

A Brontë Burlesque

January 30, 2014 [Mel Priestley](#) [Arts](#) [No comments](#)

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This is the type of English literature lesson that would make even the most reticent student take notice.

A Brontë Burlesque is the newest show by Ellen Chorley of Send in the Girls, a burlesque troupe whose *raison d'être* is as much dramatic story as it is erotic revelation. It spins a florid, behind-the-scenes (and under-the-corset) tale of the three Brontë sisters: Charlotte (Samantha Duff), Anne (Delia Barnett) and Emily (Chorley), as well as their underachieving, drunken brother Branwell (Chris W Cook). The story is framed as a set of recollections by Charlotte as she lies on her deathbed, the ghosts of her predeceased siblings visiting her in a self-admitted Dickensian fugue. While many elements of the story are clear artistic liberties, plenty of historical facts underpin the events and provide a solid grounding in reality, allowing the audience to wonder about the truth behind these scandalous exposés.

Burlesque done right means that putting on clothing can be just as stimulating as taking it off; *A Brontë Burlesque* excels in both regards. We watch each character take their turn in performing classic burlesque numbers, dexterously handling the ties and snaps on their artful costumes; we also watch the sisters don men's button-down shirts and neckties as they adopt the pseudonyms (Currer, Acton and Ellis Bell) that allowed them to publish their first novels in a male-dominated world.

This structure continues throughout the rest of the show: the characters' emotional states and inner thoughts are fleshed out (quite literally) through a series of reveals and subsequent coverings. By maintaining a strong focus on story, and with a cast that displays clear acting chops, *A Brontë Burlesque* elevates itself above the classic, cabaret-style burlesque medium.

But while the plot could stand on its own, stripped away from the burlesque numbers, those are still very much required for the mood and tone of the piece; lest all this sound overly serious, know that it's also unrepentantly campy and self-consciously demonstrative—the latter very much in the same vein as the Brontës' own writing.

With a contemporary soundtrack that aligns Radiohead with the Eurythmics and an inventive stage design placing a Victorian four-poster bed in a room of subtly shifting projections and occasional stark backlighting (for what's a burlesque show without a shadowy striptease?), *A Brontë Burlesque* is a celebration of three formative writers, a psychoanalysis of family politics and a benchmark for local burlesque.

Until Sun, Feb 2 (7:30 pm; Sun matinee at 2 pm)

Directed by Lana Michelle Hughes

Roxy Theatre, \$16 – \$20