

Society	:	Banbury Cross Players
Production	:	Underdog: The Other Other Brontë
Date	:	19 th June 2026
Venue	:	The Mill Arts Centre, Banbury
District	:	London District 12

I am grateful to David Smith for inviting me to report on Banbury Cross Players' production of "Underdog". David himself, along with the Players' Vice-Chairman Adrian McGlynn, was in the foyer to greet me, and Director Linda Shaw was kind enough to find time for a chat during the interval.

"Underdog" is an irreverent retelling of the lives of Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë, a story of the sibling rivalry between three sisters striving to succeed in a male-dominated world. Contemporary accounts of the sisters' lives, notably Elizabeth Gaskell's biography of Charlotte, are acknowledged, but the emphasis here is on an informed imagining of the intra-familial relationships. The women's love and support for each other is frequently in tension with their ambition and competitive spirit, as all three seek to challenge Victorian societal norms about the proper role of women in society. There's also a contemporary feminist spin to the writing, and the play's modern viewpoint is emphasised by the strong language employed throughout.

Charlotte, the eldest of the three sisters and played by Vivienne Garnett, is very much in charge of proceedings from the moment she steps onto the stage to supervise the placement of furniture and properties. We are going to witness her version of reality. Of course, many of her critical character traits can be attributed to

her upbringing: the sisters' mother died shortly after Anne was born, so Charlotte must inevitably have felt the burden of responsibility, especially as she couldn't depend on her ailing father or her drunken, dissolute brother. Vivienne portrayed her as determined, decisive and uncompromising as she vigorously pursued her dream of being considered the equal of the acknowledged literary giants of the time. The character frequently also assumes the role of narrator, and Vivienne was able to transition seamlessly between key participant and the confidante of the audience: she has excellent stage presence, and the ability to modulate her lines in keeping with their context.

The uneven success of the sisters' early literary ventures brought its own difficulties: Emily's only novel, "Wuthering Heights", and Anne's "Agnes Grey" were published more or less simultaneously, even as Charlotte was still receiving rejection slips for "The Professor". To what extent did the sibling rivalry spill over into jealousy and bitterness? Charlotte's decision not to reprint "The Tenant of Wildfell Hall" after Anne's death certainly felt vindictive, but Vivienne ensured that there was a certain detachment to Charlotte's decision-making so that the question of whether she was acting to protect Anne's legacy or promote her own at least remained open.

Charlotte is undeniably the dominant personality amongst the sisters, but the title character is the youngest sister, Anne, played by Sophie Raval. Just as Charlotte, as the eldest surviving child, has had to step up to leadership, so Anne's demeanour reflected the fact that she had grown up as the youngest member of the family, with a tendency towards accepting the primacy of her sisters. She is, however, pragmatic enough to recognise that options for young women in her position were distinctly limited at the time, and she therefore accepts a governess role from the wealthy and entitled Mrs Ingham. She is also principled enough to stand up for her beliefs, so she quickly resigns her post when she

is told to let the appalling behaviour of Mrs Ingham's son Cunliffe go unchallenged.

Sophie is wonderfully expressive: you could see how reluctantly she accepted the status quo in her defeated eyes, somewhat passive demeanour and slightly sagging shoulders, but when roused she exhibited the defiant spirit which underpinned her ambition. She also demonstrated the ability to portray Anne's occasionally submissive attitude towards Charlotte through excellent body language and the skilful phrasing and delivery of her lines – and of course it helped that Vivienne's height only emphasised her dominance in the family dynamic. Sophie ensured that Anne's monologues, which are generally quite analytical in nature, were argued and delivered persuasively.

The middle sister Emily, as depicted here, is probably the least well-defined character of the three, but Hannah Ramsden was able to combine dominant and passive traits in a portrayal that was entirely believable. In particular, Hannah was able to transition seamlessly between unconditional support for her younger sister, perhaps with her arm around Anne's shoulders, and righteous indignation towards her older sibling, and her criticisms of Charlotte could be quite caustic at times.

Each of the three principal actors really inhabited their roles and delivered admirably accomplished performances. They knew their lines well and delivered them persuasively, with phrases well shaped and just the right amount of tonal and dynamic variation. Consistent Yorkshire accents were maintained throughout, without ever descending into parody or pastiche. Their body language was suitably restrained for this intimate study of sisters, and unnecessary or extravagant movements and gestures were avoided: a slight inward lean was enough to convey interest, engagement or sympathy, while folded arms could indicate a similarly broad range of negative attitudes and feelings.

What was most impressive was the way in which the sisters interacted with each other: conversation and dialogue was well paced with cues generally picked up sharply, and in some exchanges the sisters were effectively completing each other's sentences. They weren't afraid to vary the pace of their exchanges according to their context, so that there was a clear contrast between discussions of success and disappointment, and appropriate pauses were left for reflection as necessary. There was also a subtle distinction in how the sisters recited extracts from their works – more formal, more mannered – which incidentally highlighted how natural and effortless their everyday dialogue sounded.

