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Dramatic Publishing

JANE EYRE: Life at Lowood

A One Act Play

Dramatized

by

ROBERT JOHANSON

Based on the novel, *Jane Eyre*,

by

CHARLOTTE BRONTË



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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(JANE EYRE: Life at Lowood)

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Produced by special arrangement with
THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY of Woodstock, Illinois

JANE EYRE: Life at Lowood

A One-act Play
For 12w, 2m, 5 girls, 1 boy
plus any number of schoolgirls – some doubling possible

CHARACTERS

JANE EYRE as an adult
YOUNG JANE EYRE, 10 years old

AT GATESHEAD:

MRS. SARA GIBSON REED, Jane's aunt

Her children:

JOHN REED, age 14
GEORGIANA REED, age 12
ELIZA REED, age 13
GEORGIANA, age 25
ELIZA, age 26

Her maids:

BESSIE
MISS ABBOT

MR. REED'S GHOST

AT LOWOOD SCHOOL:

MR. BROCKLEHURST, the headmaster

MISS MILLER

MISS SCATCHERD

MADAME PIERROT, the French teacher

HELEN BURNS, age 14

MISS MARIA TEMPLE

MRS. BROCKLEHURST, the headmaster's wife

AUGUSTA BROCKLEHURST, their daughter

SCHOOLGIRLS, ages 8-17

MRS. FAIRFAX, Thornfield Hall

THE PLACE: Northeast England.

THE TIME: 1832.

The stage is surrounded in darkness. Minimal furnishings only are used to denote locales.

At Gateshead there is an upholstered bench, sofa, stool, table and two chairs, a bed.

At Lowood a number of wooden benches, a globe, a sickbed.

The production is spare and elegant.

All characters have one costume except YOUNG JANE who dons a schoolgirl's apron over her basic black.

POSSIBLE DOUBLING: 7-9 women, 2 men, 4 girls, 1 boy
+ schoolgirls

Jane Eyre

Young Jane Eyre

Mrs. Reed, Mrs. Brocklehurst

John Reed

Young Eliza Reed, Schoolgirl

Young Georgiana Reed, Augusta Brocklehurst, Schoolgirl

Mr. Reed's Ghost, Doctor

Bessie

Abbott, Madame Pierrot, Mrs. Fairfax

Miss Miller

Miss Scatcherd

Helen Burns

Miss Temple

Schoolgirls – Older Georgiana, Eliza

JANE EYRE: Life at Lowood

AT RISE: *An upholstered bench is center stage with a book lying upon it. The book is Bewick's History of British Birds. A pool of light illuminates the bench only—ideally it is the dim light from a tall window on a gray day coming from the direction of the audience. The bench floats in a dark surround.*

Out of the darkness, a veiled woman in black appears from UC. She slowly walks to the bench and stands behind it. The woman lifts her veil. She is very plain. Her name is JANE EYRE.

JANE (*looking out the window*). I never liked long walks, especially on chilly afternoons. As a child, I was glad when it rained and my aunt confined us indoors. Then I could sneak away to some quiet corner and open a book—

(YOUNG JANE appears from behind JANE and comes around to sit on the bench, opening the book.)

JANE. —one stored with pictures. Each picture told a story—a story quite different from my own. (*Harpsichord or piano music is heard. Both JANES look in the direction of the music.*) When my aunt was occupied in

playing her music, I had to be wary. Music never soothed me. Rather, it filled me with fear.

(JOHN REED appears, followed by his sisters. They are sneaking up on YOUNG JANE. JOHN, 14, is large and stout for his age with unwholesome skin. The golden-curl'd GEORGIANA, 12, is quite pretty, if a little plump; ELIZA, 13, is severely handsome.)

JANE. My cousin, John Reed, bullied and punished me; not two or three times a week, but every moment he was out of his mother's sight. He should have been away to school, but my aunt claimed he must remain at home due to his delicate health. I feared him with every nerve in my body.

JOHN. What now, Madam Mope?

YOUNG JANE. What do you want?

JOHN. Say "What do you want, Master Reed?"

YOUNG JANE. What do you want, Master Reed.

JOHN. I want you to come here! *(He thrusts his tongue out at her as far as possible without damaging the roots.)*

JANE *(as YOUNG JANE slowly walks toward JOHN)*. I knew he would soon strike, and while dreading the blow, I mused on his disgusting and ugly appearance. I'm sure he read the notion on my face.

JOHN *(striking YOUNG JANE hard across the face)*. That is for the look you just had in your eyes! *(He snatches YOUNG JANE's book.)* How dare you steal MY book—you are a dependant, Mama says! You have no money; your father left you none; you ought to be a beggar and not live here with gentlemen's children like us. Isn't that right, Georgie? Liza?

GEORGIANA. She's a horrid orphan.

ELIZA. For nine years a guest in our home!

JOHN. I'll teach you to rummage through my shelves! Everything in this house belongs to me, or will do in a few years' time. I'll teach you. *(He strikes her hard with the book. She falls to the ground.)*

YOUNG JANE. Wicked and cruel boy! You are like a murderer—a slavedriver—you are like the Roman emperors! *(JOHN is shocked speechless for a moment.)*

JANE. I had read Goldsmith's *History of Rome*, and had formed my opinions of Nero and Caligula!

