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Samuel French Acting Edition

Brontë

A Solo Portrait of Charlotte Brontë

by William Luce

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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Opening Night: January 20, 1988

MARINES MEMORIAL THEATRE

A TRADITION IN QUALITY ENTERTAINMENT

809 BUTTER AT MASON • SAN FRANCISCO

UNDER THE GENERAL DIRECTION OF CHARLES H. DUGGAN

CHARLES H. DUGGAN

presents

JULIE HARRIS

in

BRONTË

A Solo Portrait of Charlotte Brontë

Written by

WILLIAM LUCE

Production Stage Manager

Kim O'Bannon

Executive Producers

Cheryl L. Fluehr

Joe R. Watson

Directed by

CHARLES NELSON REILLY

Produced by special arrangement with

EIS Presentations / Joan Simmons
& Bill Dyer

To Mother

PREFACE

I first wrote *Brontë* as a radio play for actress Julie Harris to perform on WGBH's *Masterpiece Radio Theatre*, Elinor Stout directing. The play was titled *Currer Bell, Esq.* (Charlotte Brontë's *nom de plume*.) This production won the Peabody Award, the Ohio State Award and Columbia University's Armstrong Award. It was subsequently recorded by Caedmon Records under the direction of Ward Botsford.

Brontë then became a movie. Producer Sonny Fox took it to Ireland, where it was filmed by Irish Television in County Wicklow. Again, Julie Harris starred, with Delbert Mann directing.

I then turned *Brontë* into a stage play. During her long commitment to a television series, Miss Harris tried out the play at several benefits, with Kristoffer Tabori directing. Later, under the sponsorship of producers Joan Simmons and Bill Dyer, Miss Harris performed Brontë at many colleges, universities and theaters. With Charles Nelson Reilly as director, *Brontë* formally opened at Charles Duggan's Marines Memorial Theatre in San Francisco in January, 1988.

Charlotte Brontë was born on April 21, 1816. She lived and wrote in the isolated moorland village of Haworth in the Yorkshire West Riding. With "Currer Bell" as her pen name, her sisters, Emily and Anne, took the names of Ellis Bell and Acton Bell, respectively. "We did not like to declare ourselves women," Charlotte later explained, "because we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice."

Charlotte's novel, *Jane Eyre*, was published in 1847. It was a tremendous success. Emily's *Wuthering Heights* and Anne's *Agnes Grey* followed soon after.

The secret of their literary genius undoubtedly lay in their childhood. With their equally talented brother, Branwell, the

girls played at being writers. In microscopic handwriting, the four children penned romances, poems, and dramas, illustrating them with Arabian Nights pictures of fairy realms. It was a game which, for Charlotte, Emily and Anne in adulthood, became the serious business of writing.

Based on her writings and correspondence, *Brontë* begins in 1849 with Charlotte, at thirty-three, returning from Scarborough, where she has buried Anne. Branwell and Emily have died within the last year. Only Charlotte and her stern, God-fearing father are left in this house of memories. "I am certainly doomed to be an old maid," Charlotte has confided to friend Ellen Nussey. It would now seem that her fears are being realized.

As the play unfolds, Charlotte comes to terms with her genius and her need for love. To Ellen she writes, "To sit in a lonely room—the clock ticking loud through a still house—and have opened before the mind's eye the record of the last year, with its shocks, sufferings, losses—is a trial. Sometimes, Nell, I have a heavy heart of it. *But I am not crushed.*"

Welcome to Haworth.

William Luce
June, 1988

CHARACTERS

Charlotte Brontë

SETTING

The parlor in the Parsonage of St. Michael
and All Angels Church in the village of Haworth,
in the high moor country of Yorkshire, England.

The time is June 21, 1849

BRONTË

ACT I

(At RISE: We hear thunder and wind, gusting and wild. Occasional flashes of lightning are seen. From stage right CHARLOTTE BRONTË enters. She wears a cloak and bonnet. She calls to offstage, as she appears with carrying case.)

CHARLOTTE. Thank you, no, Mister Nicholls. I'll carry it in myself. Good-day! *(To audience:)* When Mister Arthur Bell Nicholls is at the reins, the horse takes its own sweet time. But what a beautiful rainbow there was! *(As NICHOLLS:)* Rainbow? What rainbow? *(To audience:)* "That rainbow!" says I. Poor, dear Mister Nicholls. *(Calling offstage to housekeeper, MARTHA:)* Never mind, Martha, I'm already in. *(To audience:)* Glory, Martha must have left every window in the house open. *(To MARTHA:)* Martha, close the windows upstairs. *(To audience:)* What wretched weather. The first day of summer it is, and yet the afternoon set in so fitful and cold.

