

# BRONTË

## Education Pack UPDATE

# Interview with the Director

*Beth Flintoff caught up with the Director, Nancy Meckler, during a break in rehearsals.*

**Brontë has been performed by Shared Experience before, directed by Polly Teale.**

**What made you decide to return to it?**

Well, when we did the first production, I worked on the script development with Polly, and obviously I saw it a fair few times! I always thought it should have a future life, and when I was talking to Hedda (Beeby – The Watermill’s Artistic Director) about our collaboration, I explained that I wanted to do some exploratory work with a young company, and Hedda suggested *Brontë*. Because there are so many parts for young actors it particularly lends itself to an explorative process and so this is a completely new production. It’s like starting with a clean slate.

**When I sat in on some rehearsals it all seemed meticulously planned. How do you prepare for rehearsals?**

I don’t have it all mapped out, but I make a plan that morning. In the first two or three weeks, (this is a six week rehearsal period) we did exercises and improvisation for the first two hours every day. This Watermill/Shared Experience collaboration has meant we have the luxury of a long rehearsal. It gives you the time to ask questions, take risks and go down blind alleys before you need to make final decisions.

**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*.

**Can you tell us about being the first woman to direct at The National Theatre?**

Well, it was in about the early 1980s, and there weren't very many female directors around then. There were no female role models. But at that time the National was a new venture so being the first woman director didn't feel very historic. It was a wonderful experience, as the theatre is so supportive.

**How did you become Shared Experience's Artistic Director?**

When I was growing up in the States, I longed to be an actor, although I was rarely cast in student productions. As part of my University drama degree I directed a one act play and from that I was invited to direct other plays. But at that time, I didn't completely understand the role of the director. As a post-

graduate in London I studied acting, and I think it was really my acting training that prepared me for working with actors. When I returned to New York I got involved with an experimental theatre company called Cafe La Mama. It was a hot house for new writing and new form that was building a world-wide reputation. At that time physical theatre was really taking off. We used yoga and meditation and Polish theatre exercises and I found the physical work very freeing. Eventually I had the chance to explore that kind of work when I joined a fringe company in the UK called Freehold. We were sleeping on floors and travelling in the back of a van, but our work took us to the Edinburgh Fringe and then on to touring in Europe. It was a very exciting time. As the years went by I worked mainly as a freelance director in a more traditional way, but when I came to Shared Experience in the late eighties I was able to return to this very physical way of working.

**How did you start working with Polly Teale?**

When I first came to Shared Experience, Polly was my Assistant Director on *The Bacchae*. After that we stayed in touch and she joined me to co-direct *The Mill on the Floss*. We now run the company together and we've had a remarkable partnership I think because we share similar values about making theatre and creating a real ensemble each time we bring a group of actors together for a project.

# A Day in the Life of a Cast Member

The actress Kristin Atherton describes a typical day's rehearsal, and explains how it feels to play Charlotte Brontë.

'Today is a typically restful day in the life of Charlotte Brontë, given that I (and indeed the rest of the cast) spend about as much time offstage as the sisters spent writing romantic comedies.

We start at 10am, with a quick physical and vocal warm-up led by our director, Nancy. Then we get straight in at the deep end with scenes near to the end of the play. By this stage of the show the (already tormented) Brontë sisters have enjoyed more than their fair amount of disappointment and drama. Jumping straight into this part of the play after the weekend is no mean feat! Luckily my fellow Brontë, Flora Nicholson (who plays Anne), is never one to be fearful of jumping in and we're soon into the thick of things. We've already layered this complex section of scenes over the past couple of weeks, adding details of wants/obstacles and we're now getting to the delicate stage of refining this and making more solid blocking decisions. I explore a more back-footed Charlotte, and Flora finds some beautiful heartbreak in Anne's stoicism and desire to keep the struggling Brontë spirit afloat. Needless to say there are tears for the sisters both pre and post lunch break.

In the afternoon we go back to the beginning of the play, where we first see a glimpse of the pivotal relationship between the two sisters, Emily and Charlotte. Or more specifically: what happens when an immovable force meets an unstoppable object! We've spent a long time developing this particular dynamic, and what is exciting at this stage in the process is to see that work paying off. This scene starts to feel alive, so much so that I put an impressive rip in my apron as I frustratedly hang it up, mid-scene!

To finish, we look at two of Charlotte's male relationships, firstly her eventual husband, Arthur Bell Nicholls, in a scene we are looking at properly for the first time. The scene feels, after the multitude of heartache and death, like a beautiful bubble of awkwardness and humour. And to finish I finally get a handle on a tricky scene between Charlotte and her tutor Heger. Once again Nancy encourages David Fielder (who plays Heger) and me to improvise around the scene. In particular we discover the energy of what it feels like to invent poetry on the spot, as Charlotte has to do in this particular moment. Needless to say I am no poet but, following an improvisation that included phrases describing potatoes as "golden jewels" and a wooden crate as a "yawning cave mouth", we finally find what feels like the best energy for the lines.

We finish the day at 8pm, with the cast off to cook popcorn for our nightly instalment of the BBC version of Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. All in the name of research, you understand - none of us are paying any attention to the lovely Toby Stephens ....'

