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Dramatic Publishing

THE BRONTËS: ECCENTRIC LIVES

A Play

by

ROBERT JOHANSON



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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FROM THE AUTHOR

This unique performance piece, which can be presented book-in-hand or fully staged, highlights the extraordinary and eccentric lives of the Brontë family, most notably Charlotte and Emily, the authors of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. Using actual letters, poetry and selections from their printed works, the audience journeys to the mysterious world of Haworth parsonage on the Yorkshire moors where six young children are brought up by a tyrannical father. Their lives inspire the fictional characters they create (Heathcliff and Cathy, Jane and Rochester), and their own story is far stranger than anything they would write. Told with humor, pathos and great theatricality, this serves as a perfect companion to fully staged performances of *Jane Eyre* or *Wuthering Heights* or it can stand alone. When presented in its premiere at the Paper Mill Playhouse, the audience was moved to tears and filled with wonder at the triumph of these odd little ladies on the moors. A great opportunity for complex multiple roles for a few actors or divided up among many as fully noted in the script.

THE BRONTËS: ECCENTRIC LIVES

For 2 Men and 4 Women playing multiple roles
(easily expandable for 12-24 actors)

CHARACTERS

WOMAN ONE: Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre, Critic

WOMAN TWO: . . . Emily Brontë, Cathy, Heathcliff, Critic

WOMAN THREE: Anne Brontë, Helen Burns,
Mary Taylor, Florence Nightingale, Critic

WOMAN FOUR: . . . Narrator, Miss Dury, Aunt Branwell,
Tabby, Mrs. Reed, Mrs. Gaskell, Ellen Nussey, Critic

MAN ONE: Branwell Brontë, Carus Wilson,
Mr. Brocklehurst, Lockwood, George Smith,
Critic, Thackery, Heger, Arthur Nichols

MAN TWO: Rev. Patrick Brontë, Robert Southey,
W.S. Williams, Critic

The play can be performed with more than six actors using the main six actors as the Brontës and Narrator/Aunt and dividing up the remaining roles for any number of cameo appearances. However, Charlotte should read Jane Eyre and Emily should read Heathcliff and Cathy.

Bare stage with simple furnishings.

THE BRONTËS: ECCENTRIC LIVES

(Surrounding the playing area are five desks or tables with chairs and an armchair with a side table. DR will be MAN TWO's (Patrick Brontë) desk. DL is the armchair for WOMAN FOUR (Narrator and various roles). The central desks or tables are for WOMAN ONE (Charlotte), WOMAN TWO (Emily), WOMAN THREE (Anne) and MAN ONE (Branwell). The actors will speak from their desks and cross into the central playing area. There is a bench of all-purpose stage center. Otherwise, the stage is bare. It is possible to forego the desks and simply have the actors placed in a ring of chairs. If additional actors are used, they should be placed on chairs behind the desks and rise and cross into the action when needed. Before the play begins, the actors should take their places at their desks and be engaged in writing. Each should have paper and pen. Only WOMAN FOUR should sit doing needlework DL, putting this down on the side table when she enters the action. The other five are writing busily as the house lights fade and the action begins.)

WOMAN ONE (Charlotte). The plot of my novel is very unusual. I wish to portray a plain, orphaned heroine whose name is "Jane."

WOMAN THREE (Anne). Charlotte, I've never heard of a plain heroine.

WOMAN ONE (Charlotte). You have now. Plain Jane. She suffers a terrible childhood with relatives who don't want her, is sent to an awful school where children die of typhoid, packs off to become a governess for a mysterious man named Rochester who has a dark secret. There are many strange episodes, but finally Jane falls in love with Rochester only to learn that he is already married to a madwoman who lives in the attic.

MAN ONE (Branwell). Good touch, that. It's always fine to have a madperson about.

WOMAN ONE (Charlotte). Thank you, Branwell. She comes to a dreadful end.

WOMAN THREE (Anne). Plain Jane?

WOMAN ONE (Charlotte). No, Anne. The madwoman. She sets the house on fire and hurls herself from the rooftop. Rochester is blinded trying to save her and in the end, he and Jane are finally united.

WOMAN THREE (Anne). Thank goodness. A happy ending.

WOMAN ONE (Charlotte). Do you think anyone will believe these eccentric lives?

ALL. Assuredly. Quite definitely. Why not?

WOMAN TWO (Emily). My story is very unusual, as well. But, my orphan is a boy and far from plain. Darkly handsome and passionate, his name is Heathcliff.

