

Theatre preview: A Bronte Burlesque takes it all off

New production from Send In The Girls opens in Edmonton

BY LIZ NICHOLLS, EDMONTON JOURNAL JANUARY 22, 2014

EDMONTON - The strangest premise of the theatre season gets legs in the show that opens Thursday on the Roxy stage.

Repressed? Shy? Congenitally cautious? Four words, my friends: Send In The Girls. The historical proclivities of this enterprising burlesque troupe, exercised in the past on such alluring mysteries as the multiple wives of Henry VIII, run to revelation. Cover-ups are a red flag to them.

The latest from Send In The Girls unlaces the corseted world of the 19th-century literati, casts off its bonnets, replaces its demure downward glances with come-hither winks, and reveals a lot about the underpinnings of Victorian repression. Literally.

Under the non-literary rallying cry “take it off!”, A Bronte Burlesque takes us into the buttoned-up world of the cloistered English family that gave the world Jane Eyre (Charlotte Bronte), Wuthering Heights (Emily Bronte), The Tenant of Wildfell Hall (Anne Bronte), and in the case of their boozehound brother Branwell, a whole passel of poems and paintings. The troupe, and the script by Ellen Chorley, are all about “theatricalizing” burlesque, marrying its flamboyant performance style (and '80s dance hits) to narrative impulses.

“Each burlesque number has its own little story,” says Samantha Duff, the willowy University of Alberta acting grad who makes her burlesque debut as Charlotte. “And that’s what burlesque is. As opposed to just stripping and dancing, there’s a mini-story; there’s motivation for taking off your clothes.” Shakespeare, indoors and out, both in Edmonton and her hometown of Calgary, has pride of place in the Duff resumé. A Bronte Burlesque is way outside the world of doublet-and-hose and iambic pentameter.

“This is me climbing Everest,” she grins. “Way out of my comfort box, and that was something I was looking for.” Having a character to play when you’re taking your clothes off is a great boost to the comfort level, Duff reports.

Chris W. Cook, who plays Branwell, agrees. Like Duff, the Edmonton actor/playwright/artistic director is convinced that it’s easier to be cavorting across the stage in next-to-nothing if you’re in a bona fide play. “When exposure is rooted in character, it doesn’t seem so scary.”

Director Lana Michelle Hughes’s cast, which includes Chorley as the agoraphobic Emily and Delia Barnett as Anne, rehearsed incrementally, wearing less and less. “Baby steps,” says Duff. “First you fake the reveals, then more costume pieces come off.”

A Bronte Burlesque isn’t the first time Cook has been naked, or nearly, onstage. In his own play *Death Is Bullshit: The Pursuit Of Pavement*, Cook’s character, a zany inventor, “just didn’t like wearing clothes.” Burlesque ups the ante stylistically. Duff and Chorley report that he showed a natural flair for “reveals”: “Chris rocked the shoulder shimmy right away. And the suspender tease.”

So, why are the literary luminaries of the 19th-century English novel dancing in their knickers to Florence and the Machine and Radiohead? The context has something to do with peeling back the constraints of female ambition and respectability in the period. A certain detectable “feminist outlook” in *Jane Eyre* first twigged Chorley to the idea. “A woman’s place in society,” plus “a family life with a lot of secrets” — these are notions that lend themselves to peeling off layers.

All three sisters used male pseudonyms when they published, which explains why they wear ties in the show. Chorley explains that “when Anne starts to remove clothing, the scene is about the discovery of a secret notebook, and her finally revealing her work to us. It’s all about freeing yourself from baggage.”

Branwell, the only guy in the crowd, is “a bit of a sad-sack,” says Cook cheerfully of the underachiever sibling he plays. “He had a problem with booze, and with the success of his sisters, and over the

course of the show that tears the family apart. “Al, our stage manager (Al Gadowsky) calls him ‘our gentleman’,” laughs Chorley. “We girls call him ‘our brute’.”

“I was interested in the combination of Brontes and burlesque as a really interesting way to experiment with intimacy,” says Chorley. Burlesque is a style element that gives the story “a heightened reality.” Cook knows a lot about the heightening and shrinking of reality in showbiz from his non-theatre job as host of a karaoke bar. “A lot of this show is memory, a fever dream. So burlesque works wonderfully.”

Not coincidentally perhaps, Chorley notes, everyone in the cast and crew of *A Bronte Burlesque* brings an indie theatre drive, ingenuity and experience to the table. When she’s not acting, Duff, for example, creates outdoor children’s theatre with her Calgary company Goodger-Pink Productions. Cook, who is in the Citadel’s upcoming *Romeo and Juliet*, acts and writes for his company Watch Me Productions. Director Hughes heads the all-female theatre co-op *Running in Heels*. Production manager Beth Dart is half the creative engine of *Catch The Keys Productions*, which creates and markets shows, festivals, special-occasion theatre, theatrical extravaganzas you haven’t even thought of yet.

“It’s so inspiring to create with people who have that indie theatre passion and creativity — on a budget of \$3,” beams Chorley, whose *Promise Productions* premières new kids plays, and runs the annual *Snow Globe Festival* at Christmas time. “Everyone feels more invested in the project ... It’s the best room to be in.” A show that’s all about lack of costumes is bound to warm an indie heart.