SCRIPT SAMPLE

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UNDERDOG: THE OTHER OTHER BRONTË

by Sarah Gordon

SAMUEL FRENCH

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concordtheatricals.co.uk
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United Kingdom and World
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020-7054-7298

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UNDERDOG: THE OTHER OTHER BRONTË was first produced at the Dorfman Theatre, National Theatre, London, a co-production with Northern Stage, Newcastle-upon-Tyne and opened on 4th April 2024. Running in Stage 1 at Northern Stage 7th–22nd June 2024. The cast was as follows:

MRS INGHAM/ELIZABETH GASKELL/ENSEMBLE .... Nick Blakeley
ANNE BRONTË .....Rhiannon Clements
MR BROCKLEHURST/THOMAS NEWBY/ENSEMBLE .....
.....Adam Donaldson
EMILY BRONTË..... Adele James
CUNLIFFE/TABBY/ENSEMBLE..... Kwaku Mills
PROFESSOR HEGER/GEORGE SMITH/ENSEMBLE .....
..... Julian Moore-Cook
BRANWELL BRONTË.....James Phoon
CHARLOTTE BRONTË.....Gemma Whelan

The production team was as follows:

DIRECTOR ..... Natalie Ibu
SET AND COSTUME DESIGNER..... Grace Smart
LIGHTING DESIGNER.....Zoe Spurr
SOUND DESIGNER.....Alexandra Faye Braithwaite
MOVEMENT DIRECTOR..... Ingrid Mackinnon
FIGHT AND INTIMACY DIRECTOR..... Haruka Kuroda
CASTING .....Naomi Downham
DIALECT COACH..... Charmian Hoare
COMPANY VOICE WORK ..... Shereen Ibrahim
ASSOCIATE LIGHTING DESIGNER ..... Charlotte Burton
ASSOCIATE MOVEMENT DIRECTOR.....Ana Beatriz Meireles
STAFF DIRECTOR.....Natasha Haws

PRODUCER ..... Fran Miller
PRODUCTION MANAGER ..... Clíona Ní Mhocháin
DRAMATURG .....Stewart Pringle
COMPANY STAGE MANAGER .....Ruth Taylor
DEPUTY STAGE MANAGER..... Morag Lavery
ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGERS ..... Zoe Gledhill and Ian Connop
DEPUTY PRODUCTION MANAGER .....Tabitha Piggott
PROJECT DRAUGHTING.....Tom Atkinson
DIGITAL ART..... Daniel Radley-Bennett

COSTUME SUPERVISOR ..... Tash Prynne
ASSISTANT COSTUMER SUPERVISOR .....Mariama Bojang
WIGS, HAIR & MAKE-UP SUPERVISOR .....Suzanne Scotcher
RUNNING WARDROBE SUPERVISOR .....Michelle MacMillan
PROPS SUPERVISOR..... Matilde Marangoni
PROPS BUYER..... Kinga Czynciel
PROPS MAKING MANAGER ..... Michael Garrett
PROPS MAKING COORDINATOR..... Michelle McLucas
LIGHTING SUPERVISOR.....Katie Lands
LIGHTING PROGRAMMER ..... Reese Graham
PRODUCTION SOUND ENGINEER .....Matt Berry
SOUND OPERATOR.....Jacob Dicker
RADIO MICS TECHNICIAN..... Ethan Traynor
STAGE SUPERVISORS.....Lee Harrington and Yuri Queiroz
RIGGING SUPERVISOR.....James 'Luka' Goodsall
AUTOMATION .....Mark Stiven and Patricia Andreucci
CONSTRUCTION SUPERVISOR.....David Cotton
SCENIC ART SUPERVISOR ..... Lindsay Tuffnell
PRODUCTION PHOTOGRAPHER .....Isha Shah

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CHARACTERS

CHARLOTTE BRONTË
ANNE BRONTË
EMILY BRONTË

An Ensemble plays the following:

MRS INGHAM, CUNLIFFEE, SMITH, GEORGE SMITH, THOMAS NEWBY, HARRIET MARTINEAU, ELIZABETH GASKELL, TABBY, HEGER, BROCKLEHURST, BRANWELL, WESTMINSTER REVIEW, THOMAS REID, ELIZABETH RIGBY, NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW, THE SPECTATOR, THE ATLAS, QUARTERLY, CHRISTIAN REMEMBRANCER, LONDON MAGAZINE, CRITIC 2, GEORGE HENRY LEWES, FONBLANQUE, WEEKLY NEWS, LITERARY WORLD, THE ANTHENAEUM, THE ANTHENAEUM, THACKERY, THE ERA, MAY SINCLAIR, DRIVER

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Note on the text
Multiple parts played per actor. Roles should not be assigned based on gender.