MAN ONE (Branwell). Well, Emily, that's a tad more exciting than plain "Jane."

WOMAN TWO (Emily). He's brought to a desolate farm on the moors by a kind old man who has two children.

He's treated as a son, which infuriates the oldest boy, but the girl, Cathy—

WOMAN THREE (Anne). Is she plain?

WOMAN TWO (Emily). Absolutely not! Cathy's as wild as the moors and glorious.

MAN ONE (Branwell). Bravo, Emily!

WOMAN TWO (Emily). Heathcliff and Cathy fall in love, but when the old man dies, the oldest son, Hindley, treats Heathcliff as a ploughhand. So Cathy, knowing they can never marry, seduces the wealthy neighbor, Linton, marrying him for his money so that she can help Heathcliff to rise. But, she doesn't count on Heathcliff's reaction. His revenge is diabolical. After many strange and harrowing events—

MAN ONE (Branwell). Are there any madpersons hiding in the attic?

WOMAN TWO (Emily). Heathcliff is mad enough, I assure you. He seduces Linton's sister, kills Hindley, Cathy dies, Heathcliff sees her ghost, treats everybody horribly and finally, their children find some happiness after much suffering.

WOMAN THREE (Anne). Thank goodness. A happy ending.

WOMAN TWO (Emily). So, do you think anyone will believe *these* eccentric lives?

ALL. Assuredly. Most definitely. Why not?

MAN ONE (Branwell). My plot is even more unusual. A tyrannical widower with six small children attempts to bring them up in a parsonage on the desolate moors. He outlives all his children. Two die tragically—very young. The son who is the shining hope of the family—becomes a drunk and a dope fiend. However, the three remaining

daughters become successful authors using male pseudonyms. In fact, two of their novels become the greatest classics that world literature has ever seen. The father does not even know they've written them under his own roof, let alone had them published.

WOMAN THREE (Anne). Now, that's very hard to believe.

MAN ONE (Branwell). You think my story far-fetched?

WOMAN ONE (Charlotte). Well, it does want for some basis in reality.

WOMAN TWO (Emily). Is there no love interest?

MAN ONE (Branwell). Just at the very end.

WOMAN THREE (Anne). Frankly, brother, it needs some work.

MAN TWO (Patrick). How odd that the outrageous plots of my daughters' novels should strike one as far more reasonable than the true story of our own eccentric lives. I'll own that the Brontë saga would be hard for anyone to believe, yet it is as tragic and triumphant as anything in fiction.

ALL (*announcing*). *The Brontës: Eccentric Lives*.

WOMAN FOUR (Narrator). The story begins on St. Patrick's day—1777. The place, a hovel in Ireland. Two peasants give birth to a son and name him, of course, Patrick. And if this mark of Ireland isn't enough, his last name is very Irish—Brunty—spelled B-r-u-n-t-y. Patrick Brunty. This poor, but clever, lad educates himself, but what good is an education for a dirt-poor Irish unless he can transform himself.

MAN TWO (Patrick). At the age of twenty-five, I change my name from Patrick Brunty to Patrick Brontë.

WOMAN FOUR (Narrator). His new name was spelled B-r-o-n-t-ë with the brilliant flourish of two little dots over the final “e” to let everyone know they should pronounce it. Bront-ë!

MAN TWO (Patrick). And with seven pounds to my name, I set sail for England to further my studies at St. John’s College, Cambridge. I work my way through college as a “sizar,” a personal servant to an undergraduate nobleman—Lord Palmerston. It was through him that I developed my love of firearms.

WOMAN ONE (Charlotte). Father carried a loaded pistol every day of his life. I remember him putting the pistol in his pocket just as regularly as he put on his watch.

WOMAN TWO (Emily). Every day, Papa would greet the dawn by going out the front door and firing off his pistol.

WOMAN FOUR (Narrator). In 1806—Patrick Brontë is ordained a deacon in the Established Church of England. But now he must achieve a proper post.

MAN ONE (Branwell). Enter our mother, Maria Branwell.

WOMAN THREE (Anne). She came from a genteel family in Penzance.

WOMAN ONE (Charlotte). Her parents had died leaving her a small private income.

MAN TWO (Patrick). We are married on December 29, 1812. And start to build a family

WOMAN FOUR (Narrator). The first two children are born daughters: Elizabeth and Maria, followed quickly thereafter by:

WOMAN ONE (Charlotte). Charlotte.

MAN ONE (Branwell). Branwell.

WOMAN TWO (Emily). Emily.

WOMAN THREE (Anne). ...and Anne.

