

Review: Emma Rice (dir.) *Wuthering Heights*, Wise Children (National Theatre, London), 4 February - 19 March 2022.

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THOSE FAMILIAR WITH Emma Rice's work will not be surprised to find that her production of *Wuthering Heights* at the National Theatre puts an unconventional spin on Emily Brontë's 1847 novel.¹ After stepping down as Artistic Director at the Globe in 2018 due to creative disagreements with the theatre's board, Rice founded her own theatre company, Wise Children, with whom she now brings to the stage this latest endeavour.²

Rice's metatheatrical approach to adapting the novel is clear from the outset. The set is stripped back and bare; the legs have been removed, granting a view straight into the wings, around which black-clad stage managers can be seen moving during the performance, tossing props to the actors. By exposing the bones of the theatre space in this way, the set design establishes a production at pains to remind its audience that they are watching a constructed reality. Rice's approach thus stands in contrast to previous adaptations, like the most recent major film adaptation, Andrea Arnold's gritty and naturalistic 2011 version, low on dialogue, but full of shaky-camera shots of skies and hillside vistas, animals and inclement weather.³ This production has more in common with Armando Iannucci's 2019 *The Personal History of David Copperfield*, or even Carrie Cracknell's 2022 *Persuasion*.⁴ Both films cast a racially-diverse group of actors, and, with differing levels of success, strive to show viewers that they are wry, self-reflexive, and aware of their own artifice. Rice follows suit: the play opens with the Leader of the Moor (Nandi Bhebhe) beginning to read from a book, and closes

¹ The performances at the National Theatre were part of a tour which originated at the Bristol Old Vic and concluded at the King's Theatre in Edinburgh.

² Kate Kellaway, 'Emma Rice: "I don't know how I got to be so controversial"', *The Guardian*, 1 July 2018.

³ *Wuthering Heights*, dir. Andrea Arnold (Curzon Artificial Eye, 2011).

⁴ See *The Personal History of David Copperfield*, dir. Armando Iannucci (Lionsgate, 2019) and *Persuasion*, dir. Carrie Cracknell (Netflix, 2022).

with a projection of the final page of the novel's manuscript – the audience is never to doubt that they are being told a story.

Rice's script is also more expansive than most. The complicated family tree and timeline of the novel has presented a challenge to many writers and directors; the solution is, generally, to cut the second half of the narrative and focus on the tragic love affair between Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw. Charles McArthur and Ben Hecht took this route for their screenplay in 1939, as did Nigel Kneale in 1953, and Patrick Tilley in 1970.⁵ Rice chooses to tell the whole story, with steps taken to ensure that audience members unfamiliar with the novel can follow along. This makes for some slightly stilted and expository dialogue, and, once again, involves the use of devices which draw attention to the artificiality of performance. Once deceased, characters' names appear written on blackboards, brought on and off, and carried around by the ensemble; a conceit that is occasionally played for laughs, but that demonstrates a key concept of this adaptation. 'To die in *Wuthering Heights* – and so many do – usually means to be bundled speedily offstage, ungrieved and soon forgotten', observes Deborah Lutz, but this production is inclined to keep them around.⁶ The effect is exacerbated because, with the exception of Catherine, Heathcliff and the Leader of the Moor, all of the actors double roles. Witney White as Frances Earnshaw – played here as a screeching Essex girl – shows her softer side as the younger Catherine, whilst Hindley is never totally banished from the story as Tama Phatthan continues to walk the stage as his son Hareton. 'The dead are not annihilated', says Heathcliff in the novel, and Rice's casting decisions offer an afterlife of sorts; the stage is a space where no-one is ever truly gone.⁷

Yet Rice's adaption differs from the original, in that she continually teases out the complicated web of characters and familial relationships for a theatre-going audience, through accent, costume and the script's exposition (writing a

⁵ See *Wuthering Heights*, dir. William Wyler (United Artists, 1939), *Wuthering Heights*, dir. Rudolph Cartier (BBC, 1953), and *Wuthering Heights*, dir. Robert Fuest (American International Pictures, 1970).

⁶ Deborah Lutz, 'Relics and Death Culture in *Wuthering Heights*', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 45.3 (2012), 389–408 (p. 391).

⁷ Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (London: Pan Books, 1967), p. 318.

monologue for the Doctor in the second half, for example, which updates the audience on the births, marriages and deaths). The novel has no such impulse. Brontë has her characters constantly blur boundaries between people; she also blurs them herself. Catherine and Heathcliff's longing to be subsumed into one another serves as the most extreme example, but Hareton, too, is compared variously to Heathcliff, Hindley and Catherine, while the younger Catherine and Linton by their very names are blurred with older members of their families.

