BRONTË
by Polly Teale
EDUCATION PACK
Compiled by Kate Saxon, Associate Director, Shared Experience

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Shared Experience has been instrumental in pioneering a distinctive performance style that celebrates the union of physical and text-based theatre. We are committed to creating theatre that goes beyond our everyday existence, giving form to the hidden world of emotion and imagination. We seek to explore the relationship between the world we inhabit and our inner lives. Text plays a major part in our productions as we strive to offer our audience not only visual excitement, but also deep emotional engagement and intellectual stimulus. We see the rehearsal process as a genuinely open forum for asking questions and taking risks that redefine the possibilities of performance. At the heart of the company's work is the power and excitement of the actors physical presence and the collaboration between actor and audience – a shared experience.

“Shared Experience are in a league of their own”

Time Out

Making Brontë

Brontë was originally written and directed by Polly Teale in 2005. The new production that this pack accompanies, directed by Nancy Meckler, began its life when Shared Experience were invited to collaborate with the Watermill Theatre in 2010. This offered us the opportunity to work with newcomers to the profession, introducing them to Shared Experience's process. Now, in 2011, we are reviving the production with our new partner Oxford Playhouse.

A new chapter

Shared Experience are now the resident theatre company at Oxford Playhouse. We will premiere many of our plays in Oxford and continue to tour nationally and internationally.

The Pack

This Education Pack has drawn from articles from our preceding two productions and marries them with new articles and photos specifically on this current production. It aims to offer a comprehensive resource tool for use by students and teachers. There are interviews with the creative team, excerpts from the play, exercises and questions to consider and thematic articles about the Brontë family and the world they lived in. Thank you to the contributors of the original articles, Gill King (Shared Experience) and Beth Flintoff and Heather Snaith (The Watermill).

Kate Saxon
Associate Director
Shared Experience

Image by Ellie Kurtz
In our everyday lives we hide much of what we think and feel, for fear we would be considered foolish or even mad. I believe we have a longing to see expressed in the theatre that which we conceal in life; to share our ‘madness’ and understand that we are not alone.

Central to Shared Experience’s approach is the desire to go beyond naturalism and to see into the character’s private worlds. There will be moments on stage when we literally enact whatever a character is secretly feeling or imagining. In more realistic scenes the social façade is a thin layer beneath which bubbles a river of suppressed emotion. During rehearsals we encourage actors to allow this bubbling emotional energy to explode and take over. In a scene where someone is secretly feeling very angry, when we allow the inner to erupt onto the surface they may viciously attack the other person; if the other character is feeling afraid they might crawl under the table. Having allowed the inner to erupt, the actor must return to the scene and struggle to conceal it. Although we may see two people drinking tea, we sense that underneath the social ritual it is as if murder is taking place.

This emphasis on subjective experience runs through all areas of the production. For example, the setting of the play will be more expressive of what a place feels like than what it realistically looks like. In *Jane Eyre* everything on stage was grey or black to express the loneliness of Jane’s inner world. In *War and Peace* the set was a hall of mirrors to suggest the vanity and narcissism of the aristocracy in Tolstoy’s Russia. In *The House of Bernarda Alba* the house feels like a prison. We decided to make the door colossally large and encrusted it with locks and bolts. It is this emphasis on the ‘inner’ or the subjective experience which characterises expressionism and it is at the heart of Shared Experience’s approach.

**Polly Teale**
This isn’t the first time you’ve been drawn to the Brontës. How did it all start?

Several years ago I adapted Jane Eyre for the stage. I was intrigued by the mythic power of the madwoman, by Brontë’s repulsion and attraction to her own creation. Her danger and eroticism. Her terrifying rage. I wanted to explore what this figure represented. How she came into existence. To do this, I needed to research Brontë’s life and times. To see how the madwoman had been born in reaction to the Victorian ideal of femininity. How she had grown out of the Victorian consciousness.

Later, I went on to write a play about Jean Rhys, who wrote a book inspired by Jane Eyre. Wide Sargasso Sea was a prequel, imagining the madwoman’s life before she was locked away. Giving her her own story. In Jean’s book, the madwoman was no longer a monster. We discover her as a child, follow her journey, her growing alienation, knowing of course where it will end. The book became a modern classic. The madwoman was out of her attic, back on the run, ready to stray into our fiction in whatever form she might choose; a potent symbol of female power and psychosis.

This third and final piece is a return to the source, the beginning, the Brontës. I wrote the play with a question in my mind: how was it possible that these three women, three celibate Victorian sisters, living in isolation on the Yorkshire Moors, could have written some of the most passionate (even erotic) fiction of all time? How could they have created such potent psychological portraits that they would come to haunt us, becoming a part of our collective consciousness?

But why return to the Victorians? Things have changed so much for women. What can the Brontës tell us about our own lives?

Yes, of course things have changed, yet we are still hugely drawn to these stories, these characters. Jane Eyre is believed to be the second most-read book in the English language (after the Bible). Wuthering Heights remains one of the great literary creations of all time and is still a bestseller. Today it is difficult for us to imagine a world where women were not allowed to enter a library, where women had to publish under men’s names, where women had no part in public life.

And yet 150 years is not so long ago. Their struggles are not so distant.

A century and a half may be long enough to change laws and even statistics, but how long does it take to change our thinking? Our deeper understanding of who we are and what’s possible for us? Writing the play also made me think about the cost of greater visibility, greater ambition. The way that it can distract and distort.
What about Anne? Why isn’t she haunted by one of her fictional creations?

Anne’s writing had a much stronger social, political agenda. It was less about her deep unconscious needs, her inner world, and more of a social document; a tool to provoke reform, to expose injustice.

There are several references to the social changes which are taking place.

It was very important to me to place the Brontës in history, to know that they lived at a time of huge social upheaval.