WOMAN FOUR (Narrator). She bore six children in seven years. And shortly after the birth of the sixth child, Mrs. Brontë died, no doubt from utter exhaustion.

WOMAN ONE (Charlotte). Father took this very hard. From that day until his death forty years later, he never took his meals with us.

WOMAN THREE (Anne). It was hard on all of us.

WOMAN ONE (Charlotte). Anne, you weren't even one year old; it was not hard on you.

MAN ONE (Branwell). Our mother's last words were "my poor children, my poor children."

WOMAN TWO (Emily). Wishing to fill the void, Father did request the hand of three other ladies, but was promptly refused. Witness Miss Dury's reply:

WOMAN FOUR (Miss Dury). Poor Mr. Brontë...I think I never should be so very silly as to have the most distant idea of marrying anybody who had not some future, and six children into the bargain.

MAN ONE (Branwell). He implored our aunt—our mother's older sister from the south—to come to our aid.

WOMAN TWO (Emily). Aunt Branwell arrived to "bring us up" and stayed for the rest of her life.

WOMAN FOUR (Aunt). I'll never forget that long, cold climb up Haworth hill to the lonely parsonage at the top.

MAN TWO (Patrick). We had only recently moved into Haworth parsonage, as I had been appointed perpetual curate to the parish of St. Michael and All Angels just before my wife's death. I was at Haworth, a stranger in a strange land. It was under these circumstances, after every earthly prop was removed, that I was called on to

bear the weight of the greatest load of sorrows that ever pressed upon me.

WOMAN FOUR (Aunt). The Yorkshire scenery for some miles before we reached Haworth was wild and uncultivated, with hardly any population; at last we came to this tremendous hill, up which the horse had to be led. At the top was the church and behind it sitting in the middle of the graveyard was the parsonage.

WOMAN TWO (Emily).

There is a spot mid barren hills
Where winter howls and drives the rain
... the house is old, the trees are bare,
Moonless above bends twilight's dome
... the mute bird sitting on the stone,
The dark moss dripping from the wall,
The thorn trees gaunt, the walks o'ergrown
I love them, how I love them all.

WOMAN ONE (Charlotte). Through my window no other landscape than a monstrous stretch of moorland and a grey church tower rising from the centre of a churchyard so filled with graves that the rank weeds and coarse grass scarce had room to shoot up between the monuments.

WOMAN THREE (Anne). From every window, save one, we viewed gravestones.

MAN ONE (Branwell). The parsonage was not only built in a graveyard, but over graves. Our drinking water came from a well sunk into that same cemetery where there were, on average, two burials a week.

WOMAN THREE (Anne). The exhalations from the remains of past generations made the church a most unde-

sirable place to worship without being too pungently reminded of the ultimate end of all things.

WOMAN FOUR (Aunt). Indeed, I forbade the children to venture down into the town any more than necessary and always properly booted. Open channels on either side of the street carried the refuse of both humans and animals. This was the sewage system. Is it any wonder that forty out of one hundred children would die before reaching the age of six?

WOMAN ONE (Charlotte). I'm amazed we lived as long as we did, as we were always plagued with headaches, sore throats, fevers and weak constitutions.

MAN TWO (Patrick). I fought for better sanitary conditions my entire life and I also had a serious conflict with the townswomen who liked to hang out their laundry in the graveyard. After I managed to expel them, I wrote a poem commemorating the event:

The females all routed have fled with their clothes
To stockyard and backyards: where no one knows
And loudly have sworn by the suds which they swim in
They'll wring off my head, for my warring with
women.

WOMAN TWO (Emily) (*rising and crossing around her desk*). But just out the back door—away from the church, the cemetery and the town stretching before us like a vast ocean—were the moors.

WOMAN FOUR (Narrator). More fitting than the tomb where they are buried, or the house where they lived, the moorland surrounding Haworth is the true shrine of the Brontë sisters. From a very early age they were out in most weathers—the days were sad when conditions were just too hostile to venture out on their beloved moors.

(EMILY, ANNE and CHARLOTTE cross center.)

WOMAN TWO (Emily).

For the moors, for the moors where the short grass
Like velvet beneath us should lie!
For the moors, for the moors where each high pass
Rose sunny against the clear sky!

WOMAN THREE (Anne).

In all the lonely landscape round
I see no sight and hear no sound,
Except the wind that far away
Comes sighing o'er the heathy sea.

WOMAN ONE (Charlotte).

Give we the hills our equal prayer
Earth's breezy hills and heaven's blue sea;

WOMAN TWO (Emily).