The blocking – which made full use of The Mill's generously wide stage – echoed the changing dynamics between the sisters, so that if a character was emotionally isolated then they tended to be physically more distant as well. And when the sisterhood was close their mutual love and support was manifested in their behaviours, such as the stroking of each other's hair: I also really liked the way in which the characters occasionally sat on the floor or even sprawled on the ground, very real and relaxed behaviours associated with secure settings, but rarely seen on stage - although the raked seating rising from the level of the stage means that The Mill is particularly well suited to this approach. Vivienne, Sophie and Hannah's portrayals meant that it was easy to believe that the three characters really were sisters, and I expect that the long Sunday rehearsals may have contributed to this as the actors evidently had extended opportunities to work through their scenes with each other.

The three principals were supported by a small ensemble who swapped efficiently between generic and specific roles. The criss-crossing critics were especially effective, as the movement reinforced the suspicion that an isolated opinion, even before the

days of social media, could be picked up, repeated, and become a universal view. There was similarly effective movement in an early scene when Anne is interviewed for a governess role, and her putative employer, Mrs Ingham (played by Kate Groves), led Anne backwards and forwards along seemingly endless corridors while setting out her expectations. Mrs Ingham's long monologue could easily have become a tedious list of demands but in fact provided a fascinating commentary on rank and status in mid-19th century England, with particular reference to the established patrimony. The imaginative and effective staging conveyed the chasm in class between employer and employee, the size of the house, and Mrs Ingham's attitude towards her perceived social inferiors.

There were many other examples of episodes from the sisters' lives being presented in simple but powerful ways, not least the scene in which they went through a huge pile of post uncovering nothing but rejection slips from various publishers. The carriage ride to London was also imaginatively presented using parasols, with Jem Turner's clip-clopping coconut shells emphasising the length and tedium of the journey.

The other members of the ensemble all had their own opportunities to shine in various roles, with Richard Oliver making a particularly strong impression as Charlotte's apparently forward-thinking and supportive publisher, who nevertheless left the impression that he would be happy to exploit his relationship with Charlotte in more ways than one. Fraser McMinn was convincing as the sisters' dissolute brother Branwell, and the offstage arguments between him and the siblings' father in the parsonage in Haworth were appropriately presented as muffled exchanges, although I personally couldn't help feeling that the artifice in having two actors mumbling at each other offstage was too obvious. The theatricality of this may have been deliberate, but I felt that they might at least have had an imagined dialogue to make the rhythm and cadences of their exchanges more realistic.

The set was simple and flexible, with rear wall projections to give context and black tabs which inevitably hinted at the gloomy parsonage that the sisters, and the play, are trying to escape from. The properties by Ian Nutt included some vintage but mismatched furniture which strengthened the impression that the Brontës were struggling financially, and the piles of books emphasised the sisters' literary ambitions even if some of the tomes looked suspiciously modern. I understand that stage managers are properly nervous about liquid spills, and that Branwell could hardly have been asked to hurl an actual glass tumbler across the stage, but it was unfortunate that the plastic beaker sounded quite so cheap and that the "wine" was so obviously water. Such details can easily undermine the suspension of the audience's disbelief.

Linda's lighting design exploited the black tabs, adding to the intensity of the domestic scenes and the drama of literary London. With support from Robin Williams, she was also responsible for the soundtrack which included some interesting (and modern) choices of music: Taverner's "The Lamb" captured the austere beauty of a remote Yorkshire parsonage, while Kylie Minogue's "Can't Get You Out of My Head" energised the fashionable metropolitan elites. More generally, the short musical interludes successfully evoked mood and emotion, and served as effective punctuation marks between episodes of the story.

Linda, assisted by Molly Gill and Liz Riley, was also responsible for the costume choices, and these were well judged: the sisters wore period dresses in strong dark colours, and it was interesting to consider whether or not the individual colours – red for Charlotte, blue for Emily and green for Anne – reflected each character's personality. The ensemble wore rustic tunics and breeches, with variations and accessories as necessary to portray incidental characters; members of the upper classes, such as Mrs Ingham, merited their own, rather more sumptuous outfits.

The anachronisms in aspects of the staging were of course complementary to the play itself, which seeks to examine the sisters' lives from a contemporary perspective, and features modern idioms and robust language. Indeed, the whole production was a curious amalgam of different eras and styles which emphasised the timelessness of the central narrative – the underdog striving to succeed in a hostile world. The publicity design drew on yet another source of inspiration, with the silhouettes of three women evoking mid-1970s Athena poster shops: this seemed to be completely distinct from the design concept of the production of a whole, which to my mind felt like a missed opportunity.

But these are just minor observations. The play stands or falls by the quality of the performances, and the three principal actors delivered engaging portrayals of the Brontë sisters, and their determination to be recognised in the male dominated world of 19th century literary London. It was sobering to be reminded that the Brontës achieved recognition only when they adopted male pseudonyms, and that they struggled to have their writing judged as “the work of an author, not of a woman”. It's an important tale which still needs to be told, and there were moments when the intensity of the story-telling meant that you could have heard a pin drop in the auditorium. This was another high-quality, thought-provoking presentation from the Banbury Cross Players.

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