The changes they were witnessing during the Industrial Revolution were the beginnings of everything that has come since. The conversations they have about the working conditions at the mill could be about contemporary sweatshops. They were there at the beginning – the sense of emerging capitalism, of the huge possibilities and dangers of mechanisation. It’s all there.

What was it like to write about real people. Does it liberate or restrict?

The first three months of work on the play was all research. At one point I thought my head would explode with all the information, the wonderful detail, the endless dates, the theories of the biographers. I think though, in the end, you have to decide what it is about this story that fascinates you here, now, in the 21st century. The danger of biographical work is that it gets bogged down in event, in detail, in the surface narrative of the life. You have to be pretty brutal and chuck out anything that isn’t relevant to your bigger question, your theme. You want to be able to dig down, not just move forward through the story. To do that, you have to make space. For those who know a lot about the Brontës, they will notice huge omissions and also the occasional liberty! In the end, though, this is a response to the Brontë story, not a piece of biography. That’s the reason I begin the piece in modern dress. I didn’t want to pretend this was real. I wanted us to look at it through the filter of time, to know that we are playing a kind of game: dressing up, trying to imagine, putting ourselves in their shoes, joining all those before us who have done the same. After all, this is a story of make-believe, of the power of the imagination to transcend time and place, to take us to places we cannot otherwise go.

This article first appeared in The Guardian on 13 August 2005.

“Am I to spend all the best part of my life in this wretched bondage, forcibly suppressing my rage... and on compulsion assuming an air of kindness, patience and assiduity?”

Charlotte Brontë
In the beginning, Branwell was the spur of the Brontë children’s fantasies, and Charlotte tale-spinner in chief and most persevering scribe. The family make-believe started after he was given a box of toy soldiers in 1826, and he began making up stories to play with ‘the Twelve’ (as the figures were called), projecting through them an epic world of struggle and glory, repeated day and day in ever greater complexity. Though Branwell and Charlotte were the leaders of the game, the younger sisters Emily and Anne took part in the playing, and together they dramatised stirring adventures, utopian yearning, and emotional excitement. Theatre – playacting – was their first medium. Like all children, they lived through their imaginations: ‘The very young child acts upon the world from his bed by orders and entreaties,’ wrote Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘The objects obey these orders of consciousness: they appear.’ But unlike other children, the Brontës when grown up continued to express their fantasies, and through them to reach out to generations of readers and more.

They set down their stories in books tiny enough for their toy figures to hold and read, and filled them with microscopic writing (Charlotte penning some in such miniature script it still can’t be completely deciphered). Against a background of exotic lands – Angria and its capital Glass Town on the East African coast, as well as the kingdom of Gondal, they improvised freely on current events: their dastardly villains and dashing heroes were variations on the Duke of Wellington and other contemporary personalities, such as Lord Byron, whom they adored. Their father Patrick had changed the spelling of the family name from Brunty, in homage to Nelson who was created Duke of Brontë after a victory in Sicily. The children gave their cast far-fetched Romantic, aristocratic names.

The four of them together formed a creative energy source, and Polly Teale’s play focuses on their combined forces, their co-dependency even, and places the sisters in relation to the brother they idolised. Unusually, Brontë is also the tragedy of Branwell, and tracks the violence rippling out from his failure as a man and an artist.

None of the sisters’ writings makes the problem of women’s complicity go away, and the novels are immeasurably richer for this frankness about female desire, its contradictions, its self-destructiveness, and its defiance. Jane Eyre hides herself away but her inner voice cries out from the page. In Shirley, Caroline learns to suffer without protest, Charlotte Brontë describing female endurance with an unforgettable metaphor: ‘You held out your hand for an egg, and fate put into it a scorpion. Show no consternation: close your fingers firmly upon the gift; let it sting through your palm. Never mind: in time, after your hand and arm have swelled and quivered long with torture, the squeezed scorpion will die, and you will have learned the great lesson how to endure without a sob.’

It is anger that most characteristically accompanies this acceptance, rather than self-pity.

When Jane Eyre first appeared, the critic G.H.Lewes commented on the ‘strange power of subjective representation’ that he found in the novel: ‘it is soul speaking to soul; it is an utterance from the depths of a struggling, suffering, much-enduring spirit: suspicio de profundis! This disclosure of inner depths of passion still makes the Brontës’ writings compelling reading – for men as well as women.

Midpoint in Jane Eyre, for example, Jane expresses the frustration a young woman can feel: ‘Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags…’ Polly Teale’s play uses this kind of passion as raw material.
But the Brontë sisters are not women who suffer – at least not only. They are writers, with varying ambitions for their work and themselves. The writings of Charlotte, Emily, and Anne brought new stories into the collective imagination from the ‘artist’s dreamland’ they inhabited, and have set off a chain reaction of invention in others: how many romances have been moulded in the form of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*?

The very phrase, ‘shared experience’ is apt: the Brontës have become part of us. There are some characters who escape out of the works where they first came into being and take off into the world, epitomising a certain kind of person, a psychological state. Hamlet is one. Tristan and Isolde are others. Perhaps Frankenstein’s Creature is yet another. These characters have somehow become more than fiction; they haunt us – not as disturbing phantoms but as vibrant catalysts of ideas and understanding. The sisters as real-life characters, alongside their creations, like Jane and Heathcliff, have taken on this mythological quality. Alongside the story of their unhappy lives, the sisters’ fantasies have shaped the story of romance itself – with incalculable effects, psychological, sociological, and cultural.

The Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges has described literature as a form of conversation between books and writers across centuries and cultures, and the Brontës have undoubtedly stirred questions, murmurs and challenges among poets and novelists ever since they first appeared; today, their legacy continues without any sign of fading. Shared Experience’s theatre also enters the inner worlds of its characters, staging the fully fleshed appearances of memories and fantasies, and in Brontë, as in Polly Teale’s earlier play, *After Mrs Rochester*, the *sisters* are haunted by the personae they have made up as well as by figures of their past and their own dreams and yearnings.