There is something so merciless in the heavy rush of the wind across the moors. It wakens feelings in me I can't satisfy. A thousand wishes rise at its call, and they will die with me, never fulfilled. Then rushing impetuously upon me like the wind, comes a mighty phantasm of images conjured from

nothing into a system strong as any religious creed. It acts upon me like opium, coiling about me, a disturbing but fascinating spell. And I know then that I, Charlotte Brontë, can write—(*Long pause.*)—*gloriously.*

(*She removes her cloak and examines it.*)

The ride from Keighley seemed endless. Mister Nicholls met me there at the station, and I was in no condition to be met by anyone. Now just look at this. My good cloak, ruined.

On the train to Leeds, a little girl and her mother sat opposite me. They hadn't been there for a full minute, before without any warning or the slightest indication of nausea, sickness overcame her, and the curdled contents of her little stomach, consisting apparently of a milk breakfast, were unceremoniously deposited in my lap. What a pretty mess. And to add insult to injury, the mother accused *me* of being the cause. She said I scowled at the child when they sat down, and made her little darling feel unwelcome.

Well, with water and a towel I managed to make myself presentable. Presentable, that is, to those lacking olfactory organs. (*Sniffing at the cloak.*) I'm afraid it's turning sour. (*Rubbing it.*) I'm sure Mister Nicholls noticed. He walked three feet ahead of me all the way to the gig. I could hardly keep up with him.

I speak of Papa's assistant curate. He's Irish, like Papa. The Reverend Arthur Bell Nicholls. Sometime back, there was idle talk going around that Mister Nicholls and I were going to marry. Imagine. A clerical romance. Well, it wasn't true, but I was grateful for the rumor.

(She hangs up cloak.)

Now where the deuce is my umbrella? I suppose Nell picked it up at the station by mistake. We parted so suddenly.

(She goes to the hearth, taking up the bellows, attempting to revive the fire.)

Botheration! The peat must be damp. *(To TABBY offstage:)* Tabby! *(To audience:)* She probably can't hear me, she's so deaf. *(Calling again:)* Tabby? *(To audience:)* We need some dry, that's what we need.

(She crosses to the cabinet and collects ink well, quill and paper. She goes to the large table and sits. She puts on her spectacles and starts to write a letter.)

(To NELL, writing:) To Ellen Nussey, Brookroyd, West Riding, Yorkshire. Twenty-first of June, 1849. Dear Nell, I got home a little before eight o'clock. The sky was black, but there was the most beautiful rainbow over the moors. All was clean and bright waiting for me. The dogs seemed in a strange ecstasy. I'm certain they regarded me as the harbinger of others.

(She removes her spectacles, rises, and continues the letter in her mind.)

There's a sense of desolation here, of agony to be undergone, as I resume life in this lonely house with Papa as my sole companion.

Why does anyone come back to Haworth? Why do I? It's almost July, and not one flower. Only the same gritstone hill

where the moors begin, Papa's church and the old stone Parsonage with those two ugly thorn trees in front. A perfect misanthrope's heaven, my sister Emily used to call Haworth. Such a dirty, cramped little town. Well, cleanliness may be next to godliness in the Bible, but in Haworth it's next to impossible.

(She sits down again at the table, puts on her spectacles and resumes her letter to NELL.)

(To NELL, writing:) I confess, Nell, I'm inclined towards esteem and affection for Mister Nicholls. And I think something is brewing in his mind. At the gate, he asked if he might call at the Parsonage tonight. Mind you, he's made no declaration of his feelings for me, so I have no reason, really, to hope. But he did look at me rather fervently, as if he wanted to say something, but was shy. I wonder. I trust in Heaven that Papa won't be hostile should my intuition be true.

(She is interrupted by the sound of the front door knocker. For a moment, she is transfixed. She removes her spectacles, stands and steps toward the hallway door.)

It couldn't be Mister Nicholls already. *(To MARTHA off-stage:)* Martha? Would you see to the door?

(Sharply to dog:) Flossie, stop you barking! *(To audience after pause:)* It's not Mister Nicholls. Almost every day, late into the evening, we're assailed by strangers. They come boring into Haworth on the wise errand of seeing the author of "Jane Eyre." God deliver me from my admirers.

So it's home again. I call it home still, much as London would be called London, if an earthquake shook its streets to ruins.

(She sits on the settee.)

The past months have gone by darkly and heavily, like a funeral train. Since September last, sickness has not quitted this house. It seems death is never far from us.

Well, do you wonder? Look at us, surrounded on three sides by a landscape of tombstones. Here, here and here. And inside Papa's church it's even worse.

On his last official visit to Haworth, Mister Benjamin Herschel Babbage, the government inspector, said quite emphatically that no further burials should take place under the church aisle. His speech was memorable ...

(She stands and steps downstage, now imitating the bump-tious official.)

