

# *the Moors*

by Jen Silverman

RTW *renaissance*  
THEATERWORKS

## *Audience Guide*

*by Jayne Regan Pink*

### THE THEMES

Last year RTW opened its season with another of Jen Silverman's plays, 'Witch'. The female characters in the play shared a common ground in that they were essentially 'invisible' and 'unheard' in the situation and the world in which they inhabited. It is a theme that the playwright often returns to. Our play, THE MOORS revisits this theme through the lens of the Brontës' story, although not directly biographical, it would be fair to say that these historical characters provide a vehicle for Silverman.

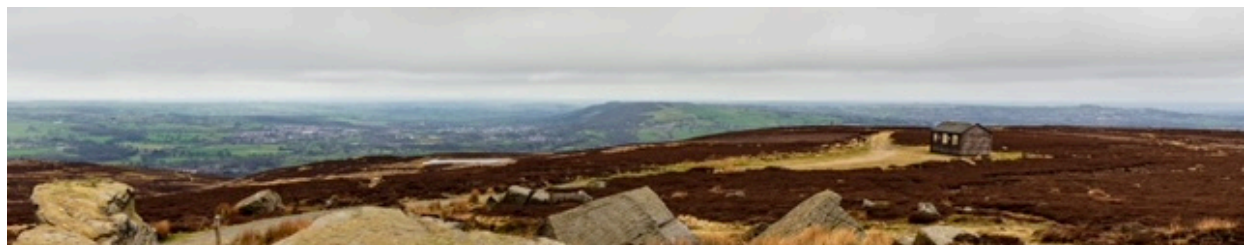
### THE LOCATION



The play is set on the North/West Yorkshire Moors. An awesome and bleak landscape that is high up, with skies that go on forever. It is a harsh and majestic part of northern England, where the sudden changes in climate can be unforgiving. In this setting we imagine the grand house is close to the parsonage at Haworth (home of the Brontë family).

By today's standards Haworth would be easily reached by booming industrial cities such as Leeds, Manchester, and Liverpool, or the Cathedral city of York to the east, but in the mid-1840s this particular windswept location was remote and solitary.

By the tail end of the Industrial Revolution, 1760 -1840, Britain's cities and towns had become connected by the expansive and flourishing rail network. The character of Emilie has traveled from the south of England (through London), to fulfill the position of governess in the employment of Agatha. This would suggest that she would have boarded a train (in 2nd or 3rd class, given her status) from Brighton for example, changed at London Kings Cross, and then continued on to Leeds. There were no onward connections from Leeds to smaller towns until 1854, so Emilie would have completed her very arduous journey by horse and carriage or omnibus. Typically a journey like this may have taken between 12 and 14 hours, made interminable by the lack of amenities and the discomfort.



## THE FAMILY IN THE MOORS

Costume Designs and Renderings by Jason Orlenko

**Agatha:** The elder spinster sister: spidery, dangerous and powerful, yet loveless.



**Huldey:** Younger spinster sister, ill-equipped and naïve, with literary aspirations and a yearning for any kind of recognition.



**Emilie:** The romantic and sweetly-faced governess.

**Marjory/Mallory:** The parlor/scullery maid. She is unseen, unheard, uneducated and long-suffering.



**The Mastiff:** The male house-dog; doleful and philosophical. He is ignored and doesn't even have a name.



**The Moor Hen:** A bird, native to the local landscape. She is practical and simplistic.

**Branwell:** We should include the 'unseen' character of the younger wayward brother, and heir to the property and the land.

**The moors:** And the landscape itself is a character, to which each character is carved from, and equally tethered to.

**Invisibility:** All of the play's characters are to some degree, essentially invisible. Hidden away on the bleak Yorkshire Moors and shrouded in the mid 19th century not only by their social status but more so their sex.

Some of the parallels and echoes between the story and characters in this play and of the lives and writings of the Brontë sisters are both direct and blurred in places.



A painting of the Brontë sisters - (left to right) Anne, Emily and Charlotte by their brother Patrick Branwell.

The character of Emilie, and in particular her role as governess, is a theme that appeared often in the stories of the three literary sisters. In the 19th century the occupation of a governess or a teacher was a respectable option for an educated young lady of moderate means; other than securing a fortunate match, she would have few other prospects. All three sisters at one time or another were either a governess or a teacher. Indeed Charlotte and Anne both immortalized their two eponymous protagonists; Jane Eyre, and Agnes Grey.

Charlotte Brontë spent time in Brussels as a teacher, where she fell in love with Constantin Hèger, a passion unrequited, but no doubt influenced her novel "The Professor."

**Spoiler Alert!** In THE MOORS, Agatha woos the governess Emilie, corresponding with her under the pretense that she is Master Branwell, writing under the pseudonym of her wayward brother.

Likewise, each Brontë sister wrote under a male pseudonym for their work to be considered in a man's world. Charlotte's was Currer Bell, Emily's was Ellis Bell, and Anne's was Acton Bell.

