

# Jane Eyre: Theater Review

by Mark Bretz | Posted: Monday, April 15, 2013 11:02 am

**Story:** Jane Eyre, orphaned at an early age, is taken in by her mother's brother and his family. After his death she is subject to ridicule and abuse by her aunt and cousins, and ultimately dispatched to the Lowood School for Girls at age 10. Living conditions at the institution are squalid, and many of Jane's classmates die in a typhus epidemic.

Following her studies at Lowood, Jane remains there as a teacher for a couple of years before taking a job as governess to the ward of a wealthy baron named Edward Rochester at his manor, Thornfield Hall. Gradually she finds herself attracted to the brooding but decent Rochester, who lives a mysterious life. Rochester's past, including a mentally ill wife who is kept in the attic of Thornfield, eventually catches up with both him and Jane, and she moves on.

Rescued by a kindly parson and his sisters after misfortune strikes her, Jane discovers that her benefactors are actually related to her, and also learns that she has inherited the fortune of an uncle she has never known. She returns to Thornfield to care for Rochester, who was seriously injured in a fire caused by his late wife.

**Highlights:** Visiting Wikipedia, one finds that *Jane Eyre* has been adapted to the stage more than 50 times since Charlotte Bronte's novel first was published in 1847. The book has remained popular for nearly two centuries, not only in its novel form and the stage versions but myriad film and TV adaptations starring the likes of Susannah York, George C. Scott, Timothy Dalton, Joan Fontaine and dozens of others.

Mustard Seed Theatre artistic director Deanna Jent has assembled an expert cast that breathes life into a somewhat stilted adaptation with precise literary and theatrical application. Included in that cast is Sarah Cannon, who gives one of the best performances in her impressive career as the fiercely independent and passionate title character.

**Other Info:** Jent has chosen a 2002 adaptation by her friend and Northwestern University classmate Julie Beckman, who wrote her version as a company member of Seattle's Book-It Repertory Theatre. It's an odd and spastic approach that attempts to eliminate the need for a narrator by having various characters deliver actual dialogue, as well as descriptive phrases, lifted directly from Bronte's novel.

For the most part, the Mustard Seed production succeeds in spite of, rather than because of, Book-It's unsatisfying signature style that adapts works of literature to the stage. For many in the audience, that approach is highly effective and enjoyable, but for me it was annoying and awkward and rarely edifying.

As for the production, though, it's immensely enjoyable, as Jent and her technical team carefully construct a time and place that pulls the audience into 19th century England. Dunsy Dai's scenic design conveys the splendor of Thornfield Hall as it provides the illusion of a three-story structure on the

Fontbonne University Fine Arts Theatre stage.

Thanks to Michael Sullivan's pinpoint lighting design, it just as easily puts the viewer in a cramped boarding room at Lowood School at stage right. Meg Brinkley's props further accentuate the setting.

JC Kracijek's sumptuous costumes befit the characters of various class status of the era, while Kareem Deane's sound design adds nicely defined touches to various scenes. Further enhancing the effort is some pleasing original music performed by Leona Ernst, even if it tends to be too intrusive early in the show, and the cast displays fine voices on a few tunes that embellish proceedings.

The supporting ensemble does marvelous work, aided by Richard Lewis' precise dialect coaching, most apparent in several small but delicious bits by B. Weller that seem to cover the entire British Isles. Donna Weinsting is consistently nasty as Jane's officious aunt, Mrs. Reed, and equally convincing as her uncle's affable servant, Bessie.

Gregory Cuellar and Laura Ernst capture the spoiled and boorish qualities of Mrs. Reed's children, Katie Donnelly is Rochester's screaming, sinister mad wife and Leslie Wobbe essays the role of Jane's late uncle's guiding spirit. Kathryn Hunter does a fine job as Jane's friend and schoolmate, the ill-fated Helen Burns, while Carmen Russell and Lewis add deft touches to other minor roles.

The production is carried, though, by Cannon in the title role and Shaun Sheley as the tortured Rochester. Cannon remarkably changes the pitch of her voice when transforming from 10-year-old Jane to the 20-year-old version with nary a lapse in time. Her characterization richly conveys a wide breadth of emotions that is multi-layered and fully engaging throughout, a suitable interpretation for a great work of literature.

Sheley provides wonderful counterbalance as Rochester, barely recognizable from his recent performance in Talley's Folly but equally successful as he was in that fine effort. His interpretation is more subtle than forceful, resulting in a deeper and more affecting persona.

Despite Beckman's funky adaptation, Mustard Seed's version of *Jane Eyre* is a splendid way to see Bronte's enduring characters brought to life on stage.

Play: *Jane Eyre*

Group: Mustard Seed Theatre

**Venue:** Fontbonne Fine Arts Theatre, Wydown at Big Bend

**Dates:** April 18, 19, 20, 21, 25, 26, 27, 28

**Tickets:** \$20-\$25 (pay with a can/pay what you can at Saturday matinees); contact 719-8060 or [mustardseedtheatre.com](http://mustardseedtheatre.com)

**Rating:** A 4.5 on a scale of 1-to-5.

*Photos courtesy of John Lamb*