(As BABBAGE.) The exhalations and noxious gases exuding from the decaying remains of past generations that are laid to rest under the aisle of Saint Michael and All Angels, not to mention the permanent placement of large slabs of stone as grave covers, which prevent the access of atmospheric zephyrs to the ground, a condition necessary for the desired decomposition of dead bodies, have long rendered this house of God an impossible place in which to worship, without the swooning supplicant being pungently reminded of the ultimate end of all things.

(To audience:) Oh, Mister Benjamin Herschel Babbage, how right you are. *(Tapping foot on floor.)* Mister Babbage once told me that Papa's church is the only one he knows that has a full congregation when empty.

My sister Anne is the only family member not interred under the cold damp stone floor across the way. It's from Scarborough that I've just returned, where I buried Anne this four weeks past. It was my decision to lay the flower in the place where it fell. I have no preference for place. And there's little pleasure in kneeling in Papa's church, knowing that your nearest and dearest are moldering directly under your knees.

(She steps to the rocker, tea tray beside, and lifts the tea cosy.)

I'm exhausted with this whole business of dying. *(Pause.)* I hate this teapot.

(She steps to the fireplace to warm herself.)

And funerals, dear God, I'm worn out with them. I'm tired of having to be staunch and unafraid, because I *am* afraid. And I refuse to wear black anymore.

Tabby is upset for my not having brought Anne back home to Haworth, to rest under the church aisle with the others. Tabby thinks we should all be buried together, so that on the Final Day of Resurrection, we won't lose each other in all the confusion.

You see, toward the end, my sister begged to visit Scarborough, because of her happy memories there as a governess. Papa knew it would be disastrous for one so far advanced in the consumptive way. But she pleaded so pitifully, that he finally relented and let me take her—my friend Nell and me. That was a month ago. Anne was only twenty-nine.

I shall always remember her as she was that last evening—sitting by the window, looking out to sea. Such tranquility in her face.

(Conversing in memory.) Anne, what are you thinking of?
(To audience:) "Of the next existence," she said simply. Oh, no, please.

But Anne was lost in her dreams. The most glorious sunset illumined the sky. The castle on the cliff was gilded in light. The little boats near the beach heaved on the tide, glittering like burnished gold. Anne seemed almost—well, almost transfigured. But her strength was fled. And so she died. She went so gently, we hardly realized. I think she knew it would be easier, the letting go—by the sea.

(Looking for spectacles:) Where are those damned spectacles?

(She stands and crosses, finding the spectacles in her purse.)

I dislike these. I think they look hideous. They leave a cleft right here. *(Touching bridge of her nose.)* Papa has one.

(She sits at the table again, puts on her spectacles and resumes her letter to NELL.)

(Writing.) I'm trying to be glad I've come home, Nell. I've always felt happy before, but this time, joy isn't the sensation. I feel the house in all its silence, the rooms all empty, where eight short months ago we were all together—Emily, Anne and our brother Branwell.

(She moves away from the table, removing her spectacles.)

(To audience.) In this room, my sisters and I used to assemble after supper, the dishes done, and walk and talk and read aloud our day's writings. We did, Emily, Anne and I. We

called it “perambulating.”

(She strides around the table happily.)

We perambulated arm-in-arm this way, like restless, wild animals, around and around the table, after everyone had gone to bed. It was here I first heard “Wuthering Heights,” chapter by chapter. Emily read it to us, night after night. Afterwards, I couldn’t sleep, it was so vivid and fearful, every page charged with a sort of electricity. Brooding and dark, as if hewn in some wild workshop.

(She sits on the settee with a book.)

Even today when I read “Wuthering Heights,” it’s like breathing lightning. *(Pause.)* Oh, Emily, gone like a dream.

(She resumes the letter to NELL in her mind.)

Actually, Nell, I love Memory tonight. I prize her as my best friend. She gives me a deep delight. The hours, the thoughts, the hopes of my youth. Vast and sweet they seem now. They cling to every smallest corner of this gray stone house ...

(She goes to the cabinet and looks at the shelves.)

... to the long-locked drawers and shelves. And to this cupboard shut up for years, filled with tokens of childhood. *(Opening cabinet door.)* Oh, here are my brother’s toy soldiers. *(Removing them.)* Papa purchased them in Leeds years ago for Brany. I remember the morning he brought them home. There was such excitement when they marched into the Parsonage.

Brany gave Waiting Boy to Anne. He waits. And Gravey to Emily. Brany took Sergeant Bud and Bonaparte, and mine was the Duke of Wellington. Duke for short.

(She plays a make-believe game with the soldiers.)

The Duke says, "How goes the watch, sir?"

What watch, Dukie?" says Gravey. *(Hiccup.)*

"You're drunk!" says the Duke. "You'll face a court-martial for this, sir!"

