

## Brontë (By Polly Teale)

<b>Date</b>	Saturday 16 <sup>th</sup> November 2019
<b>Company</b>	Tavonians Theatre Company
<b>Venue</b>	Sterts Studio, Upton Cross (touring)
<b>Type of Production</b>	Play
<b>Director</b>	Stuart Waterworth (assisted by Ali Fife Cook)
<b>Musical Director</b>	n/a
<b>Choreographer</b>	n/a

### Report

Polly Teale's 'Brontë' is not a play I had seen before although I was, of course, aware of much of the context. In order to enhance the intimate atmosphere of the play, director Stuart Waterworth had chosen to present it in a studio format, necessitating a good deal of very detailed attention to the acting as the audience were so close. A lot of work for actors and director – but well worth it, because the audience did feel emotionally connected with the lives of the characters.

'Brontë' is a difficult play to stage, shifting as it does between timeframes and requiring each actor to portray more than one character, some real, some fictional. This production was beset by problems and casting crises, but the performance absorbed me from the start, as we meet

modern-day visitors to Haworth who transform into the famous literary family and we are plunged into the middle of their 19<sup>th</sup> century lives.

Branwell, the sole male sibling, on whom rests the hopes and expectations of his father and sisters for the reputation of the family, was perfectly played by Tim Sutton, who portrayed Branwell's weaknesses, vulnerability and anger; we could sympathize with the pressure he was under and yet condemn his behaviour – the scene in which he physically assaulted Charlotte was particularly shocking. Teale's commentary on Victorian views of men and women is still relevant today – Branwell has the advantages and opportunities denied to his sisters because of their gender, and he wasted them.

Director Stuart Waterworth played a range of roles, including Patrick Brontë, with aplomb, showing true skill in convincingly portraying completely different people and ensuring we always knew who he was and how we felt about him. Stuart stepped into this challenging and demanding role at relatively late notice, but he was superb. I still remember when I first saw and heard him on stage in 'The Railway Children' and he always reminds me of John Gielgud, especially vocally.

The role of Charlotte, the eldest and longest surviving sister, was in the experienced hands of Janine Plunkett, who gave us a real insight into the turmoil of her mind: never still, never quiet, never satisfied with the domestic lot of her life. We empathized as we saw her rich creativity develop as a young girl and as she matured, we witnessed her determination to find an outlet for her writing and find a way out of the lonely life to which she was condemned.

Emily, apparently quieter and more domesticated but, just as frustrated with the emptiness of household chores and caring for her father, was portrayed by Jeni Boardman, who conveyed perfectly the vulnerability, love of nature and innate passion that leads Emily to write as an escape from the dreariness of her life. The scene in which she is horrified by Charlotte 'outing' her as a female writer, after being published under a male pseudonym, was heart wrenching, as was her death scene.

The youngest and least known sister, Anne, was played engagingly by Annabelle Byrne. She anguishes at being away from home as a governess and her gentle nature, often caught as peacemaker between her siblings, was powerfully acted. I must congratulate Annabelle for her command of the English language too – it is astonishing to find she's from Germany as her English is so assured.

Laura Cunliffe gave a mesmerizing and sensitive performance in the dual roles of Bertha Rochester and Cathy. She appeared like a ghost throughout the play, often portraying her characters through movement and minimal dialogue alone. This was an accomplished performance in a role which could so easily be lost amidst the strength of the characters from the central family. This was even more impressive as she only stepped into the role eight days before opening night!

Despite its setting in the real life of famous people over 150 years ago, this play still has plenty to say about the human condition and the effect of social pressure today. It is a piece which was emotionally engaging and evokes thought and discussion long after you have left the theatre.

Thank you to the Tavonians for a memorable evening.

**Gareth Davies**  
**NODA South West District 3**

---

**National Operatic and Dramatic Association**  
15 The Metro Centre, Peterborough PE2 7UH

**Tel** 01733 374 790 **Fax** 01733 237 286 **Email** [info@noda.org.uk](mailto:info@noda.org.uk) **Web** [www.noda.org.uk](http://www.noda.org.uk)

**Twitter** @NODAtweets **Facebook** NationalOperaticDramaticAssociation

Registered CIO charity number 1171216 Registered company number 241572 Registered in England and Wales at the above address.

**Patrons: The Lord Lloyd Webber and Connie Fisher**