

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

'Pierre' duels with our dual natures

By John Moore
Denver Post Theater Critic

The Denver Center Theatre Company's world premiere of "Pierre," Jeffrey Hatcher's adaptation of the Herman Melville 19th-century Gothic romance, challenges you to a duel with issues of duality. Not only does duality dominate the structure of the plot and its characters; conflicting forces of good and evil do battle in internal areas such as identity, morality and love.

The unsettling production is also of the two-sided nature. There are those things that make you go, "Hmmm . . ." vs. those that make you go, "huh?"

Despite stellar acting, robust support characters, an ingenious set and astounding costumes, you can't get away from the fact the whole affair is more than a just little creepy.

No one ever claimed the meandering novel "Pierre" was Melville's masterpiece, but Hatcher has admirably stripped it of its clutter so that it can at least be contemplated now in a most accessible state.

In 1852, Melville thought "Pierre" would be his biggest commercial success. But in the long course of writing a story that might otherwise barely rise above a Harlequin, Melville went a little crazy and in doing so blew any chance of mass popularity.

Tough luck for Melville, but not for the reader. It's the title character's sudden, delicious descent that makes the story *about* something: the poverty of man's soul. In Melville's madness, he became the George Carlin of his day, skewering every conceivable institutional hypocrisy while still dressing it in an entertaining format.

Hatcher wasn't the first to adapt "Pierre." Melville borrowed heavily from the Bible, Dickens and Shakespeare. He invokes everything from an incestuous Adam and Eve to an erotic Hamlet to repeated references



Denver Center Theatre Company

Morgan Hallett and Christopher Kelly in 'Pierre.'

Pierre

★★★

(Out of 4 stars)

■ **Adapted by:** Jeffrey Hatcher, from a novel by Herman Melville

■ **Starring:** Christopher Kelly, Morgan Hallett, Gordana Rashovich

■ **Directed by:** Bruce K. Sevy

■ **Presented by:** Denver Center Theatre Company

■ **Where:** Stage Theatre, Denver Performing Arts Complex, 14th and Curtis streets

■ **When:** 6:30 p.m. Mondays-Wednesdays, 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 1:30 p.m. Saturdays; through June 8

■ **Running time:** 2 hours, 25 minutes

■ **Tickets:** \$28-\$34 through Wednesday; \$31-\$42 rest of the run, through the Denver Center box office (303-893-4100 or www.denvercenter.org) or Ticketmaster (303-830-8497 or www.ticketmaster.com)

to the biblical curse that the sins of the father shall be visited upon the son. And don't get me started on Pierre's Christ complex.

Our hero is Pierre Glendinning, a romantic idealist who is engaged to be married and will soon inherit his

emotionally incestuous mother's Massachusetts estate. But passions quickly pull our hero into the wrong pursuits. When he comes across a woman he believes to be his sister, he is blinded by desire for a relationship he has wanted far longer than any lover. In his altruistic efforts to have this woman's "good" name restored, he pays the heaviest price. He leaves his fiancée, is cut off by his mother and loses everything. He is totally rejected in his act of righteousness.

This delectable scenario is irresistible. Pierre embodies Hatcher's attack on Romanticism, which in part celebrated the internal struggles of the hero, in this case piety vs. passion. When Pierre is motivated by piety, he loses. When he gives in to the darker nature of his passion, he loses more. And when he realizes his walk on the wild side wasn't so wild after all, the joke is doubly on him.

Adding to the tragedy is the unflinching characterization by dashing Christopher Kelly, who plays Pierre as if he is the last good man on earth, holding desperately onto what's left of our common humanity as if dangling on a rope off a cliff. There is that much at stake if he falls. And in his determination "to see the hidden things," boy, does he fall.

Pierre is betrayed at every turn, but Kelly is fully supported by an ensemble of 27 that must be one of the best ever assembled at the DCTC. Gordana Rashovich is awful in the most astounding way as Pierre's mother, a controlling woman who, unable to bear Pierre a sister, insists he call her by that name. Morgan Hallett follows her impressive run as Ophelia in "Hamlet" with a star-making turn as the mysterious Isabel, and local favorite Marcus Waterman is chilling as the hypocritical Rev. Falsgrave, a cleric who could choke on his lust for blood and flesh. ("God drowned the world to make a point," he snaps.) That does no justice

to Caitlin O'Connell's Dorothea, Shannon Koob's Lucy and a dozen others.

The other stars are Kevin Copenhaver and Andrew V. Yelusich for their rich period costuming and, above all, Vicki Smith, who negotiates 160 scene "shifts" with barely a blackout. She leaves the stage itself mostly open while framing the back areas like a changing 19th-century painting, taking us from the rolling Glendinning estate to the New York cityscape to a graveyard, tavern and abandoned church, to name a few.

The weaknesses of the adaptation begin with its tentativeness to fully embrace its melodramatic form. In an apparent attempt to keep from staging the story too broadly, what suffers is not the story's irony or evil but the potential of its humor.

(Plot revelation warning): "Pierre" especially stumbles at its end. I was later asked if I understood all of what happened. I wasn't so much confused by the story as by its staging. At the climactic duel, a shot is fired that apparently kills two people, but I was later told a knife revealed as the weapon in a previous offstage stabbing factors in this conflict as well. Didn't see that.

More disappointing is the final scene, in which Pierre meets both his love and his demise. Who is the hooded woman Pierre embraces in his final moments? I had to ask, because a third character, played by the incredible but hulking Bill Christ, is avoidably positioned downstage left, obscuring the action from about a third of the house. *Huh?* . . .

Where Hatcher triumphs is in showing us that no one really knows anyone, and we know Pierre least of all. His willingness to forsake all to rectify the sins of his father seems heroic at first, but as the city of New York grinds his ideals further into its cobblestone streets, you must ask whether he was fooled instead by his own primal lust. *Hmmm* . . .