Brump, brump, brump.

"Ready, aim, fire!"

(She removes several tiny books from the cabinet.)

Those games led to our tiny books. We wrote these as children. The tales of Angria and Gondal and the great Glasstown adventures. Brany called it our "scribblemania period." *Furor scribendi*. That was our secret password. *(Wistfully.)* Such little things to so obsess our days and nights.

(She opens one book briefly, squints at the page, then closes it.)

We wove a web in childhood,

A web of sunny air;

We dug a spring in infancy

Of water pure and fair;

We sowed in youth a mustard seed,

We cut an almond rod;

We are now grown to riper age—

Are they withered in the sod?

The mustard seed in distant land
 Bends down a mighty tree,
 The dry, unbudding almond wand
 Has touched eternity.

(A clap of thunder interrupts the mood. CHARLOTTE returns the little books to the shelf. She removes an ivory fan and opens it.)

Here's the ivory fan that Aunt Branwell gave Emily in her will. Aunt Elizabeth Branwell was Mamma's sister. Brany was named for her. Auntie came to live with us from Penzance in Cornwall the May before Mamma died, and she never returned to Penzance. *(Pause.)* Auntie enjoyed arguing fiercely with Papa.

(As AUNTIE.) No, no, no, no, no, no, no, Mister Brontë! I'm sure you're wrong. *(To audience.)* She always won.

(As TABBY.) A bit of a tyke, she wur—*(To audience:)*—that's what Tabby says about Auntie—*(As TABBY.)* So crosslike an' fault-finding'. An' so stingy. She ga'e us, Sally an' me, but a gill o' beer a day, an' she ga'e it to us hersel', did Miss Branwell. She wouldna let us go t'draw it oursel' in t'cellar. No. Only a pint a day, she ga'e us. An' that wur half a pint for me an' half a pint for Sally. Hmph!

With Calvinish fervor, Aunt Branwell taught us joyless religion and workaday sewing, neither of which Emily excelled in. Her sampler is a horror. Brany embroidered the prettiest one.

(She replaces the fan and picks up BRANY's sampler.)

Look at these French knots. And have you ever seen more perfect lazy daisies? Brany, I think, should've been a girl. He might have been happier.

(She finds AUNTIE's snuff box.)

Oh, Auntie's snuff box. *(Imitating AUNTIE taking snuff.)* "No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, children, we do not use the word *spit*," she would say, with her little curls bouncing. "Never the word *spit*. If you must refer to the unpleasant discharging of unwanted matter from your chest cavity, you will hereafter use the word *expectorate*. Now repeat after me."

(She executes a prolonged sneeze.)

"Ex-pec-to-rate."

Oh, Auntie, in your black silk gown and lace mob cap, decreeing the rigid domestic schedule of our lives. Did you know that we cared for you? Did we ever tell you? Or thank you for giving up your plans, whatever they might have been, in sunny warm Penzance—to become mistress in this somber place?

And did you know that Brany doted on those false auburn curls so primly attached to your dear gray head? Oh, yes, Auntie, we knew that those springy curls were false. Brany secretly schemed to one night steal them while you slept, and pin them to Flossy's tail. Well, of course, he never did. Even the Duke of Wellington wouldn't have dared such an exploit. *(Regretfully.)* Oh, Auntie.

(We hear thunder and the sound of rain driving against the window. CHARLOTTE returns the snuff box to the cupboard.)

(*To audience:*) Like a North Pole day it is.

(*In her mind, she resumes her letter.*)

(*To NELL:*) Riding up from Keighley, Nell, the sky looked like ice. England might really have taken a slide up into the Arctic Zone, as some say.

(*More thunder. She crosses and sits in the rocker, calling to MARTHA, offstage.*)

Martha! Are the dogs inside? (*To audience:*) Flossy and Keeper are terrified of thunder. Flossy is Anne's dog—*was* Anne's dog. Keeper is a mastiff. Keeper followed Emily's coffin to the church. Now he spends most of each day lying outside her bedroom door upstairs.

(*To MARTHA:*) Let them come into the kitchen. They can sleep by the fire. Oh, and if it's all the same to you, I'd just as soon use the blue and white teapot after this. (*Pause.*) I know it was my aunt's, but I prefer the blue and white.

(*To audience:*) She's Martha Brown, the sexton's daughter. Martha's been with us since she was eleven. She came to help Tabby. Tabby has relinquished most of her exclusive tasks to Martha—with some jealous reluctance, I dare say. But they've always gotten on well.

Tabby was born in the year of our Lord only knows when. She must be eighty by now. She came to us a widow, when I was six. Tabitha Ackroyd. You saw she's lame? Well, last winter she fell at the top of Main Street, in front of the Black Bull Tavern. It's so steep there, don't you know, and the cobblestones were icy.

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