There is an on-stage band of guitar, drums and upright bass, which is complemented at points by cello and accordion, with some stunning music and dance sequences created by composer Ian Ross and choreographer Etta Murfitt. These are largely led by The Moor, an ensemble of actors, which Rice has explained functions as a Greek chorus: 'I cut Nelly Dean, took the form of a Greek Tragedy and created a chorus of The Moor'.⁸ The Moor takes on a variety of roles, dispensing commentary, advice and admonitions to the characters. Unlike with a Greek chorus, however, characters often interact with The Moor. The audience is encouraged to identify Catherine and Heathcliff with this landscape, the refrain of Catherine's solo declaring: 'I am the Earth'. In a play continually negotiating inside/outside spatial boundaries (a prominent piece of set is a door, wheeled on and off), and where characters often discuss being elsewhere (Cathy Linton pleading to return to Thrushcross Grange, Linton Heathcliff begging to return to London), The Moor is the only constant. This impression is heightened by the practical need for the ensemble to move scenery, manage props and manipulate puppets – by necessity The Moor is woven into every aspect of the on-stage world.

Lucy McCormick is fantastic as Catherine Earnshaw, bringing a wild, anarchic energy to the stage. Playing the younger version of the character, she leans into the stereotype of the troublesome teen: she is stroppy and raucous, running around the stage and into the audience in a white dress and boots. In the second half, after her death, she literally haunts the stage (as Heathcliff has wished for) in a dirty torn nightgown and smudged eye makeup. Ash Hunter's Heathcliff is stoic and brooding, but never seems quite to deliver the level of menace and

⁸ *Wuthering Heights*, dir. Emma Rice, Wise Children (National Theatre, London), 10 March 2022, Programme. All further citations are from this production and are given in the text.

volatility expected from the character. When he says to Catherine, of Isabella, that he would 'wrench her nails from her fingers', he does not entirely convince. Perhaps Hunter's task is a more difficult one than McCormick's. He is certainly disserved by the script's placement of his biggest monologue, in which he curses Catherine and the Lintons (with an emphatic 'I smudge you!') immediately before a solo by McCormick, which turns the atmosphere of the National Theatre briefly into that of a rock concert. The adjacency of the two scenes makes it difficult to avoid comparison: any monologue would pale before the drama and spectacle of Catherine's literal moment in the spotlight. The chemistry between Catherine and Heathcliff could also have been stronger – their connection through an adolescence spent roaming the moors is conveyed credibly, but McCormick and Hunter falter somewhat as the relationship becomes more bitter and fractious.

The production embraces its comedic moments and veers at times almost into camp – for one, Rice is unafraid to flirt with musical theatre as a genre. One of the novel's most famous scenes, where Catherine's ghost appears at Lockwood's window, verges on horror-movie melodrama here – it does not chill or unsettle, either like the 1939 film's eerie and understated interpretation of the encounter, or in the way the 'lamentable prayer' of what Lockwood 'discerned, obscurely, [as] a child's face' does in the novel's equivalent passage.⁹ This aspect is most pronounced with Sam Archer's Edgar Linton and Katy Owen's Isabella and 'Little' Linton Heathcliff. They are brilliant comic creations, with their exaggerated physicality, fancy clothes and RP accents distinguishing them from the rest of the characters. Owen, double cast as Isabella and her son, gets the biggest laughs of the night, with her extraordinarily physical performances of the childish, mincing Isabella, and the spoiled, nagging Linton. They struggle, however, to make the emotional beats of the story land. Having set up mother and son as amusing and somewhat pitiful, the script asks us to reevaluate them (and perhaps our laughter at them). This is more successful with Isabella, whom we see shattered by Heathcliff's abusive behaviour, begging the audience not to forget her; it is less so when the younger Linton's petulance turns threatening. He has been set up too well as the comic relief to deliver the gravitas this episode demands, and like

⁹ Brontë, pp. 54-5.

Hunter's Heathcliff does not quite convey the malice that is part of the character in the novel – the cowardly torturer of cats, the 'little tyrant'.¹⁰

Rice's *Wuthering Heights* is a fantastic night of theatre, and if it is not the moving and unsettling *Wuthering Heights* of Brontë's novel, it is because that is not its aim. It sits more comfortably in a tradition of nineteenth-century adaptations that are self-consciously theatrical than in a tradition of *Wuthering Heights* adaptations that attempt to capture the dark and violent heart of the novel. Consequently, some of its raw power is lost: the relationships between the characters are less well-drawn, the emotional impact lands more lightly. Its power is in its spectacle, originality, charismatic performances, and irreverent spirit.



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¹⁰ Brontë, p. 267.