

## UNMELLOW MELODRAMA

BY JULIET WITTMAN

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Bill Christ and Christopher Kelly in *Pierre*.

*Terry Shapiro*

As we streamed out of the theater at the end of *Pierre*, I overheard a fellow audience member trying to analyze what he'd seen. "Perhaps Shakespeare run amok," he mused. It's as good a description as any. Especially if you add Dickens run amok, the pastoral impulse run amok, Hogarth...well, pretty much as he is.

I must admit I'm somewhat at a loss to understand playwright Jeffrey Hatcher's intentions in writing *Pierre*. In the program notes, he eloquently describes his fascination with Herman Melville's unwieldy mess of a novel -- despite its obvious flaws -- and his vision of a play based on it that would, in a sense, combine Jacobean revenge tragedy and nineteenth-century melodrama. The final product is certainly both bloody and melodramatic. It's peopled with characters who seem to operate simultaneously at the height of their emotional range and at the tops of their voices. No one's multifaceted or nuanced; almost every participant embodies only one impulse or emotion: pure love, greed, villainy, revenge; though some are capable of flip-flopping into a second, equally maniacal mode -- from love to hate, for example. These characters fit neatly into the fictional portrait gallery of the day: the smarmy clergyman; the lost, waiflike girl, deranged by the cruelty of men; the heartless and hypocritical purveyors of charity; Pierre's merry-hearted, young betrothed, Lucy; his controlling and vengeful mother. Occasionally someone does veer from the prescribed path: Pierre himself is a mass of contradictions, so is his ultimate beloved, Isabel, who seems on her first appearance to be a regular damsel in distress but morphs rapidly into something stranger and less predictable before deflating into ordinariness again. But their opaqueness doesn't make Pierre and Isabel seem complex, nor do their long, passionate speeches; rather, these muddy things.

Victorian melodrama may be melodrama, but it's still meant to move us. The tragedies that dominate *Pierre* are not only implausible but insufficiently prepared for, and it's impossible to identify with the characters. So when the bodies start falling, it's hard not to laugh.

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As the play opens, Pierre sports and jokes with Lucy. Though the scene is idyllic, we sense odd, sick currents: Pierre's mother, Mary, clearly has incestuous feelings for him; perhaps they're returned. On a charitable visit, he encounters Isabel and comes to love her. She tells him of her terrible background; he learns that she may be his half sister. He deserts lovely Lucy, rescues both Isabel and her mad, bereaved friend Delly and makes for New York. The plot continues to twist with a fair amount of speed and skill. There's madness, violence, revenge, discovery and lots of half-baked symbolism as the group finds refuge from the hellish streets of the city in an abandoned church watched over by the figure of the crucified Christ.

The odd thing is that the play almost works. On some subverbal level, you find yourself affected by the dark currents underlying the irrational action. There's a kind of hush and horror to the moment when Isabel and Pierre prepare for their first night together -- and to break the incest taboo. **The play's last minutes are moving, too, almost succeeding in unifying everything that's gone before.** There's been continued emphasis on the theme of art making: The set is defined by a gilt picture frame; there's talk of the way portraits reveal the truth about their subjects; some plot points hinge on an auctioned painting. So as the strange, corrupt artist Van Renssalaer Vanderhost sets down his brush, you think about Melville and the satisfaction the artist feels when he has found a form -- no matter how imperfect -- with which to express his inner torment.

The Denver Center Theatre's production values for *Pierre* are stunning. Vicki Smith's set design is elegant and expressive; *Pierre* would be worth attending just to watch the play of Don Darnutzer's gorgeous lighting against the scrim. Kevin Copenhaver and Andrew V. Yelusich's costumes are equally inspired. And from the way he's grouped the actors on stage, director Bruce K. Sevy must have worked closely with these artists.

But there's some problematic casting. The central roles of Pierre and Isabel are certainly difficult, but neither Christopher Kelly nor Morgan Hallett seems up to the task. Kelly's Pierre is inconsequential, a lightweight, and it's hard to follow his speeches, because he reels them off as if his words and his thoughts were unconnected. Hallett's Isabel is stronger and appropriately mysterious, but she rouses neither sympathy nor curiosity.

There are wonderful little cameos in every corner of this production, however. Randy Moore as the saturnine, seen-it-all family retainer, Dates, steals every scene he enters. Gloria Biegler and Kathleen M. Brady have a high old time as the Dickensian Miss Pennies. John Preston is an impressive Glen Glendinning, and Aaron Serotsky -- whose Charlie Millthorpe admittedly gets many of the play's best lines--is memorable. Caitlin O'Connell brings so much interest and complexity to the role of Aunt Dorothea, that you spend quite a bit of time wondering what she's really thinking. **Bill Christ provides a genuine frisson of fear as the asylum keeper, and his Vanderhost is the high point of the evening. It's largely because Christ controls the play's final moments that you feel it has finally -- in some inexplicable way -- jelled.**

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