

# Theatre review: Jane Eyre – Festival Theatre \*\*\*\*\*

☒ Charlotte Brontë's Yorkshire Grit lit, Jane Eyre, was more than just a conscience pricking social critique of class and gender injustice. Its humane realism and decidedly tenacious female protagonist/narrator also promised Gothic-lite, on the edge of the chaise lounge, romantic tension. However, there was little or none of her sister's feral bodice-ripping, vowel shattering shenanigans on t'storm blasted heaths and treacherous cliffs if you please.

Tortured by a terrible secret, co-protagonist Rochester (Tim Delap) is much more a nuanced, credible and empathic soul. Though heart-throbbingly broody and choleric enough. But it is always heroine, resilient sweet Jane (Nadia Clifford) who commands our hearts. Vulnerable but unvanquished, she is made of sterner stuff than those of her sex requiring a restorative rose-water tincture after the vulgarity of an exposed table-leg. Resilience, self-belief and loyalty without submission marks the three hour passion on our stage.

☒ It is a truth universally acknowledged that in the highly unlikely event that the Bristol Old Vic/National Theatre ever shot themselves in the foot with a production they would simply synthesise it seamlessly in to ground-breaking new physical theatre.

Set Designer, Michael Vale, eschews any cliché of bat bothered, ivy entwined Gothic motifs. His is a cubist, oak and pine timber geometric construct complimented by black thrusting tubular ladders on which Director, Sally Cookson, insists that this energetic and highly versatile cast occupies every available space. It is a utilitarian mean machine and

they work it majestically. Back and side of stage hang enormous pleated white drapes that provide back screens for an ever shifting pallet of colour and visual textures. Sound/Lighting Designers, Dominic Bilkey and Aileen Malone work in seamless tandem.

Composer, Benji Bower, utterly in his element, combines traditional Folk song airs, played through the three piece on-stage combo, in addition to some decidedly sultry jazz sketch scene transitions. Operatic vignettes beguile with increasing sinister portent from the voice of Melanie Marshall as Bertha Mason, Rochester's incarcerated frenzied wife. Her Act 2 torch-song rendition of 'Mad About The Boy' should be as kitsch as it is anachronistic but just satisfies the heart's curves and spaces in all the right places.

☒ There are set-pieces aplenty to delight a life-time's imagination and beyond. Jane's bone-shaking stage-coach travels are realised through a gee-up giddy montage of mime and harness Rap. The Lowood children seeking warm from a candle suggests a nuanced homage to Georges de La Tour's Nativity painting. The bedclothes on fire episode is satisfyingly convincing, but equally ominous is when Jane bashfully accepts Rochester's bridal veil and train gift. The cast playfully toss and tumble it with wind effects but the suggestion of ectoplasm, even a winding-sheet, is ever there. Bertha Mason is going to see to that. Increasingly throuout Act 2, a section of the cast serve as Chorus voicing Jane's mounting expectations and inner conflicts. One poignant scene has them force her to view herself in hand held vanity mirrors. Better she sketch a self-portrait to remind her of her undeserving origins and hopeless expectationsof Rochester's requited love.

Whilst the opening ten minutes of Act 1 are acoustically near to bombast and percussive overbearing things soon settle down. The plaintive acapella sang by the Lowood School girls, Kyrie Eleison (Lord Have Mercy), chimes ironically with the

discordant, brutish faux piety of Mr. Brocklehurst (Ben Cutler). Cutler's utterly improbable role as Rochester's ever faithful dog, Pilot, is – well, barkingly superb. The swelling denouement is resolved with heroic credibility. A moment frozen in a pin-drop silent kiss. Reader – you will be married to this show. If you want to know if ever faithful Pilot does/doesn't escape the terrible conflagration up at the house – look away now. Of course he does.

Melodramatic romance with passionate panache, forged in the volatile smithy of Bristol Old Vic's turgid genius for doing things the awkward way. This Jane Eyre gives your heart and soul a breath of fresh daring. *Omnia Vincit Amor.*

<http://www.edtheatres.com/janeeyre>