The Brontës continue to inspire in this way because their writings are vitally charged with an ideal of romance as liberty, as hope, as energy in its most emancipatory form. As Gillian Beer has written, ‘Romance shapes the world in the image of desire.’ Jane’s marriage to Mr Rochester might inspire mixed feelings in us, but when she writes that she becomes his eyes, we might well read between the lines. ‘… I was then his vision,’ she says: *Jane Eyre* has become our vision too. Though the Brontës wrote about desolation and death, and suffered themselves so many partings and so many deaths, their characteristic stance conveys intense expectation, longing, and questioning. They grew out of make-believe and they in turn stimulate its continued possibilities: their desolate dreamscapes have a far horizon. Between mute withdrawal and the attic window Catherine flings open to the wuthering sky and the wind, a space of expression stretches wide, which now echoes with many others’ voices, their confidences and their cries.

“So hopeless is the world without The world within I doubly prize”  
Emily Brontë
Charlotte Bronte was very ambitious from an early age. She and Branwell both decided that they may be able to turn their literary skills into an opportunity to earn a living. Branwell and Charlotte had been creating stories for many years based on the adventures of the Kingdom of Angria. They decided that they needed the advice and judgment of those who were already professional writers, so both embarked upon a course of letter writing to their literary idols.

So on December 29th 1836 Charlotte Brontë wrote to Robert Southey the Poet Laureate asking for his opinion on some of her poems. And this was his response:

‘The daydreams in which you indulge are likely to produce a distempered state of mind. Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties the less time she will have for it even as recreation. To these duties you have not yet been called but when you are you will be less eager for celebrity’.

Charlotte Responds with the Following:

‘Sir, I cannot rest until I have answered your letter. At first I felt only shame that I had ventured to trouble you. A painful heat rose to my face when I thought of the quires of paper I had covered with what once gave me so much delight. The letter I wrote you was senseless trash from beginning to end. I have since endeavoured not only to observe all duties a woman ought to fulfil but to feel deeply interested in them. I don’t always succeed for sometimes when I am sewing I’d far rather be reading or writing but I try to deny myself. Once more allow me to thank you with sincere gratitude. I trust I shall never more feel ambitious to see my name in print’.

Southey’s attitude, that women should look to careers as a wife and mother only, were not unusual in the nineteenth century. Indeed Patrick Brontë often urged his daughter to be content with fulfilling her duty and not to allow unattainable ambitions to sour her life. Charlotte’s novels were full of references to the frustration she felt at the narrowness of women’s lives:

‘I believe single women should have more to do – better chances of interesting and profitable occupation than they possess now.’
In the introduction to the play, Polly Teale describes why Cathy and Bertha work in different ways and why Bertha is less of a conscious creation than Cathy. Cathy and Bertha appear on stage as they surface in the minds of the creators. Cathy appears much as she is found in *Wuthering Heights*. Emily is writing the section where Cathy is feverish and delirious, close to the end of her life. She has torn open her pillow and is obsessively trying to remember the names of the birds from which the feathers come, in the belief that it will reconnect her to her childhood. To the free, primitive self that exists before self consciousness, before socialisation. The image of Cathy unable to recognize her reflection, unable to recognize her adult self in the mirror is central to both Cathy and Emily's crisis. Their fear of being neutered, being destroyed by conformity.

Emily: *When I write, I leave behind this miserable body. I leave behind the din of the world. I forget my tedious thoughts that squabble all day like fractious children. I write to be unknown. Unknowing. To exist outside and beyond myself. To be in the… is-ness of things as I was once before I knew…*

Charlotte: *What?*

Emily: *…that the world was broken and all who live in it ashamed. Myself also.*

Lights change. Emily goes to table to write as Cathy enters with her torn pillow. Emily speaks the occasional word as she writes.

Cathy: *Is that a pigeon’s? Or is it a duck’s? I cannot be sure. That’s a turkey’s and that is a …What is its name?. They nest in the cracks on the crag. High up out of reach. Flying way above us, riding the wind, calling, making us run…What is it,Nelly?*

Cathy/Emily: *What is it called? I must remember.*

Bertha first surfaces in Charlotte's childhood fantasy of herself as then exquisitely beautiful daughter admired by all. Later Bertha becomes an expression of the part of Charlotte (sexual longing, rage frustration, loneliness) which she wishes to disown, to conceal from others. In the second half of the play, when Jane Eyre comes to life, Charlotte takes on the role of Jane, casting herself as ‘The Good Angel’, the moral centre of the story and antithesis of Bertha.

Charlotte sees Bertha for the first time. She stares at the creature, both fascinated and repelled. Branwell is asleep.

*Beat me. Hurt me. Make me. Sorry. I’m so sorry.*

Branwell (sleeping): *Sorry, I’m sorry, I…*

Charlotte continues to speak over Bertha, who whispers.


Charlotte: *It snatched and growled like some strange wild animal…. A quantity of dark grizzled hair, wild as a main, hid it’s head and face.*

**Bertha:** *No God. No love. No more. Nothing. Lost. Lost it. Can’t find. Once was once.*

**Q**

1. In this play we see Cathy, Emily’s fictional creation, and Bertha Charlotte's fictional creation, why does Anne not have one of her characters come to life on stage?

2. Frances McNamee plays both Cathy and Bertha, in the production, how does she differentiate between the two ‘ghosts’? Consider the different energies and physical mannerisms of the two women.

3. How does Emily relate to Cathy on stage?

4. How does Charlotte relate to Bertha?
The Madwoman in the Attic

*Jane Eyre* and its place in the history of literature and thought

If you read Polly Teale’s article about writing Brontë, you’ll come across the phrase ‘madwoman in the attic’ several times. This phrase was the title of a book written by two women in the late 1970s about literature. The book changed the way we think about literature by women, the way we think about Victorian women, and perhaps even the way we think about relationships between men and women today.

