

Melville's 'Pierre' lightens up with heavy dose of theatrical fun

By Lisa Bornstein
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The women are dressed in lace and silks, but there's velvet afoot in Denver Center Theatre Company's premiere of *Pierre*.

Bruce Sevy directs Jeffrey Hatcher's adaptation of Herman Melville's least-loved novel. While Hatcher streamlines the story and the language, Sevy and his design team give a wholly baroque cast to this early-19th century novel of forbidden lust.

The result reveals its parentage in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*, as well as bodice-rippers from the days before that phrase was an anachronism. It's absorbing and entertaining, with some terrific performances, but it doesn't mean much.

Pierre Glendinning is the adored only scion of a wealthy, established family living a life of nobility in the Berkshires. He plays at elopement with his lifelong fiancée, Lucy, and enjoys elaborate catered picnics with his mother, Mary, whose relationship with Pierre lies somewhere between siblinghood and marriage. Nearby are Pierre's kind aunt, Dorothea, and his raffish cousin, Glen, who live off Mary's largesse.

But Pierre, a post-pubescent Little Lord Fauntleroy, dreams of achieving adulthood as a bachelor in New York City. As his mother connives to keep him on the farm, Pierre makes an acquaintance with the beautiful but impoverished Isabel and her mad, outcast friend, Delly.

Pierre sets off for the city with the two girls, leaving behind the only comfort he'll ever know.

Hatcher's refined plot, pioneered at Denver Center's 2000 New Plays Festival, is still a looping, complex matter but one that's engrossing.

On a simple stage, Sevy moves the action from the Berkshires to the poorhouse run by the two Miss Pennies (the amusing Kathleen M. Brady and Gloria Biegler) to New York's most wretched slums.

And where Melville kept early



Christopher Kelly anchors *Pierre* with a balance of spoiled youth and foolhardy determination in the role of Pierre Glendinning.

TERRY SHAPIRO/
DENVER CENTER
THEATRE COMPANY

Pierre

- **Grade:** B+
- **When and where:** 6:30 p.m. Mondays-Wednesdays, 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 1:30 p.m. Saturdays, through June 8; Stage Theater, Denver Performing Arts Complex, Speer Boulevard and Arapahoe Street.
- **Information:** (303) 893-4100

New York an ill-defined geography, Hatcher gives chilling visions of the infamous Five Points (razed nearly a century ago), the jail cells of The Tombs and an Uptown that lay below 14th Street.

Even without elaborate sets, the period excess is conveyed in the lighting design of Don Darnutzer and the sound design of David R. White. For the most part, it works: Vicki Smith's backdrop of clouds recalls the era of idealized American landscape painting, and all the action is encased in an enormous gilt frame.

At times, though, the effects become ludicrous, as when Pierre and Isabel meet in spotlights while all

other action (in the poorhouse, no less) freezes. Likewise when Pierre receives a letter from Isabel and her disembodied head recites the words from behind a scrim.

As Pierre, Christopher Kelly anchors the production and holds a balance of spoiled youth and foolhardy determination.

Morgan Hallett, who has yet to disappoint Denver audiences, projects a diminutive but powerful force of will as Isabel from behind her translucent skin and pre-Raphaelite curls.

Gordana Rashovich, at her best playing women with a streak of vituperation, plays Pierre's mother with fists and (presumably) other body parts clenched. She gets all the script's best lines and does them justice.

These are only three in a cast of nearly 30 (defying projected budget cutbacks) that excels at all points. It's great theatrical fun. Let's hope the Theatre Fest, excised from next year's budget, returns to develop more scripts for audiences of Denver and the world.

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