gets Jan's a couple of

pills, and Jan reluctantly puts them in her mouth. George comes in to see what all the screaming was about and suggests that one of the local kids may have been after their stereo. Jan knows it was someone else, however, because the figure was deformed and hideous looking. Before going, George advises them to use the shotgun on the wall if they have any more trouble.

Jan gets the shotgun and sits down, determined to stay awake. When Greg and Laura go back upstairs, she spits out the pills that Laura gave her. She moves around the room with the shotgun in her hands, convincing herself that no one else is there. Just as she is about to relax, she again hears the sound of a heartbeat. The scratching noise at the window begins again and Jan jumps up in terror. The noises get louder and she cocks the gun. Suddenly the lights go out, the music stops and the windows fly open as before. When Jan hears someone bump into a piece of furniture in the dark, she warns them not to come any closer. The next sound is the shotgun going off. Greg runs down the stairs to see what has happened. He goes to the fuse box and gets the lights back on. He sees a body lying on the floor. It is Laura. He kneels, touches the body and rises with blood on his hands. "She's dead," he says angrily to Jan. Greg now moves towards Jan but she points the shotgun at him. They freeze.

Act II, Scene 1

Still pointing the shotgun at Greg, Jan warns him to keep away from her. She claims that Laura was coming after her with a knife, but Greg cannot find one. She informs Greg that she was only pretending earlier to be out cold on the sofa, that she heard everything he and Laura said. Jan suspects that Laura and Greg have had an incestuous relationship, but Greg denies this. He also denies that they put poison in Jan's pills. He says that Laura, against his will, exchanged Jan's pills for stronger ones because she thought they would do Jan more good. Jan does not believe his story and demands to know the truth. He admits he did not tell her about his intimate relationship with Laura because he was afraid Jan would walk out on him. After they were married, he broke off with his sister and did not see her again until their mother's funeral. When Laura said that she wanted to reconcile things with Jan before going to America, he believed Laura was sincere. Greg swears he loves Jan. Convinced he is finally speaking the truth, Jan lowers the gun and says that he had better call the police. But Greg believes that would be the

end for them because the authorities would surely put her in prison or in a mental institution for murdering Laura. Greg reminds Jan that there is no knife and that, in front of a witness (George), she said that she had seen a man, not a woman, with a knife. The fact that Jan has been hospitalised for a nervous breakdown would also work against her.

Act II, Scene 2

A week later. Early evening. Greg has buried Laura's body in the garden. Jan discovers a red stain on the floor and remembers that George said this would appear after a murder in the area. Greg tells Jan to stop being stupid and clean up whatever it was she spilled on the floor. George pops in and praises their vegetable garden. He wants to know if they use any special fertilizer. Jan gets George off the subject of the garden by offering him a whisky. After Greg has excused himself to go jogging, George tells Jan he is going away for a couple of days to visit his sick brother in Millston. He adds that he let himself into the house when Greg and Jan were out to fix some of the faulty electrical wiring, and that his son, Robert, will take another look at it when he comes home. George pulls an object out of the chair he is sitting in and examines it. It is a shotgun pellet. He asks if the shotgun on the wall has been used. Jan tells him it has not and changes the subject.

After George has left, Jan is overcome by a feeling of loneliness. Suddenly she hears the sound of a heartbeat again. She hears the front door opening and then hears something heavy being dragged along the floor in the hallway. She rushes to the double doors between the hallway and the living room and locks herself in. Then she hears a sound from the window. She starts to get the shotgun but is stopped by a distorted voice calling to her from the window. It sounds like Laura. The heartbeat sound returns and again there is a scratching sound at the window. Terrified, Jan grabs her pill bottle and stuffs a large number of pills into her mouth which she washes down with whisky. Laura's voice cries out from the window: "Open the window, Jan . . . or I'll be back . . . before midnight . . . I'll come back . . . just for you. Open it!" Horrified, Jan rips open the curtains and the heartbeat stops. No one is there. Turning away from the window, she begins to laugh nervously. Then a half-decomposed hand darts out from behind the curtains and grabs her around the neck. Jan screams, breaks free and dashes for the double doors. She throws them open and runs right into the half-decomposed body of Laura hanging from a rope in

the hallway. Jan backs away in horror and faints, falling to the floor.