The Initial Response to *Jane Eyre*

*Jane Eyre* was immediately popular – perhaps because of its notoriety as a ‘dangerous’ book, which made it immediately attractive to the public. Most reviewers considered it well written, but many were deeply shocked by the character of Jane. The evident sexiness of Rochester, and Jane’s response to it, was deeply troubling. Women weren’t supposed to feel like this – these sorts of passions belonged to a man. Many readers were confused about the gender of the author, puzzling over how such feminine ‘tenderness’ could coexist with such masculine vulgarity. The princess is supposed to wait patiently at the top of the castle, not come down the stairs and scream at everyone, that she has feelings. Here’s an example of Jane’s ‘improper’ emotions: ‘always and always restrained, always checked – forced to keep the fire of my nature continually low, to compel it to burn inwardly, and never utter a cry, though the imprisoned flame consume vital after vital.’

From *Jane Eyre*, by Charlotte Brontë

One American journal even associated the novel with disease, writing in 1848 of ‘*Jane Eyre* fever’ which consisted of ‘a general fever of moral and religious indignation.’ Meanwhile, an English reviewer considered Jane’s character deeply unpleasant: ‘This is a very remarkable book … [but] Jane Eyre, in spite of some grand things about her, is a being totally uncongenial to our feelings from beginning to end … the impression she leaves on our mind is that of a decidedly vulgar-minded woman—one whom we should not care for as an acquaintance, whom we should not seek as a friend, whom we should not desire for a relation, and whom we should scrupulously avoid for a governess.’

*The Quarterly Review* 1848
The Madwoman in the Attic: the Feminist Interpretation

In 1979, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar wrote a feminist interpretation of Victorian novels written by women, and Anglo-American literary criticism tilted on its axis.

The main point of the book was that the female characters who are especially ‘dangerous’, like Bertha in Jane Eyre, represent the dark side of the ‘good’ heroine. Why does Jane see Bertha in the mirror? Because she is looking at herself, without the trappings of social convention and polite society.

Here is a key passage:

‘Bertha, in other words, is Jane’s truest and darkest double: she is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress ever since her days at Gateshead.

… Bertha has functioned as Jane’s dark double throughout the governess’s stay at Thornfield. Specifically, every one of Bertha’s appearances – or, more accurately, her manifestations – has been associated with an experience (or repression) of anger on Jane’s part. Jane’s feelings of ‘hunger, rebellion and rage’ on the battlements, for instance, were accompanied by Bertha’s ‘low, slow ha! Ha!’ and ‘eccentric murmurs.

Jane’s apparently secure response to Rochester’s apparently egalitarian sexual confidences was followed by Bertha’s attempt to incinerate the master in his bed… Jane’s profound desire to destroy Thornfield, the symbol of Rochester’s mastery and of her own servitude, will be acted out by Bertha, who burns down the house and destroys herself in the process as if she were an agent of Jane’s desire as well as her own.’

Sandra M Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic, 1979

The theory, and the book, became famous. Other female authors were revisited and examined, and their writings taken more seriously:

‘Gilbert and Gubar for ever changed the way we read. But they did more than that. Although they themselves may have focused on Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, the Brontës, George Eliot and Emily Dickinson, their consideration of literature by women as something more than an anomaly launched the effort to reclaim significant but forgotten works by other female authors.’

Deborah D Rogers, The Times Educational Supplement, 2009

Nowadays the phrase has been adopted into everyday usage, to suggest the inner, repressed life of a woman.

“Bertha, in other words, is Jane’s truest and darkest double: she is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress ever since her days at Gateshead.”

Sandra M Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic, 1979

The Madwoman and Shared Experience

The examination of a repressed inner life is directly relevant and appropriate to the ethos of Shared Experience – the madwoman in the attic presents a perfect subject matter for a company interested in the physical expression of what we conceal.

In Brontë, Charlotte is haunted by her own sexual desires, and when she is particularly disturbed, Bertha – not Jane – slides across the stage. When Emily is writing Wuthering Heights, Cathy appears, expressing Emily’s longing for the freedom she can only experience when on the moors.

Who hasn’t felt furiously angry about something, but been unable to express themselves? Even today we restrict ourselves in our search for social acceptability. We want to be liked.

Beth Flintoff
What’s Happening in the World Surrounding the Brontës?

A selective look at some key events.

1816 – Elgin Marbles are bought for the British Museum London
    – Charlotte Brontë born
1817 – Jane Austen dies
    – Riots in Derbyshire against low wages
    – Branwell Brontë born
1818 – Emily Brontë Born
1819 – Queen (to be) Victoria is born
1820 – George the Third dies succeeded by his son the Prince Regent - George the Fourth
    – Anne Brontë born
1821 – Constable paints The Haywain
1824 – Lord Byron dies
1825 – Samuel Pepys diaries published (1633-1703)
1828 – Duke of Wellington becomes Prime Minister
1829 – First Oxford Cambridge boat race
    – Suttee - the Indian custom of immolating a widow along with her dead husband abolished in British India
    – Catholic Emancipation Act allows Catholics to sit in parliament and hold any public office
1830 – William the Fourth becomes King of England
    – Charles Darwin sails as a naturalist on a surveying expedition in HMS Beagle to South America, New Zealand and Australia
1832 – Great Reform Act - number of voters increased from 500,000 to 1,000,000
    – Tennyson writes The Lady of Shallot.
1834 – Poor Law Amendment Act decrees that no able bodied man shall receive assistance unless he enters a workhouse
1835 – Hans Christian Anderson publishes the first four of his 168 tales for children
1837 – Victoria becomes Queen
1839 – Edgar Allan Poe wrote Fall of the House of Usher
1840 – Kew Botanical Gardens opened
1841 – First University degree granted to women in the USA
1842 – Grace Darling saves 9 people from a shipwreck from her home in a lighthouse
1843 – William Wordsworth appointed Poet Laureate
1845 – Turners painting *Rain Steam and Speed* exhibited at the Tate Gallery London
1846 – Famine in Ireland due to the failure of the potato crop
         Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell published at the sisters’ expense.
1847 – Emily Brontë writes *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte Brontë writes *Jane Eyre*,
         Anne writes *Agnes Grey*.
1848 – First settlers arrive in New Zealand
         Gold discovered in California which leads to the first gold rush
         Anne writes *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Branwell and Emily dies.
1849 – Anne dies
1851 – First Double Decker bus introduced
1852 – Charles Dickens writes *Bleak House*
         Charlotte Brontë writes *Villette*
         Queen Victoria allows chloroform to be administered to her during the birth
         of her seventh child, thus ensuring its place as an anaesthetic in Britain.
1854 – Charlotte dies
1861 – Patrick Brontë dies
When you are interpreting a play, which comes first for you: the physicality or the text?