The play is told from Charlotte's present day point of view and as such has a modern sensibility to it. This is reflected in dialogue. All stage direction, music and set design are suggestions only.

/ means that the next speech begins at that point.
– means the next line interrupts.
(,) on its own means a pause equivalent to a beat.
[ ] means intended but not spoken aloud.

For Emma Gordon

PROLOGUE

(John Tavener's funereal "The Lamb" plays as the audience enter.)

(As it bleeds directly into Duran Duran's "Hungry Like The Wolf" the stage comes to life. The Ensemble erect the set, pulling up a dome of hanging male jackets of the period.)

(In the middle is **CHARLOTTE BRONTË***, directing them and checking all looks to her taste.)*

(Once done and the music has faded, the Ensemble retreat to the edges of the arena, leaving **CHARLOTTE** *at the centre.)*

CHARLOTTE. This… is not about me.

(She beams 'humbly', taking in her audience.)

Really.

EMILY. *(Offstage.)* CHARLOTTE?!

CHARLOTTE. Well, it's a little bit about me.

(Her smile fades.)

I see you all… Judging.

Young women always judge older women more harshly than anybody else in the world. Don't get me wrong, they *shout* their judgements about young men, old men… But they reserve the full weight of their arsenal for their own sex. Their mothers. Grandmothers.

Dare I say their 'idols' present and…past. They are conditioned to.

I'm aware our story's been done before. Three sisters of equal talent who supported each others' rise to fame and glory from out of the wilds of Yorkshire.

Like the centuries of women before us, we had to fight to be heard. It was a competition.

And in every competition there are winners and there are losers. And I might not be on a bank note right now *(Which is fine.)*, but, *Reader*… I think you know who's the most quotable.

You see, they say that behind every great man is a great woman.

That's nice.

But behind every great *woman* are a hundred other great women who are also trying to get her one seat at the table.

Which, let's face it, *is* awkward.

EMILY. *(Offstage.)* CHARLOTTE BRONTË –

*(***CHARLOTTE** *flinches at the interruption.)*

CHARLOTTE. Sorry –

EMILY. *(Offstage.)* WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU?

(She's derailed somewhat, almost imploring.)

CHARLOTTE. Sorry.

There may be some mistakes in this little revision.

But I – I feel you all advancing away from me again and so I fear it's time I tried to tell the truth… About how one became an idol and the other became known as the third sister.

I just… I hope you won't all judge me too harshly.

(She smiles, wryly.)

Woe betide the woman who wishes to be looked up to.

Scene One

"He's A Bellend"

*(**EMILY BRONTË** appears, holding a letter.)*

EMILY. Charlotte! There you are.

*(As **EMILY** enters, we are transported to 1837, the Brontë household in Haworth. Above them, indistinct voices argue in the background, both male and female.)*

CHARLOTTE. *(To audience, introducing.)* Emily. Middle sister.

And above us, our brother Branwell and our father fighting, with Anne, the youngest, being very, very, very good, as ever, playing mediator.

*(**EMILY** hands **CHARLOTTE** an envelope.)*

EMILY. Southey has replied.

CHARLOTTE. Robert Southey?!

EMILY. The very same.

*(**CHARLOTTE** tears open the envelope.)*

*(She paces about the room reading, whilst an agitated **EMILY** waits, tense.)*

CHARLOTTE. *(Hurt.)* Ha!

EMILY. Go on then, what's he said?

*(**CHARLOTTE** freezes defensively.)*

CHARLOTTE. Nothing.

EMILY. Charlotte.

CHARLOTTE. I don't want to.

EMILY. You're not going to be a child about this are you?

CHARLOTTE. I am not being a child, I just don't want to tell you. It's my letter, it is not your letter, it's mine.

EMILY. Bloody hell.

*(***ANNE BRONTË** *enters.)*

ANNE. *(Re the voices.)* They're still at it.

CHARLOTTE. *(Snapping.)* Well they can keep their problems and opinions upstairs.

Away from me.

ANNE. What – what's going on?

EMILY. Charlotte's had a reply from Robert Southey about her desire to become a professional writer.

