

REVIEW ★★☆☆

# "DO WE EVER REALLY KNOW WHAT LURKS WITHIN US?"

Audrey review: An intriguing play ponders the monstrosity that yearning and isolation can seed in the psyche.

**Category:** Theatre

**Show:** The Moors

**Company:** Siren Theatre Company

**Where:** Seymour Centre, Chippendale, Sydney

**When:** 7 Feb - 1 Mar 2019

## THE MOORS

**By:** Kate Prendergast      **Date:** 10 Feb 2019

**Stray upon the moors, and you may be swallowed whole.**

The most fantastical events can happen on those merciless tracts – events lurid, horrific and absurd – and then the land itself will engulf them. Bleakness will restore itself, and all will be as though nothing occurred.

American playwright Jen Silverman's *The Moors* is a queer reckoning of, and homage to, the Victorian gothic. Kinkily erotic, dreamlike and twisted, this Brontë sisters subversion for the modern age erupts the "dangerous desires" that for centuries went overwhelmingly untold. "You want 'taboo'?" it seems to mock the canon dryly. "You trying to tell us that all forbidden sexual energy was just pent up in class divides? Well!"

Here, in a comic inversion of the mad-woman-in-the-attic formula, Silverman cages her would-be Rochester, and – in another flip of a sexist trope – reduces him to a biological mechanism. As women in literature and life were largely reduced to childbearing vassals, so he is reduced to a child-creating dick. In this upside-down world, the "mad women" can enact their vengeful, long-repressed fantasies.

But what does it matter, if their lives still play out on those wretched moors? They're still trapped.

The sisters in this case are Agatha and Huldey, foils for each other in temperament and character.

Huldey, played with just the right amount of flounce and squeal by Enya Daly, is fanciful and girlish. She is also pathologically committed to self-denial when it comes to the crushing banality of her limited existence. She keeps a journal, dreams of fame, play-acts the glorified rapes that typify the romance of her era, and thinks by recording her dull life she can transcend it.

Alas, she has no talent; she is no Brontë after all.

Agatha, who seems to glow with a regal, otherworldly cruelty through actress Romy Bartz, is the lady of the house. Rather than deny the nihilism of the moors or become its victim, she has internalised and embraced it, and triumphs in its all-consuming power.

Pretending to be her brother (who is allegedly "indisposed"), Agatha lures in a virginal governess from London. Emilie arrives as fresh-faced as *The Sound of Music's* Maria, guitar at the ready, expectant of a swooning seduction by a commanding male master. Instead, she finds (and finds pleasure in) a female master hungry for legacy and a new "sub". Their mutual self-interest turns them both on.

As the contract of "civilised behaviour" is abandoned with relish, impermissible acts are made possible, and what was a rather unpromising, ho-hum beginning becomes a whirlpool that drags viewers down and in. A scene in which Agatha and Emilie confront each other on the moors is the hinge. After this point, the unravelling is swift and compelling.

Strangeness billows through as time, space and meaning take on the absurd logic and intensity of a dream. Never for a moment does the circular stage stop swirling, its black plastic coating shimmering then engulfing the characters' reflected doubles (while unfortunately making some actors' shoes squeak). Chairs are righted and toppled for no reason; words are uncoupled from their referent; conversation is laden with insinuation and traps; and a maid is either named Mallory or Marjory (and is either pregnant or has typhus) according to whether she is in the scullery or kitchen.

Diana Popovska gives the show's strongest performance as this shifting, Machiavellian servant. She scuttles about the stage like a spider in petticoats, beady eyes gleaming beneath a monobrow, resentful of her masters and plotting insurrection. In Dickens novels, you would find her described as "a creature". Here, this minion dominates.

The moors don't just swallow humans, though. They prey on beasts, too.

A pathos-rich parallel narrative unfurls in the household's dog (played by Thomas Campbell), an introspective savage whose terrible need for company and kindness projects itself on a tiny injured bird. Unlike his human counterparts, the mastiff hasn't the intelligence for fiendish machinations, yet his impulsive animal nature leads him to a similar kind of despair.

"Happiness is a clenched knot beneath your heart that hurts, then is gone," the dog explains to the bird (Alex Francis). "Loneliness is a similar clench that stays."

*The Moors* stages a surreal rumination on the monstrosity that yearning and isolation can seed in the psyche. Darkly comic, it tells of how that acute longing for meaningful connection – for the other to see us, recognise us, even adore us – encourages extremity.

All-consuming, this need forms an abscess, and an obsession to fill it. To what lengths will we go in the attempt? At what cost? What fresh terrors does fulfilment bring? Do we ever really know what lurks within us? And how can we resist the myriad forms of madness that attend upon desire?

A final deserving hat tip now to Nate Edmondson, the award-winning composer and sound designer behind this intriguing production, who jangled audience nerves at all the right moments and swelled the self-reflexive melodrama with apropos musical pomp. He also aided Daly in her terrific genre-bending final ballad. For the audience on opening night: a highlight.

*Kate Prendergast*

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