Of course you start with the text in planning the production and working with the designer, but once in the rehearsal room, whenever I can I start with the physical. We do explore the words in depth, but if you start with the text, it can be hard to work in a strong physical language. There are moments in this script that call for a real physical explosion. Because of the process and the exercises each morning, the actors are more physical and freer in the space. I try to create an environment where they’re used to relating to each other through movement, so that the visual becomes as important as the words.

Does it make it difficult if they have a script in their hands at the start?

I ask them to learn their lines after we’ve gone through a piece of text once. But sometimes we’ll feed lines in to them, for instance if we’re rehearsing an intense scene between Cathy and Heathcliff, it gives them a chance to be led by their bodies.

This is an unusual rehearsal process that some actors might not take to. How do you make sure that you’ve chosen the right ones?

I start by meeting actors and ask them to do an ordinary text reading. Then we call them back and have a go at some exercises – I try to call them back in pairs so that I can see how they work with people. It’s a great chance to see how they respond to the process – will they really go for it? And if they also read the part well then we can take a chance.

Have you come across some really difficult moments in Brontë?

All the time! We try things, and if they don’t work then I’ll come back to it later. We’ll learn from the audience, as well, so it’s a continually evolving process. It’s important to me that everyone in the room can help to solve problems. Actors often say this is one of the things they find special about working with Shared Experience – that everyone can contribute to the process and all ideas are tried. It’s important that everyone has a sense of ownership.

Do you have a favourite Brontë sister?

No! That’d be like having a favourite child!

Do you have a favourite Brontë novel?

If I was to re-read one, I think it would be Jane Eyre.
Following the Industrial Revolution, the new middle classes were created, and with them came a great surge of wealth to the country. Suburbs began to grow, ideal for the factory owner for example who no longer wanted to ‘live above the shop’. It was also the start of gentility. Before the Industrial Revolution women could earn money as secretaries, book-keepers, shop-keepers, hairdressers, midwives and pharmacists, but the change in society decreed that it was not ‘gentile’ for women to work. Afterwards, there were few options for women, the main being to work in a factory, as a servant or as a governess.

‘I am afraid I am about the worst person in the world to advise you; I really have no notion what you could do unless, indeed, you turn governess - that is what young ladies in novels mostly do, I believe.’ Chrystabel by Emma Jane Worboise. Chapter 30

Work undertaken solely for economic reasons was unlikely to be fulfilling or pleasurable: the concept of ‘job satisfaction’ is a modern one. Many governesses were forced into the profession on the death of their father, there were no pensions and life insurance and often the fathers would die without having made a good enough provision for their remaining family. Indeed the daughter of the Governor of the Bank of England became a governess for this reason. Salaries were very low, especially when contrasted with those of a male tutor. He could earn around £84 a year for as little as an hour a day teaching from his own rooms. A live-in, permanently on-duty governess would earn less than half that amount. Charlotte in 1841 earned £20 a year, less £4 deducted for laundry expenses! Also many governesses supported other relatives, and in 1850 a survey showed that out of 75 governesses, 47 were supporting relatives.

It was also very hard to get a job - demand for governesses was easily outstripped by supply. Upper-class households mainly chose their governesses by recommendation only, the middle classes advertised, often using the clergy as an unofficial employment agency. It was considered shameful and vulgar self-promotion to advertise in newspapers and periodicals, so many women were forced to offer their services simply in exchange for a roof over their head. The interview usually took place through letters only, so both parties were never sure what to expect when the governess arrived at her post.

Life was hard for the governess, one did not have a respected ‘place’ in the household, being neither servant nor gentry, and therefore the governess was snubbed by both groups. Mothers would often only visit their children for an hour a day and they had little clue as to how their children behaved. Both Charlotte and Anne worked as governesses and found the work and domestic situation in their new positions to be very stressful and physically draining.

In The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, in Chapter 3 Agnes describes her violent attempts to subdue the six year old Mary Ann Bloomfield: ‘Sometimes, exasperated to the utmost pitch, I would shake her violently by the shoulders, or pull her long hair, or put her in the corner, - for which she punished me with loud, shrill, piercing screams that went through my head like a knife. She knew I hated this, and when she had shrieked her utmost, would look into my face with an air of vindictive satisfaction, explaining – ‘Now then! That’s for you!’’

One reviewer of Agnes Grey, in Douglas Jerrold’s Weekly Newspaper wrote in 1848: ‘We do not actually assert that the author must have been a governess himself, to describe as he does the minute torments and incessant tediums of her life, but he must have bribed some governess very largely, either with love or money, to reveal to him the secrets of her prison house, or, he must have devoted extraordinary powers of observation and discovery to the elucidation of the subject.’
In 1843 the Governesses Benevolent Institution was founded for the placement and protection of governesses. In 1848 the Institution opened Queen's College in London for girls over the age of 12. Queens' curriculum was its major achievement. Girls could choose from lectures or classes in modern languages, mechanics, geography, geology, English grammar, English literature, Latin, botany, chemistry, philosophy, and political economy. With Bedford College, founded in 1849, Queen's showed new possibilities for girls. It helped initiate an educational campaign as a gateway to other rights and opportunities. By the end of the decade, classes were being arranged for women at University College in London.