Although Charlotte was devoted to her younger sister, she was irked by Anne's undeserved success after receiving a positive response from the publisher Thomas Newby, and potentially beating Charlotte to the title as the first of the sisters to be published. Ultimately Charlotte's "Jane Eyre" would be published first, followed closely by Anne's "Agnes Grey," both in 1847. Given the similar themes and the wild popularity of "Jane Eyre," "Agnes Grey" would fly under the radar, establishing Charlotte as the literary superior. Anne would publish "The Tenant of Wildfell Hall" in 1848 to praise from critics and a fair bit of scandal, due to the themes she explored. The Tenant of Wildfell Hall would be Anne's most popular book; but when it was due for a reprint after her death, Charlotte blocked it. She is even quoted in a letter to her publisher saying "...hardly seems to me desirable to preserve ... the choice of subject in that work is a mistake." These actions by Charlotte doomed Anne to be known as "the forgotten" sister. In THE MOORS, the character of the older sister Agatha scrutinizes her younger sister Huldey's inadequate writing skills.

Charlotte/Agatha (in our play) is thrust into an untimely parental role with the unexplained absence of both maternal and paternal figures. In real life, Patrick Brontë outlived his six children, including the tragic and early demise of his only son Branwell; primed to be the shining hope of the family; gifted as a poet and an artist, he died of delirium fits associated with substance abuse.

The fictional character of Alice Fairfax (the housekeeper from Jane Eyre) could well be a mirror for Marjory/Mallory. She sees everything and bides her time. She is in the very fabric of the house, who's secrets she's bound to keep.

## THE BRONTË PARALLELS

EMILIE

AGATHA

HULDEY

AGATHA

MARJORY/  
MALLORY



**Spoiler Alert!** The unseen character in the play, also called Branwell is a ne'er-do-well, and has been hidden away, captive in the house's attic, as plans are made to protect the legacy of house and the land.

Emily Brontë's immortal tale "Wuthering Heights" is as much about the land and the moors themselves, as it is about Cathy and Heathcliff. In Emily's book, Heathcliff is treated like a dog and beaten by Master Hindley. Is our Mastiff in the play Heathcliff? He is dark and brooding and philosophical and more importantly 'consumed' by Catherine Earnshaw, in this case our Moorhen. If he can't have her, nobody can. The Mastiff and the Moorhen are unheard and wordless to the rest of the play's human characters, but they seem to say out loud to our audience all of the unspoken laments of the human creatures who inhabit the house on the moors.



Jen Silverman

Silverman: In general, I'm really interested in questions about visibility, and how women are seen and the space they are permitted to take up, and what is required to break those boundaries. I was particularly interested in exploring those kinds of stories on a landscape that is so bleak and isolated and has a special kind of permissiveness. Out there, you can dream yourself into a variety of things that you may have not been permitted to do in a more populated area - so I question, what does that look like? The bleakness is in the isolation and the permission is also in the isolation.

<https://stagebuddy.com/theater/theater-feature/interview-jen-silverman-female-visibility-power-gripping-new-play-moorsinterview-jen-silverman-on-female-visibility-and-power-in-her-gripping-new-play-the-moors>

**Invisibility syndrome** (APA diagnosis) is a feeling of being disregarded or undervalued due to prejudice or racism.

Feeling invisible, unseen, or unheard can happen in the home, the workplace, a classroom, a doctor's office, social settings, or when supervising a team of subordinates. Middle children, very young children, women, victims of bullying, religious and racial minorities often experience invisibility (defined as the inability to be seen or the state of being ignored or not taken into consideration).

Over time, feeling invisible can become chronic - gradually destroying self-esteem, self-confidence, and devaluing self-worth. Long-term disregard for oneself due to feeling invisible or ignored can cause sensory processing disorder, a condition in which the brain has trouble receiving and responding to information, and/or anti-mattering, which can lead to mental health disorders.

Research and recent studies find social rejection activates the same regions of the brain as physical pain - "hurt feelings may register in the brain just like a scraped knee or a kicked shin, according to new research that finds that the brain responds to social rejection in the same way it responds to physical pain." Feeling invisible, unwanted, or unaccepted can cause chronic stress, anger, depression, and rage, activating physical pain throughout the body. We often see this in lowering of the eyes, curving of the upper body, tilting the head, or crossing arms across the chest. Researchers have found emotional pain caused by the "silent treatment", or totally ignoring someone in a "love" relationship affects the chemical balance within the brain's sympathetic nervous system.

THE BRONTË  
PARALLELS  
(CONT.)

THE MASTIFF  
& THE MOOR  
HEN

INTERVIEW:  
JEN  
SILVERMAN  
ON FEMALE  
VISIBILITY  
AND POWER  
IN HER  
GRIPPING  
NEW PLAY  
"THE MOORS"

INVISIBILITY  
SYNDROME