JOHN. What? What? Eliza! Georgiana! Did you hear what this rat said to me? *(He pulls her up by the hair and hits her hard again. The SISTERS run off screaming for their mother. JOHN throws himself on the ground and pulls the nearly fainted YOUNG JANE onto him and struggles with her as though SHE were attacking HIM.)* Help! Get her off me! MAMA! MAMA!

(The elegantly gowned MRS. REED runs shrieking into the room, followed by her girls and the maids, BESSIE and ABBOT.)

MRS. REED. Pull her off! She's attacking my delicate John! Bessie! Abbot! Pull her off I say!

(BESSIE and ABBOT struggle to lift YOUNG JANE off. MRS. REED kneels by her sobbing son.)

BESSIE.

Dear! Dear! To fly at Master John that way!

ABBOT.

Did ever anyone see such a picture of passion!

GEORGIANA.

She's killing him!

ELIZA.

Our John will be murdered!

MRS. REED. Lock her up in the red room!

MAIDS (*holding the battered YOUNG JANE*). The red room?MRS. REED. Jane Eyre will stay there until I come to let her out. (*The MAIDS drag YOUNG JANE around the upstage playing area as MRS. REED supports her sobbing son to walk out DL followed by GEORGIANA and ELIZA.*)JOHN. Mama, why does she always attack me? (*Screams.*)
Don't let her hurt me again!

YOUNG JANE. No! No! Please! I didn't do it! I didn't do anything!

JOHN. She's a liar! Liar!

(The FAMILY is gone. BESSIE and ABBOT have walked the struggling YOUNG JANE around the stage. They mime opening a door and warily entering this new room. They now place her on the same bench lit by a dim down light and surrounded with a red glow—the Red Room.)

JANE. Unjust! Cried my reason! Unjust! (*YOUNG JANE continues to struggle.*)

ABBOT. Hold her arms, Bessie, she's like a mad cat!

BESSIE. For shame, Miss Eyre, to strike at your young master!

YOUNG JANE. Master! Am I his servant?

ABBOT. You are less than a servant for you do nothing for your keep. If Mrs. Reed were to turn you out you would go to the poorhouse.

YOUNG JANE. She is my aunt—they are my cousins!

ABBOT. Don't think yourself equal with the Misses and Master Reed. They will have a great deal of money and you will have none. It is your place to be humble. Now will you sit still or must I remove my garters to tie you up? (*Preparing to remove her garters for bonds.*)

YOUNG JANE. No, no please. I'll be still.

BESSIE. What we tell you is for your own good, Miss Jane. Try to behave. Come, Miss Abbot, I'm scared to stay in this haunted place.

YOUNG JANE. Haunted?

BESSIE. Mr. Reed's bedroom, miss.

ABBOT. He died right there in that bed.

(ABBOT points to a bed in the direction of the audience. Both MAIDS cross themselves, then exit. Locking the imaginary door: SOUND EFFECT of key turning in the lock as lights fade with door closed.)

JANE (*standing again behind her younger self*). Even from the distance of so many years, I still feel the heat of that ceaseless inward question—WHY? Why did I suffer thus?

(BESSIE and ABBOT outside door.)

BESSIE. Poor Miss Jane is to be pitied, Abbot.

ABBOT. If she were a nice pretty girl like Miss Georgiana, one might pity her forlornness; but one really cannot

care for such a plain little toad as that. (*BESSIE and ABBOT exit.*)

JANE. I was hated because I was plain. But, I could not see it then, all I could see was that I was in the Red Room where my dead uncle had laid in state—my dead uncle that if he had lived would have treated me kindly. My mother's brother who had taken me in. (*Eerie and mysterious music and a change of lighting.*) Bessie had told me that if dead men in their graves were troubled that their last wishes had not been fulfilled, they would revisit the earth to exact a punishment. I fell down on my knees and prayed—prayed for my dead uncle to save me— (*As YOUNG JANE falls to her knees—*)

JANE & YOUNG JANE. —save me from this hell!

(*Suddenly from out of the darkness behind her, MR. REED slowly approaches with arms outstretched—reaching for YOUNG JANE. [This can also be accomplished by merely hearing the voice.]*)

MR. REED'S GHOST. Jane! Jane! My wife promised on my deathbed—she would rear you as her own. Oh, Jane! JANE!

YOUNG JANE (*screams and bolts for the door*). Help! Help! Bessie! Let me out! Take me out! Save me!

(*BESSIE and ABBOT run on fumbling with the keys. The sound of the door unlocking. BESSIE and ABBOT enter the Red Room. The GHOST has disappeared.*)

BESSIE.

Miss Eyre, are you ill?

ABBOT.

What a dreadful noise!

YOUNG JANE. I heard the rushing of wings—I saw it!

There was a ghost!

BESSIE. Haunted!

ABBOT. Another naughty trick!

(MRS. REED appears—her children crowded behind her.)

MRS. REED. What is all this? She was to be left here until I let her out.

BESSIE. She screamed so loud, ma'am.