“Salaries were very low, especially when contrasted with those of a male tutor. He could earn around £84 a year for as little as an hour a day teaching from his own rooms. A live in, permanently on duty governess would only earn less than half of that amount.”

Excerpt:

Anne: Spring is coming. Let us hope her pupils are curious and have a will to learn. They may provide her cure.

Lights change. Two months later. Charlotte arrives home in coat and shawl with luggage. She sneezes. Anne gives her a hanky as she continues her story.

Charlotte: My charges, two pretty little kittens, took it upon themselves to dress me up and would not be persuaded against it. The ordeal took an entire evening. It was clear, however, that in spite of their enthusiasm, nothing suited. I was not improved one bit. When I said as much, they became sulky and rude and blamed me for looking miserable. The next day I was given notice.

Anne: I'm sorry.

Emily: It is them we should pity. To be beautiful is to be cursed. To belong not to yourself but others.

Charlotte: (turning out her purse). I have earned five pounds and ten pence. Almost exactly the price of the gig there and back.

Anne: It was not your fault.

Charlotte: I will advertise again tomorrow.

Careers were also short-lived, the ideal age for a governess was 25 and by 35 she was often considered too old. The only real escape was marriage, but who to marry? The only men they might meet of a similar standing were curates and teachers. And even if one was able to get married, because of disease and high death rates, many were forced to return to being a governess.
Advice for Young Ladies

In the years between 1785 and 1820 a large number of books were printed giving advice on the education and conduct of young ladies. The advice books were designed to be bought by parents, teachers and clergymen to be given to young ladies.

During this time, it was asserted or assumed that women were weaker in body and mind than men. The prime female virtues were modesty, faithfulness, prudence, delicacy, and humility. The prime role was in the home, to give support and comfort to families and husbands. It was recommended that women needed to exercise restraint in virtually every aspect of life, in society, in home, socialising or dealing with tradesmen. Reading needed to be closely controlled by husbands and parents.

The advice books were fearful of novels which were believed to:
‘inflame emotions and cause discontent. Avoid such works, as to enervate the mind, soften the heart, or awaken the passions’
‘The indiscriminate reading of such books corrupts more female hearts than any other cause whatsoever’.

Maternal Letters, Mrs Chapone.

The Reverend Fordyce, another advice book author wrote;
‘There are very few novels that can be read with safety, a woman who reads such novels must in her soul be a prostitute’.

Mrs John Sandford wrote in Women in her Social and Domestic Character in the 1830’s:
‘A woman may make a man’s home delightful, and may thus increase his motives for virtuous exertion. She may refine and tranquilize his mind – may turn away his anger, or allay his grief. Where want of congeniality impairs domestic comfort the fault is generally chargeable on the female side: for it is the woman, not for the man to make the sacrifice, especially in indifferent matters. She must, in a certain degree, be plastic herself, if she would mould others, and this is one reason why very good women are sometimes very unattractive. They do a great deal, but they yield nothing…

In everything that women attempt, they should show their consciousness of dependence. There is something so unpleasant in female self-sufficiency, that it not infrequently prejudices instead of persuading.

Their sex should ever teach them to be subordinate: and they should remember that, by them, influence is to be obtained, not by assumption, but by a delicate appeal to affection or principle. Women, in this respect, are something like children: the more they show their need of support, the more engaging they are.’
In the novel, Jane Eyre, at one point Jane protests, ‘Women are supposed to be very calm: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their own efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer, and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags…’

In the extract below from Brontë, Emily and Anne discuss how women were treated and viewed:

Emily: And you? You said in your letter you had finished the first chapter.

Anne: I cannot promise it has any merit beyond that it saved my sanity. But even that is not yet certain.

Emily: What is it about?

Anne: A woman who is married and bound for life to a drunken adulterer. I intend it as provocation to those who would have women treated as children. The more I see, the more I am certain we ruin both girls and boys by insisting on the frailty of our sex. While young men must endlessly prove themselves, we are kept like overgrown infants in the nursery of life, our talents wasted, our energy squandered on meaningless tasks, peering out at a world we will never know –

Q

1. Do you believe in 2011 that there are still rules that women consciously or unconsciously adhere to?

2. If you were writing a book on etiquette for today's young women what would be the top five most important things?
An Extract from *The Princess*
By Tennyson

Man is the hunter: women is his game
Man for the field and women for the hearth:
Man for the sword and for the needle she:
Man with the head and women with the heart:
Man to command and women to obey:
All else confusion.

Q

1. Now nearly 200 years on, is this an archaic view of male and female roles in our society?
2. What prejudices surrounding women do we still face in 2011?
3. Consider your own opinions on marriage, having a family, working when a woman has children, sex and socialising.

Flora Nicholson (Anne Brontë) and Mark Edel-Hunt (Branwell Brontë/Heathcliff) by Ellie Kurtz
Haworth, 800 feet high in the Pennines, was a crowded industrial township during the Brontë period.

The population increased by 118 percent between 1801 and 1851 to 3,365. There were no sewers and the water supply was both polluted and inadequate, contributing to a high mortality rate.

There were 1,344 burials in the church yard between 1840 and 1850 and the average age at death was 25 years; 41 percent of babies died before reaching their sixth birthday. Against the mortality figures the Brontë’s deaths, though tragic, were unremarkable.

Subsistence farming of a few acres, often ‘take-in’ from the moors was combined with hand-loom weaving or wool combing. This domestic system of worsted manufacture was changing to factory production with water powered machinery.

The mills built from 1790 along the River Worth were well established when the Brontë family arrived.