Act II, Scene 3

It is now just before midnight. There is a crash of thunder and the sound of rain. The phone rings. Jan slowly wakes up, rises from the floor and answers it. The caller hangs up. She opens the window and calls out Greg's name. There is no answer so she locks the window and closes the curtains. She goes to her voice recorder and dictates another message for her doctor. To calm herself, she puts on music and turns on every light in the room. There is another flash of lightning and a crash of thunder. All the lights go out and the music stops. Jan gets a torch and decides to phone George at his brother's home in Millston to ask for help. George had told her he would be visiting his sick brother for a few days. To Jan's surprise, the brother tells her he is not sick and that George is not there. She then remembers that George had said his son, Robert, would check the electricity when he came home. But the brother informs her that this is impossible because Robert was murdered years ago. Frightened to death now, Jan drops the phone and runs to get the shotgun on the wall.

Before she can reach the gun, someone breaks open the window with a shovel. It is Greg who says someone slugged him. He wants to know why Jan dug up Laura's body. Jan denies having done this and concludes that George must be responsible for everything. After she tells Greg that George's son, Robert, is not alive but was murdered, Greg agrees that Jan's suspicions about George must be right. They decide to leave the house by way of the window since George might be waiting for them out front.

When they throw open the curtains they see the hideous old man that Jan saw previously. He is standing over them with a sickle raised to strike. Greg hits him with the shovel, but the old man knocks Greg out. He then takes off a mask revealing himself as George. George tells Jan he is going to kill them both and make it look like a murder—suicide. Greg suddenly leaps out of the shadows, hits George from behind, grabs the shotgun from the wall and shoots George. When Greg picks up the phone, however, to call the police, George rises from the floor and laughs. He tells them he put blanks in the gun. The men fight again. When George is beaten, Jan, who is trembling, asks Greg to hold her.

Greg takes Jan in his arms, but his hands slowly tighten around her neck. Jan breaks away from him. When he picks up the sickle and moves towards her with it raised to strike, something inside her snaps and her screams turn to whimpers. Realising now Greg's true intentions, she stares into space, unable to move.

After observing Jan for a few moments, Greg says, "She's gone. Get the lights." George rises from the floor and answers, "You get the lights. I'll get the whisky." George remarks proudly that everything went just as they had planned.

Greg: Yes, although I didn't think we'd have to go this far. I thought she'd freak out when she saw the body, especially hearing Laura's voice. My God we spent hours recording those sounds! She just wouldn't break, not until she knew I was part of it.

George still does not understand why Greg wanted to drive Jan insane. Greg explains: "These bitches never left me alone." He hated them all—his mother, Laura, and then Jan—they were all the same. He admits he married Jan because of her father's money and not for romantic reasons. He had hoped the women would destroy each other. While he was searching for rocks in the quarry, he discovered Robert's murdered body. He was convinced that George was the murderer and

realized that he could blackmail George into helping him get rid of both Jan and Laura. George reminds Greg that he promised to give him twenty thousand pounds for his services, but Greg just laughs and informs George that he does not have a penny.

George is furious at being tricked by Greg. He lunges at Greg with the sickle but then suddenly goes weak at the knees and slumps to the floor. Greg laughs hysterically and tells George he put antimony, a poison that leaves no trace, in his whisky. Greg will tell the police that George, while trying to scare Jan as the old hermit, had a stroke and died. When they discover Laura's body buried next to Robert's in the quarry, they will think that George killed them both.

After George dies, Greg puts on the hermit mask and coat, intending to carry Laura's body to the quarry and bury it. He becomes hysterical and makes ghostlike noises. Jan suddenly leaps out of the shadows with a Stone Age axe that she has taken off the wall and drives it into Greg's back. He falls to the floor, dead. Jan looks at him, not quite knowing what to do. Then she goes to her voice recorder. It has been on the whole time. She listens to the recording and hears Greg discussing his plan of murder with George. With this recording, she knows the authorities will believe her story. She stops the recording and phones the police.

Objective Questions

1. Why was Jan in the hospital?
2. Who owns the farm house Greg has rented?
3. Why is Jan upset that Laura is visiting them?
4. What happened in the house fifty years ago?
5. Why doesn't Jan want to take her pills?
6. What are some things Jan sees and hears in the house when she is alone?
7. Who does Jan shoot at the end of Act I?
8. Why doesn't Greg want Jan to phone the police?
9. What does Jan see hanging in the hallway?
10. Who was the old hermit, the figure Jan saw in the darkness?
11. Why is George furious at Greg?
12. What is the twist, or surprise, near the end of the play that shocks Jan into silence?

Interpretative Exercise

1. Describe each character's motivation (what he or she wants) in the play. Explain what they do to get what they want and how this creates conflict.
2. Critics have noted that **I'LL BE BACK BEFORE MIDNIGHT!** has all the classic elements of a good thriller in the story, the characters, the setting and the technical effects. Describe these elements as they are presented in the play. Have you seen them before in the theatre, on television or in films?