# Exercises: Status

The Assistant Director, Tom Hughes, describes some of the exercises used in the Brontë rehearsal room.

To introduce the idea of status, Nancy Meckler, the director, puts out ten chairs and numbers them 1 to 10. Then she asks the cast a series of questions, starting with simple ones such as 'how political are you,' and they position themselves behind the chairs according to their level, ten being the highest.

Then they talk about status levels in society and how it changes. A group of people will respond to each other in a manner often dictated by their perceived status.

To demonstrate this, Nancy gives each actor a playing card that they hold to their foreheads. They don't know the value of their own card, but everyone else does. They then improvise a scene in which each actor treats the others as though they have the status of their card's value. If they have a low number, they might be ignored, for example, but if they have a high number they should be treated with respect. After the improvisation, the actors have to guess their own 'value'.

Gradually the company develops a shared language for status that they can use in rehearsal: 10 is the highest possible status, and 1 the lowest. They talk about their character 'being a 2', for instance. This can become increasingly sophisticated: a character might consider themselves a 10 in one scene, but a 9 in the next, and everyone else might think of them as only a 4. In addition, someone can be a ten externally, but a low number internally.

*How does this affect the performances?*

The company develop guidelines for status that they can use when rehearsing the scenes: for instance the father, Patrick, is always a '10'. Whenever Patrick enters the room, everyone else's status goes down accordingly. As children, Charlotte is nearly always higher status than Emily, but in adulthood they are locked in a subtle power struggle. Charlotte growing up knows the world sees her as a 4 because she is poor and a woman. Internally, she feels a 10 and wants to be treated as such.

On the next page is an example of the script, with notes about the status levels of the characters.

# Status (continued)

'BRANWELL – 10'  
Branwell has been given a status of '10' when he first enters

'CHARLOTTE – 8'  
Charlotte has been given a status of '8' when she first enters. ANNE has only a '2' because she is younger.

*extended w/ play* →

*10*  
BRANWELL as an eight-year-old, runs into the room followed by his sisters, CHARLOTTE and ANNE (aged nine and five). He is carrying a parcel. PATRICK is fully sighted as he was twenty years before. Throughout this sequence EMILY remains in the kitchen in July 1845, preparing supper. The children chase around the table, BRANWELL holding the parcel aloft.

*8*

*2*  
CHARLOTTE. What is it, Father? (Re the parcel.)

*9/8/7/5*  
ANNE. Who did it come from?

*the holding table to be here*

*Enter Patrick - everyone downgraded.*

'EXTENDED WITH PLAY'  
In rehearsal, this section became longer than the stage directions in the script, and the young Brontës play together before Patrick enters

'ENTER PATRICK'  
When Patrick enters, he always has a status of 10 because as the father he is the most powerful figure in the household. Everyone else's status is reduced.

# Physical Exercises

Among the exercises Nancy Meckler, the director, uses are those created by the Bosnian director, Mladen Materic.

Two actors face each other. One makes a short movement with a clearly defined beginning and end. The other must respond physically, with another clearly defined movement. There should be no 'textual' meaning to their movements: they are responding to each other using only their bodies.

The actors explore different types of movement:

- Strong / light
- Straight / curved
- Fast / slow

The actors work in pairs, answering each other with their movement (still without speaking). Then Nancy gradually introduces another person into the space, and then another. They continue to respond to each other so that it becomes a kind of physical dialogue: ripples of movement cross the room. Nancy describes the result as similar to a sports team playing together organically.

These exercises encourage the actors to feel connected to each other physically when words and meaning are stripped away. The aim is for the physical relationships onstage to be as strong as the verbal communications.

*How does this affect the performances?*

Frances Mcnamee, who plays Bertha, has decided that Bertha's movement is strong, slow and curved. During the scene in which Charlotte and Branwell tell stories, Bertha enters the room and the other actors instinctively respond with a 'ripple' effect of movement. Emily and Anne, hiding under the table, roll over as she walks past. This came naturally to the actors, resulting from the physical training.

# Exercises: Wants & Obstacles

When working on improvisations, Nancy gives the actors a 'want' (i.e. a goal that they should try to achieve during the scene) and an 'obstacle' that works against them and might prevent them from achieving their want.

Below are some notes taken during rehearsal showing decisions that the company made about Emily and Charlotte's wants and obstacles.

EMILY *hears* CHARLOTTE *enter through the front door.*

CHARLOTTE. We need to make up the bed and the fire in Branwell's room. He and Anne are to be home tonight. They sent for the gig yesterday. We must buy some meat, and tobacco and . . . They must have been given leave. He is on his way and will be with us before nightfall. They are coming home.

EMILY. I know.

CHARLOTTE. You know?

EMILY. Anne wrote to me two days ago.

CHARLOTTE. Why did you not tell me?

*Charlotte:*  
Wants: to be in control, to mother Emily and organise everything.  
Obst: to not lose Emily's love

*Emily:*  
Wants: to maintain the independence she has had this year while Charlotte was away; to be in charge  
Obst: to not inflame Charlotte