MRS. REED. Let go her hand! Leave this room! I abhor artifice; even in children.

YOUNG JANE. I saw my Uncle Reed.

MRS. REED. What?

YOUNG JANE. My Uncle Reed, he knows how you've treated me—all of you; he knows how you shut me up and how you wish me dead. He said that on his death-bed, you promised him to rear me as your own.

MRS. REED *(after a stunned silence)*. You shall remain here all night!

YOUNG JANE. No, Aunt! Please don't! Please! Don't lock me in! *(ALL exit. The sound of the door slamming. YOUNG JANE faints dead away as the lights fade.)*

JANE *(in a solitary light)*. I ought to forgive my aunt. She believed me to be a wanton and troubled child—a clever actress. To her I was. But to her I owe much mental suffering.

(In the darkness the sound of a key in the lock. Light from the open door comes on revealing a crumpled YOUNG JANE. BESSIE enters carrying a little doll.)

BESSIE. Come, Miss Jane, Missus said I was to bring you out. Don't cry, Miss Jane.

YOUNG JANE. I cry because I am miserable. It was cruel to shut me up with a ghost in there—I will never forget it!

BESSIE. Missus was rather too hard. Here, I brought you your little doll. (*YOUNG JANE grabs her doll and hugs it to her.*)

JANE. With what absurd sincerity I doted on this shabby little scarecrow of a doll. I could not sleep unless it was folded in my nightgown. Human beings must love something.

YOUNG JANE. Bessie, they all hate me. Master John struck me. He struck me, Bessie, several times. What can I do?

BESSIE. Wouldn't you like to go to school?

YOUNG JANE. I should like it very much.

JANE. My aunt, it seems, had come to the same conclusion. I was summoned to her presence in the parlor.

(The parlor now assembles with a few elegant furnishings: R a sofa, a stool by the sofa, and a side table with lamp; L a writing table with two chairs and a lamp. MRS. REED sits on the sofa with JOHN lying indolently beside her eating candy. A tall, sable-clad, severe gentleman, MR. BROCKLEHURST, stands across the room. GEORGIANA eats chocolates on the footstool and ELIZA writes in her account book.)

MRS. REED. Mr. Brocklehurst, this is the girl respecting whom I applied to you. Jane Eyre.

BROCKLEHURST. Well, Jane Eyre, are you a good child?

MRS. REED. Perhaps the less said on that subject the better.

BROCKLEHURST. No sight so sad as a naughty little girl. Come here. Do you know where the wicked go after death?

YOUNG JANE. They go to hell.

BROCKLEHURST. A pit full of fire. Should you like to fall into that pit and be burning there forever?

YOUNG JANE. No, sir.

BROCKLEHURST. What must you do to avoid going to hell?

YOUNG JANE. I must keep in good health and not die.

BROCKLEHURST. You have a wicked heart. You must pray to God to change it.

MRS. REED. Mr. Brocklehurst, I know this girl has not quite the character you would wish, but should you admit her to Lowood School, please request her teachers to guard against her worst fault—deceit. She has been known to lie.

JANE. Already my aunt obliterated any hope for a new phase of my existence.

BROCKLEHURST. She shall be watched, Mrs. Reed.

MRS. REED. She should be brought up to be useful and humble. As to vacations, she will, with your permission, spend them at Lowood. (*She has written a check and handed it to BROCKLEHURST.*)

BROCKLEHURST. Perfectly so, madam. Little girl, here is a book entitled the *Child's Guide*; (*He hands YOUNG JANE a copy of the book.*) read it carefully, especially the part accounting the sudden death of little Martha, a naughty child addicted to lying. We will expect you quite soon. Good day to you then.

MRS. REED. Good day. I will be sending her as soon as possible. (*BROCKLEHURST departs. To YOUNG JANE:*) You may return to the nursery. (*YOUNG JANE stands staring at her calmly.*) Why do you stand there?

YOUNG JANE. I am not deceitful; if I were I should say I loved you; but I do not love you: I dislike you the worst of anybody in the world except for your son, John Reed. And as to this book, you may give it to him, for it is he who tells lies, not I. I will never come to see you when I am grown up; and if anyone asks me how I liked you, I will say the very thought of you makes me sick and that you treated me with miserable cruelty.

MRS. REED. How dare you affirm that, Jane Eyre?

YOUNG JANE. How dare I, Aunt Reed? How dare I? Because it is the truth. You think I have no feelings and that I can do without one bit of love; but I cannot live so. People think you are a good woman, but you are bad; hard-hearted. YOU are deceitful to tell Mr. Brocklehurst I have a bad character.

MRS. REED. Children must be corrected for their faults.

YOUNG JANE. Deceit is not my fault! You deceived your own husband when you promised to take care of me as your own. Send me to school soon for I hate to live here. (*YOUNG JANE leaves the parlor. MRS. REED is quite shaken.*)

MRS. REED. Oh, I will indeed. (*The lights fade on MRS. REED and the furniture is struck in the darkness.*)

JANE. Something of vengeance I had tasted for the first time—it seemed like fine wine; but it's after-flavor—metallic and corroding—gave me a sensation as if I had been poisoned.