ANNE. Baahh! Exciting! What's he said?

CHARLOTTE. "Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be" –

ANNE. Oh.

CHARLOTTE. "The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure she will have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation" –

EMILY. He's a bellend.

CHARLOTTE. He is the Poet Laureate!

EMILY. He's still a bellend.

CHARLOTTE. "To those duties you have not yet been called…"

EMILY. *(Grimacing.)* You told him you were single?

CHARLOTTE. "and when you are you will be less eager for celebrity" –

EMILY. You told him that you wanted to be famous?!

CHARLOTTE. I told him of my ambition to be forever known, yes.

EMILY. Oh.

CHARLOTTE. What?

EMILY. Bit much.

CHARLOTTE. What would you have had me say? "I desire your advice to become a writer of modest to little success? No, no, no, no *I* daren't ask for *anything* more than to have my talents dissolve politely into obscurity". Please. I'm not *Anne* –

ANNE. What have *I* done?!

CHARLOTTE. Nothing. You do nothing, you just stand there and listen. You look like some little church mouse.

ANNE. I do not look like a mouse. Do I look like a mouse?

EMILY. No.

CHARLOTTE. Emily –

EMILY. A bit.

*(***CHARLOTTE** *looks upwards towards the ceiling, where the voices rise again briefly in argument.)*

CHARLOTTE. *Would* they stop yelling!

EMILY. *(To* **ANNE**.*)* How are they?

ANNE. Not good.

EMILY. Branwell?

ANNE. Drunk.

EMILY. And Father?

ANNE. Weepy.

EMILY. Aunt Elizabeth?

ANNE. Irritating.

CHARLOTTE. Mighty words from the mouse!

EMILY. Stop it Charlotte.

ANNE. Father is worrying over Branwell's debts. New debts.

CHARLOTTE. Well what was he thinking? Letting him run off to try and become a painter. The man manages to turn even the most simple portrait into a nightmare in watercolours.

EMILY. At some point, Charlotte, you shall have to make peace with your nose.

CHARLOTTE. It doesn't *look* like that.

ANNE. I – I – I think he's quite good. When he's sober.

CHARLOTTE. Oh of course you do. You do nothing but serve his ego. *(Gesturing to the letter still in her hand.)* I bet you agree with this tripe. Quiet, dependant –

ANNE. Stop –

CHARLOTTE. Angelic –

ANNE. Stop it –

CHARLOTTE. Little Anne.

ANNE. Unjust!

EMILY. Please Charlotte. Leave Anne alone and go take out your rage on our dolt of a brother. Bully him into action before he drinks us out of house and home.

CHARLOTTE. Oh far be it from me to meddle in masculine matters.

*(***EMILY** *stares her down.)*

Fine.

*(***CHARLOTTE** *turns to leave. As she does so:)*

ANNE. Wait! One – one – one second.

(**CHARLOTTE** *turns.)*

(Quietly.) I've um. I've had an idea! Actually.

CHARLOTTE. *(Rolling her eyes.)* Go on…

ANNE. If, well, if we cannot reason with our brother, as apparently we can't, then perhaps the only way out this mess is by finding our own financial independence…?

(Both sisters look back at her blankly.)

EMILY. What?

ANNE. Like, get jobs.

CHARLOTTE. I'm not going to teach in a school again. The education system in this country is fucked.

EMILY. *(Agreeing.)* Cannot get worse.

ANNE. I agree. But – but – but what I mean to say is that whilst teaching is really the only thing we might be qualified for that is respectable and, and, um –

CHARLOTTE. Oh *please* get to the point –

ANNE. I have applied for a role as a governess.

CHARLOTTE. What?

ANNE. At a manor house. In Mirfield.

CHARLOTTE. You? Governess?

ANNE. Yes! What do you think?

CHARLOTTE. You?

ANNE. Yes, me!

(**ANNE** *waits a moment in suspense as* **CHARLOTTE** *considers this.)*

CHARLOTTE. No.

ANNE. I thought, if I were to attain such a position, then I would, well, A) be able to acquire something of my own independence –

CHARLOTTE. *(To* **EMILY***, playfully.)* She's doing that listing thing –

ANNE. – And B)! Be able to send some of my salary back home.

EMILY. And you have already acquired the position?

ANNE. I have!

EMILY. *(To* **CHARLOTTE***.)* Hardly mouse behaviour!

