

*Review: The National Theatre's "Jane Eyre"*

National Theatre's Girl-Power "Jane Eyre" Struggles to Prove Its Relevance

by Faith Hart

Pulling from a varied grab-bag of contemporary techniques, The National Theatre's production of *Jane Eyre* aims to infuse the stuffy classic with feminist power matched for our modern world. Unfortunately, it fails at placing meaningful female relationships onstage.

The vivid, moving musicality of this production is perhaps its most distinguishing feature. A live three-piece band remains onstage throughout the piece, frequently accompanied by the stunning vocals of Melanie Marshall. She glows, adorned in a flowing scarlet gown that spills from her body along with her haunting songs. The vibrancy of red is reserved for her alone, the rest of the cast clothed in dull tones. As if of another world entirely, Marshall floats mysteriously without obvious direction for most of the play, aside from an abrupt act of violence staged out of the audience's sightline. Despite the way she lurks in the background, I find myself enamored by her.

It is only in the last ten minutes that I fully understand who she has been all along: Bertha Mason. This revelation flings my jaw open and lurches me forward in my chair. All we have been told of this woman is that she is viciously mad, akin to an animal. I'm shocked, for the woman in red has been one of the most stable elements of the production. So there she is: the "madwoman" stands with a burning match raised to Thornfield, prepared to end her life of isolation, abuse, and misery.

Of course, *Jane Eyre* is not about Bertha Mason. The play's singular focus, played by Madeleine Worrall, stands only a few feet away from the woman in red. Each of these women has led lives destroyed by neglect and riddled with sexist limitations. On the edge of my seat, I pray silently to see them encounter one another. It doesn't happen.

I have been watching for nearly three hours. The production is rife with female anguish, Worrall's face rarely softening out of a pained grimace. Over and over again, gender-based limitations leave Jane defeated and disempowered as I grow increasingly exhausted. Now, the devised production has thrown away the perfect moment for two tortured female characters to be in a meaningful relationship together— even just to look one another in the eye.

Undoubtedly, pain, abuse, and limitations are a part of the collective female story. As a survivor of sexual assault and a modern woman, I intimately know the struggles that are inherent to being a woman and I am not opposed to seeing those struggles reflected onstage. However, the National Theatre's *Jane Eyre* falls into the same trap so many girl-power productions of our time do: regurgitating the female struggle, possibly retraumatizing audiences, without any payoff or mention of women's joy and resiliency.

The story of *Jane Eyre* was revolutionary in its context but for a modern feminist audience, it falls flat. I'm no longer interested in seeing a female lead struggle for independence for three hours, only to end up with a man with whom she's shared an emotionally volatile and aggressive relationship. I want to see productions that do not shy away from the struggles of women, but are proactive in championing their resiliency and autonomy apart from men. *Jane Eyre* has nothing left to teach us about the plight of women— we know the struggle well. It's time to offer a solution.

Make no mistake: this production is visually stunning and undoubtedly full of heart. Everyone involved is dripping with pure talent, which would have been better utilized in a show that doesn't have to struggle so much to prove its relevance.

My question remains: why do we insist on overlaying our modern politics on old stories when they simply can't keep up? Why not use National Theatre's massive budget to develop the voice of a modern female playwright? Let's honor Charlotte Bronte by gallantly pushing beyond her scope, into a new era of feminist art that celebrates resiliency and positive solutions, instead of merely rehashing pain and trauma.