We ask for nothing further here
But our own hearts and liberty.

WOMAN ONE, TWO, THREE.

We ask for nothing further here
But our own hearts and liberty.

MAN TWO (Patrick). When my two oldest daughters, Maria and Elizabeth, were old enough, Aunt and I agreed that they should be sent off to Cowan Bridge school. There girls could train to be governesses which was the most probable profession open to them.

WOMAN ONE (Charlotte) (*returning to her desk*). I joined them at eight years old and Emily who was six came with me.

WOMAN FOUR (Narrator). The school register records that Maria “reads tolerably, writes pretty well, works needlework very badly.” Elizabeth “reads a little, writes pretty well, works very badly, and knows nothing else.” Charlotte “altogether clever of her age” and Emily “reads very prettily.”

WOMAN TWO (Emily) (*at her desk*). The conditions at the school were horrid. Damp and cold. The food was far from adequate for growing girls. For breakfast we ate milk and a piece of dry bread. For lunch, our big meal, we’d have a scoop of rice and a bite of meat if you could find it—often burnt and inedible—and at five we took tea—our last meal of the day—which again offered milk and dry bread.

WOMAN ONE (Charlotte). Many years later, when I wrote *Jane Eyre*—the horrible conditions I depicted in the fictional Lowood School were direct memory of Cowan Bridge. The words of the founder, the Reverend Carus Wilson, were used almost verbatim for Lowood’s Mr. Brocklehurst:

MAN ONE (Carus Wilson) (*rising, pompous*). The pupils have been unfortunately accustomed, perhaps even to excess in this very prevailing and increasing love of dress, for alas, clergymen’s families are not exempt from the mania—not even the poorest. With me it was always an object to nip in the bud any growing symptom of vanity. Pupils should be made useful and kept humble. The school is a nursery for Christ’s Spiritual Church on earth, and a nursery for Heaven.

WOMAN ONE (Charlotte). We were frequently given stories to read about children welcoming death. It seems we were not being prepared for life on earth, but the life hereafter.

WOMAN FOUR (Narrator). Mr. Brocklehurst to Jane Eyre:

(The lights change to denote a scene from within the novel. MAN ONE and WOMAN ONE are at center.)

MAN ONE (Brocklehurst). Well, Jane Eyre, are you a good child?

WOMAN ONE (Charlotte/Jane). Impossible to reply to this in the affirmative—I was silent. My aunt, Mrs. Reed, answered for me:

WOMAN FOUR (Mrs. Reed). Perhaps the less said on that subject, the better, Mr. Brocklehurst.

MAN ONE (Brocklehurst). No sight so sad as that of a naughty child, especially a naughty little girl. Do you know where the wicked go after death?

WOMAN ONE (Jane). They go to hell.

MAN ONE (Brocklehurst). And what is hell?

WOMAN ONE (Jane). A pit full of fire.

MAN ONE (Brocklehurst). And should you like to fall in that pit, and to be burning there forever?

WOMAN ONE (Jane). No, sir.

MAN ONE (Brocklehurst). What must you do to avoid it?

WOMAN ONE (Jane). I must keep in good health, and not die.

MAN ONE (Brocklehurst). Children younger than you die daily. I buried a little child of five years old only a day or two since—a good little child, whose soul is now in

heaven. It is feared the same could not be said of you were you to be called hence.

(The lights restore as they return to their places.)

MAN TWO (Patrick). My daughter, Maria, was the first to be taken ill at school. She had tuberculosis. I was kept in ignorance of this until her sickness had gone too far. We brought her home, but she died within a few days. My second daughter, Elizabeth, died shortly after of consumption.

WOMAN ONE (Charlotte). My sister, Maria, was the angelic image for Helen Burns in *Jane Eyre*. I witnessed the cruel treatment that she bore quietly and stoically. When she was very ill, I saw her pulled from her bed, made to dress. I watched her move with slow, trembling steps down the stairs to class and then punished for being late. I was greatly criticized for my harsh depiction of the conditions in the school. But, I sat by my dying sisters' bedsides, I suffered to see my sisters perishing. You are right in having faith in Helen Burns; she was real enough. I have not exaggerated there.

(WOMAN ONE and THREE at the bench, center, as lights change.)

WOMAN THREE (Helen Burns). Don't cry, little Jane.

WOMAN ONE (Jane). I picked some flowers for you today, Helen. So many of your favorites.

WOMAN THREE (Helen). You came to bid me goodbye then?

WOMAN ONE (Jane). Are you going home?