ANNE. I – I really am not a mouse! I – I only wish to do what is best.

*(***ANNE** *and* **EMILY** *both look to* **CHARLOTTE***.)*

CHARLOTTE. No.

EMILY. What?!

CHARLOTTE. She will not be able to bear it.

EMILY. And why do you think that?

CHARLOTTE. Because I know, as well as you do, that governessing is vile, lonely, debasing work, teaching table manners to aristocratic brats with egos larger than Queen Victoria's arse. Anne would not last a week.

EMILY. Anne is stronger than you think.

CHARLOTTE. Anne is a mouse!

ANNE. *(Mumbled.)* Anne is in the room.

CHARLOTTE. Beg your pardon?

ANNE. N – nothing.

CHARLOTTE. *(To* **EMILY***.)* You see how meek she is! She's is too gentle for that sort of work.

EMILY. Hypocrite! You sound like the pompous twat who wrote that letter!

CHARLOTTE. I most certainly do not!

EMILY. You would stop Anne from pursuing her dream –

ANNE. Oh, it's really not my dream –

EMILY. Stay out of this Anne –

ANNE. Sorry.

CHARLOTTE. I am protecting her. School nearly killed her!

ANNE. But this isn't school, it's a manor house. A big manor house. With things like food.

EMILY. *(To* **CHARLOTTE**.*)* The circumstances are entirely different.

CHARLOTTE. We will think of something else.

EMILY. We need the money now.

ANNE. Please.

(Small pause.)

CHARLOTTE. It's for your own good that I am saying no.

EMILY. Christ! You know we're all screwed financially, don't you?

*(***CHARLOTTE** *retreats to a chair to brood over her letter.)*

CHARLOTTE. I will think of something.

EMILY. *(To* **ANNE**.*)* She can't stop you, you know.

CHARLOTTE. *(To audience.)* Not true.

ANNE. No, I ... Maybe I can find employment at home.

EMILY. Urgh. You're an idiot. *(To* **CHARLOTTE**.*) You're* a dick. I'm going to sort out Branwell.

*(***EMILY** *exits.)*

*(**ANNE** hovers, watching **CHARLOTTE** read.)*

(She sits and picks up a book. Pretends to read.)

(Small pause.)

CHARLOTTE. I can feel you watching me.

ANNE. Sorry.

Sorry.

*(**ANNE** picks up her book again. Pretends to read. Watches **CHARLOTTE**.)*

(Small pause.)

CHARLOTTE. *(Not looking up.)* What is it?

ANNE. I – I'm really sorry about Southey.

CHARLOTTE. Don't be.

ANNE. *I* believe in you. Your stories are *amazing* –

CHARLOTTE. Thanks Anne, I'm just. I'm not in the mood.

ANNE. Sorry.

Sorry.

*(Small pause. **ANNE** grins.)*

Hey, um. Do – do your 'man' impression.

CHARLOTTE. Not now Anne.

ANNE. Go on.

CHARLOTTE. Stop it, I said I'm not in the mood.

ANNE. *(Already giggling.)* Do – do the bit where you're like Lord Byron.

CHARLOTTE. Anne –

ANNE. *Please* –

CHARLOTTE. *(As Lord Byron.)* FUCK OFF YOU PAGAN SHIT OF A WOMAN!

*(***ANNE** *screams with excitement.)*

ANNE. OH MY GOD IT'S SO GOOD!!

*(***CHARLOTTE** *rises.)*

CHARLOTTE. *(Still as Lord Byron.)* Draw your pistol or be damned!!

(Delighted, **ANNE** *draws out a mime pistol. The pair of them mime shoot each other,* **CHARLOTTE** *still as Lord Byron – everything groin first.)*

Now kiss me you bitch!

*(***ANNE** *dies with giggles, struggling to breath.)*

ANNE. I can't – I can't – I can't –

*(***CHARLOTTE** *laughs with her.)*

CHARLOTTE. Alright, calm down.

ANNE. I can't – I can't...

(After their laughter has died out, **CHARLOTTE** *slumps back into her chair.* **ANNE** *sits by* **CHARLOTTE***'s feet. She puts her head on her lap.)*

Play with my hair.

CHARLOTTE. No.

ANNE. Pleeeeaaase.

*(***CHARLOTTE** *huffs, but strokes* **ANNE***'s hair.)*

(Small pause.)

CHARLOTTE. *(Morose.)* I would be an *excellent* Lord.