Other occupations included quarrying, building and crafts but there were scarcely any professional people.

Baptist and Wesleyan chapels flourished and together with the church, provided the village with a focus for social life.

The moors were not as isolated as they are today when the Brontë sisters were alive, as many farmers eked out a living from subsistence farming. All of the sisters’ novels describe the windswept moors and the harsh weather either through their characters emotional states or in actuality.

Charlotte in many of her letters wrote of the weather and the moors around Haworth:

“When I go out there alone everything reminds me of the times when others were with me, and then the moors seem a wilderness, featureless, solitary, saddening. My sister Emily had a particular love for them, and there is not a knoll of heather, not a branch of fern, not a young bilberry leaf, not a fluttering lark or linnet, but reminds me of her. The distant prospects were Anne’s delight, and when I look round she is in the blue tints, the pale mists, the waves and shadows of the horizon. In the hill-country silence their poetry comes by lines and stanzas into my mind: once I loved it, now I dare not read it…”

Rehearsal photo by Ellie Kurtz
Interview with the Composer, Peter Salem

**What research did you do before starting composing for this play?**

I read *Wuthering Heights* for the first time to get a sense of the dark, bleak but exhilarating wildness of the moors. It’s a great source for getting a picture of the Brontë’s location and for suggesting a ‘soundworld’ for the play.

**What instruments are you using and why?**

Apart from electronic sounds and the sounds of flapping wings, bird calls, the wind etc, the principal instruments will be a high ‘ethnic’ wooden flute (representing the freedom experienced through imagination, through writing – esp. in the case of Emily) and piano (representing the outside world and ambition in relation to Charlotte and Branwell).

**What are the chief differences to the Cathy and Bertha themes…?**

Bertha’s is very dark and physical, Cathy’s is more to do with her mental state and her longing for her past freedom (this will connect with the flute motif related to Emily).

**What is your favourite scene?**

Too many to mention! And quite a bit I haven’t seen yet. Emily’s death is very moving....

**Any major challenges for you?**

Yes! One is trying to get a distinct sound for the novels, when they appear, to help with clarity. The structure of the play is very complex, frequently moving across time and in and out of novels.

**What are the main differences between working with Shared Experience and other theatre companies?**

The difference between Shared Experience and other companies is the physical content, coming away from the text to express something purely physically or counterpointing sections of text with physical work. This is always particularly interesting from the point of view of sound as these are heightened non-naturalistic moments which can use sound very effectively.
Read the scene in groups, discuss it and then consider the questions below.

Emily picks up the dog lead and the manuscript of Wuthering Heights. Emily whistles to her dog. Charlotte steps in front of Emily barring her way to the door.

Charlotte: It was not my choice to go away. I didn’t choose to spend my every moment with a spoilt child and a miserable baby. To be ordered about ’til I was dead on my feet, day after day. I did it for you. That you might be here and not parted from what you must have.

Emily: Then let me go to it.

The door opens and Patrick stands in the doorway. He has only a little sight left and has used a stick to navigate the journey to the kitchen.

Patrick: Why are there voices raised in my kitchen?

Charlotte: Father. You should have rung. You should not –

Patrick: I should. I should not. It is not for you to tell me what I should or should not do. I should not have had to leave my chair if it wasn’t for your quarrel. What is it about?

Charlotte: We were…….in disagreement over what to cook for dinner. (Pause.) Emily has made soup but I would rather –

Patrick (To Charlotte): Go and lay a fire in my study. I shall need you to accompany me to afternoon prayers. My curate has gone to the hospital. The man who has lost his hands to the loom, he has become ill.

Charlotte leaves. Emily stands, still dressed in her shawl and holding the manuscript of Wuthering Heights. Patrick reaches out and touches the manuscript.

What are you reading?

Emily: A book.

Patrick: Is it good?

Emily: I…..don’t know. I have not yet finished it.

Patrick: But you must have an opinion.

Emily: It is……..unusual.

Patrick: Unusual. I am intrigued.

Emily: It is not so very interesting…..

Patrick: Read it to me.
Emily: It would not be to your taste.

Patrick: How do you know? (Pause.) Wherever you open it. The next sentence. What is it?

Emily opens the book and reads. Cathy enters agitated.

Emily: (with Cathy speaking her lines a little afterwards) “Can you keep a secret?” Cathy asked, as she closed the kitchen door. “It troubles me and I must let it out. Where’s Heathcliff? He must not hear us” she knelt beside me at the hearth “for today Edgar Linton asked me to marry him and I accepted”.

Cathy: Now quickly, say whether I should have done so. Say whether I was wrong.

Emily: You accepted him. Then what good is it discussing the matter. It is done. You are to be Edgar Linton’s wife.

Cathy: But say, say whether I should have done so.

Emily: You will leave a comfortless home for a wealthy, respectable one. So where is the obstacle?

Cathy/Emily: (Cathy clasps her stomach and then her heart) Here and here. In whichever place the soul lives. Oh Nelly, in my soul and in my heart, I’m convinced I am wrong.

Patrick: (interrupting) You are right. It is…….unusual. Tonight we shall eat in the dining room and eat well. You will stay indoors and help your sister to prepare our meal. You may use the rest of the week’s house keeping. It is an occasion, is it not? I am to see my only son.

Q

After reading through a scene with the actors, the director, Nancy, asks lots of questions about the scene, such as; what do the characters want, what might prevent them from achieving their wants, what has happened just before?

