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Overemotionalism undermines incestuous tale

By Mark Collins
Camera Theater Critic

DENVER — Family secrets are revealed and incestuous feelings abound in the current Denver Center Theatre Company's production of "Pierre," a stage adaptation of Herman Melville's 19th-century novel of the same name.

Melville's "Pierre" wasn't well accepted, by the public or by critics, when it was published in 1852. However, playwright Jeffrey Hatcher, drawn to the novel's poetic language, thought it would be good theater. While the DCTC version captures Melville's lush prose, the story's translation to the stage is flawed.

Pierre Glendinning (Christopher Kelly) is an aristocratic lad living in the idyllic countryside, where he and his doting mother refer to each other as "sister" and "brother." Pierre is engaged to neighbor Lucy Tartan (Shannon Koob) and plans to marry her until he encounters and falls in love with the mysterious Isabel (Morgan Hallett), a lower-class girl who cares for Delly (Catie Baumer), an indigent and slightly deranged soul.

Soon, however, Pierre takes a look inside his family's closet and finds an unexpected skeleton left by his late father. It appears that Isabel is Pierre's half-sister, the offspring of Pierre's father and, according to Pierre's mother (Gordana Rashovich), a French whore.

The revelation sends Pierre into a tailspin. But he eschews his family and his intended, Lucy, and takes Isabel and Delly to New York City. There he encounters a seedy underworld and, ultimately, consummates his passion for Isabel. From there, Pierre's decisions send him tumbling toward a tragic demise.

The production is lovely to look at. The technical design group of Vicki Smith (set), Kevin Copenhagen and Andrew V. Yelusich (costumes) and Don Darnutzer (lighting) has combined powerful and effective elements.

Some of the most engaging moments are when director Bruce K. Sevy turns to his technical team to

WHEN:

- 6:30 p.m. Monday-Wednesday,
- 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, 1:30
- p.m. Saturday, through June 8

WHERE:

- Stage Theatre, Denver Center
- for the Performing Arts, 1050-13th
- St., Denver

TICKETS:

- \$26-\$42

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help tell the story: The playing space is outlined with a Victorian-style picture frame, and the players, dressed in sepia and earth tones, seem to step out of an aging photo; the opening tableau is erased by a sharp lighting strike that foreshadows what's to come; a single spot illuminates the figure of Isabel in one haunting scene; an abandoned church-turned-tenement-house, crawling with whores and low-lives, rivals the underbelly of Dickens' 19th-century London.

Twenty-seven actors inhabit 60-plus characters in the script, but as Pierre, Kelly has the gargantuan task of carrying the play. While he handles the language and physical style well, he uses a manufactured quiver in his voice to indicate a heightened state of emotion through much of the evening. It doesn't ring true, and, at times, his performance veers off into melodramatic posturing. Nowhere is this more apparent, or problematic, than in the closing scenes.

Melville's novel was written when melodrama was at the height of its popularity on the stage, so perhaps it's not a total shock that DCTC's "Pierre" takes a sharp turn toward the form. But, what is strange is that the ending scenes so closely echo two of Shakespeare's most famous plays. The penultimate scene seems like the end of "Hamlet" done with pistols instead of rapiers. Its tone gets so strident that it teeters on absurdity, while the audience members titter in their seats. And the play's climax comes off like a take on the end of "Romeo and Juliet."

It's not for me to tell if Hatcher's script is true to Melville's novel, or if the darkly maudlin tone is accentuated in the stage version. (I confess, I've never even read "Moby Dick," Melville's masterpiece.) But, whatever the case, the production's overemotionalism undermines its psychologically interesting subject matter, and its final trip down Bard Boulevard simply takes the audience right out of the world of the play.

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