

The untold story of Branwell Bronte - Charlotte, Emily and Anne's troubled alcoholic brother



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Adam Nagaitis, who plays Branwell Bronte in Sally Wainwright's *To Walk Invisible* tonight Credit: Telegraph/David Rose

The lives of the Brontë sisters are widely known to have been as unremittingly bleak and chequered with disappointment as those of their heroines. Two older sisters who died of tuberculosis as children, a mother lost to uterine cancer, a deeply troubled brother and devoutly

tyrannical father - truly, there was nothing romantic about the circumstances in which they penned some of the greatest works of English literature.

The only existing group portrait of the sisters, which hangs in the National Portrait Gallery, shows Charlotte, Emily and Anne, unsmiling beneath severe centre partings, sitting in the gloom of Haworth parsonage. But while the sisters' quiet determination to be heard, despite the silencing power of poverty and patriarchy, still echoes through the ages, few have even heard of the tragic artist who painted himself out of that self-same picture: their brother, Branwell.

In *To Walk Invisible* - tonight's one-off biopic for the BBC - the award-winning screenwriter Sally Wainwright documents the three years leading up to Branwell Brontë's death, during which time his sisters wrote and battled to publish (initially under pseudonyms) *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* among other titles, all the while nursing him through alcoholism, laudanum and opium abuse and finally tuberculosis until his death in 1848.



Nagaitis says Branwell's pain was all tied up in his relationship with his father Credit: Telegraph/David Rose

For Adam Nagaitis, who plays the ill-fated Branwell, this is the untold story that reveals so much about the toxic context in which the Brontë sisters managed to create some of the most beautiful fiction ever written. And one which only Wainwright would be brave enough to portray in a cosy Christmas costume drama slot.

“I think Sally loves the Brontës so much and has so much respect for them that she wouldn't ever have put some presentational, period Brontë thing on the screen,” says Nagaitis, who viewers will recognise from his roles in Wainwright's Bafta-winning *Happy Valley* and Jimmy McGovern's *Banished*. “But what they went through, with their brother and their health and just the world as it was - it was just misery.”

Save for the odd soul-soaring countryside scene, the film is (authentically) gloomily lit and features a relatively unknown cast, bar Jonathan Pryce as the Brontë patriarch, Patrick. But while it may not sound like classic Christmas fare, it brings life to the deep and tender affection between the siblings which - along with their dogged belief in their work - sustained them.



Branwell Brontë struggled with alcohol and laudanum abuse until his death Credit: BBC/Michael Prince

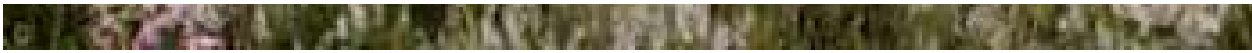
For Nagaitis, theirs is a thoroughly modern tale. Of course, society has moved on somewhat since the early 1800s, but what the Brontë sisters experience - constant crises of confidence; an ambition that outstrips both their circumstances and family's expectations for them; the heartbreak of watching their brother struggling with his mental health - will resonate strongly with a 21st century audience.

“Dramas like this are so necessary in 2016 because really, what each of them goes through is still happening today,” says Nagaitis. “I don’t remember being a working class kid growing up and watching something and going: ‘those things ring true of my life’. That was rare.”

A thoughtful soul, who clearly struggled with his own demons growing up in Chorley, Lancashire, we meet on the set of his next drama, *The Terror*, another big budget period series starring Jared Harris and Ciaran Hines which will air in 2017.

Raised by his dad after his parents separated, he struggled at school - at one stage dropping out of three in three months - so the idea that he could make a living as an actor, let alone play a primetime lead, never occurred to him.





(l-r) Charlie Murphy, Chloe Pirrie and Finn Atkins, who play Anne, Emily and Charlotte Bronte in *To Walk Invisible* Credit: BBC

But after his father's sudden death when he was just 17, Nagaitis was taken under the wing of his aunt and uncle in Texas, who encouraged him to think about what he wanted to do with his life. "I said: 'I think I could probably act' and [my uncle] said: 'Ok, so where do you want to go? Where does one do that?' I'd read a Robert De Niro biography, I used to keep it by my bed and read it all the time, and in it there was a mention of a drama school called Stella Adler in New York. So I looked it up and thought: 'I think I'll go there'."

Five years' living and studying in New York proved the ultimate fresh start. "At the time, I had a lot of tattoos and a shaved head and I was very aggressive. But these kids were the most accepting human beings.

"They didn't care if you were Northern, they didn't care if you had tattoos or went to a certain school, they didn't care about any of it."

A move to London, where he lives in a Soho flatshare, and three years at RADA followed - during which time he says he "worked all night in a bar and studied all day" - and since graduating in 2012 the roles have only got meatier and more high profile. It's why, he says, he's so determined to take on parts like this one, which will speak to people like Branwell who perhaps feel life has dealt them a bad hand.



Adam hopes that viewers will relate to the familial relationships which are still so relevant today Credit: Telegraph/David Rose

Branwell's pain springs, Nagaitis believes, from his relationship with his father, who desperately wanted his only son to go out into the world and make something of himself - never realising that

his three daughters were quietly working on literary masterpieces that would see the Brontë name endure for centuries to come.

“I focused all his turmoil on the relationship with his father because that was the key to it in my mind. His sisters he didn’t even notice. It was all about his father,” says Nagaitis. “You don’t see a lot of love between them, what you see is him dealing with the lack of it and all the expectations on him.

“Horrid to think that you were a son that was not good enough. The only thing your dad wanted you to do and you didn’t quite do it. That’ll pack you in, that’s the end.”

Nagaitis, by contrast, seems to be very much content with his lot: living his childhood dream of getting paid to pretend to be other people.

And if he inspires even one child from Chorley to have the confidence to go out into the world and give acting a try? Even better. “I just hope that kid over there who watches the film - who you have no idea what he’s going through when he has to turn it off - that when he sees it, he might think: ‘I can do that.’”

***To Walk Invisible* is on tonight at 9pm on BBC1**