Here are questions you may wish to explore:

1. How does Charlotte feel about her last year away?
2. Why does she tell her Father that the argument was only about the dinner menu?
3. How does Emily feel about reading her work out loud?
4. Does Patrick know that it is her manuscript and not just a book someone else has written?
5. How complicit is Emily with Patrick in pretending it is just a novel and not her work?
6. How exposed does she feel?
7. Why does Patrick ask her to read? Is it cruelty or an act of love?
8. What does he feel about Emily?
9. How would you stage this scene?
10. Is Emily aware of Cathy or is it just us the audience who see her?
11. What is the level of tension?
12. What are each characters’ objectives?
13. Physically what is in the room and how does that affect the scene? (What about Patrick’s near blindness?)
BRONTË

A Description of the Novels Mentioned in the Play

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

The tenant of the title is Helen Huntingdon, who, under the name Mrs Graham, arrives at the decaying Elizabethan mansion and causes gossip and rumour to spread in the neighbourhood. She arouses the interest of Gilbert Markham, a local farmer, and though she tries to repel his growing love for her, his closeness to her young son eventually makes her treat him in a more friendly fashion. The relationship however is hindered by the opposition and ridicule of his family, and by the figure of Frederick Lawrence, who seems to have an interest in or influence over the mysterious tenant which arouses Gilbert's antagonism. After the pair fight, 'Mrs Graham' thrusts into Gilbert's hands a diary which tells the story of her disastrous marriage.

A serious and pious young girl, she has become fascinated by a young man of bad reputation, Arthur Huntingdon, a Byronic figure of great fascination but also of hardly-concealed moral failings. She marries him, fatally confident that her love will reform him. For a time all goes well, but gradually he resumes his drinking and womanising, and Helen becomes increasingly unhappy. A son is born, but his husband's debaucheries become more frequent and more organised. When he begins to corrupt his son into his own 'manly' habits she decides to flee, and after an aborted attempt, sadistically thwarted by her husband, she finally achieves her aim, fleeing to Wildfell Hall, in the vicinity of her brother, who is Frederick Lawrence.

When Arthur is on his death-bed, Helen returns to him and watches helplessly as he dies unrepentant. After some delays and misunderstandings she marries Gilbert Markham.

Jane Eyre

Charlotte's most famous novel depicts the emotional and spiritual development of the heroine, which is mirrored by her physical journeyings throughout the book. It describes her search for self-worth, for identity as an individual and for economic independence, in a world which did not expect such ambitions in women. Jane first appears as an orphaned child, lodged with an aunt who resents her and shamelessly favours her own children. She is sent away to a charity school run by Mr Brocklehurst, where, through the harsh regime, she learns survival and eventually succeeds in becoming a teacher there herself. She advertises for a post as governess, and is appointed to care for Adele, the ward of the sardonic Edward Rochester at Thornfield Hall. Thus far, Charlotte is drawing heavily on her own and her sisters' lives, but it is not an autobiographical novel. The aunt who brought Charlotte up was a benevolent influence. By contrast, her experiences, and those of her sisters, as governesses were far bleaker than that portrayed here.

And there was never any Rochester to fall in love with her. What attracts Rochester to Jane is not her looks (she is small and plain, like her author) but the honesty with which she speaks her mind, and her practical common sense, which enables her to save his life. He proposes marriage, but she discovers at the altar that he already has a wife, Bertha, a lunatic who is kept in the attic at Thornfield. Jane refuses to become Rochester's mistress, and flees from him. Destitute, she is taken in by the Rivers family, who, coincidentally, turn out to be cousins, and reveal that she is heiress to sufficient funds to give her financial security for life. The Revd. St. John Rivers, who is planning to go to India as a missionary, asks her to marry him and follow him in his calling. Jane is on the point of acceptance, when she hears a supernatural cry from Rochester. She returns to Thornfield to find that the house has been burned down by Bertha, and that Rochester himself has been maimed and blinded in an unsuccessful attempt to save his wife. Now, Jane can marry him, not just because he is widowed but because his physical dependence gives her the equality to which she aspires.
Wuthering Heights

The structure of *Wuthering Heights* is complex; the narrator is Lockwood, Heathcliff's shadowy tenant at Thrushcross Grange. He learns the history of the Earnshaws and the Lintons from Ellen ('Nellie') Dean, who has been a servant at both Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange, and whose account fills most of the book. Within that story, the characters come to life and speak with their own individual voices. Ellen's account begins with the father of Catherine and Hindley Earnshaw returning home with an orphan child, whom he names Heathcliff and who becomes his favourite. Heathcliff and Catherine develop a passionate love, while mutual hatred grows between Heathcliff and Hindley. After Mr Earnshaw's death, Hindley humiliates Heathcliff, who endures everything on account of his love, until he overhears Catherine tell Ellen that it would degrade her to marry him. Catherine has met Edgar and Isabella, the children of the Linton family at Thrushcross Grange, and Edgar has proposed to her. She accepts, and Heathcliff vanishes.

Three years later, Heathcliff returns as abruptly as he left. The petulant adolescent has changed into a master schemer, whose twin passions, love and desire for revenge, are thinly masked by wealth and an air of gentility. He lodges with Hindley, who is now widowed with a young son, Hareton. He encourages Hindley's drunkenness and gambling, and wins from him the deeds to Wuthering Heights. He renews his association with Catherine, to the dismay of her effete husband Edgar, but then elopes with Isabella, whom he maltreats. Catherine becomes pregnant, and a sudden irruption by Heathcliff induces her labour: she dies giving birth to Cathy. Isabella escapes to London, where she has a son, giving him her maiden name of Linton.

Step by step, Heathcliff takes control of the younger generation. After Hindley's death, he brutalises Hareton in revenge for his own treatment. Isabella, too, dies, and he seizes their son, Linton, whom Edgar had sought to care for. Finally, he decoys Cathy to Wuthering Heights where he forces her to marry Linton. In this way, he gains control of both houses, and obliterates both family names. Edgar and Linton die in turn. Cathy develops an affection for Hareton, and the possibility emerges of eventual happiness and redemption. The fulfilment of Heathcliff's plan should have been the destruction of them both, but his vindictiveness has worn him out, and his only desire is to be reunited with Catherine beyond the grave. He wastes away, and the novel ends with village gossip of their ghosts being seen together on the moors.