

TheatricalLandscape

BERKSHIRE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

‘Poor Herman’ examines the legacy of Herman Melville’s epic literary failure ‘Pierre; or the Ambiguities’

Melville
descendent
Elizabeth Doss
pays homage
to his success
and failure
as a writer

By JENNIFER HUBERDEAU
The Berkshire Eagle

PITTSFIELD — Where does the line that separates utter genius and epic failure lie?

Herman Melville spent most of his life straddling that line, existing in the liminal space between genius and failure — his desired fame only achieved posthumously.

Melville was not revered in his day. “Moby-Dick” wouldn’t be considered one of the great American novels until more than a half-century after his death. (It received a lukewarm reception from critics.) His subsequent novel, “Pierre; or, The Ambiguities,” was universally condemned by critics.

But what compelled Melville to follow his tale of the great white whale with a Gothic romance? It’s a question playwright Elizabeth Doss, Melville’s great-great-great-granddaughter, began pondering nearly a decade ago when she first thought of adapting the book into a play.

Instead, Doss would write a play about Melville in the aftermath of the failure of “Pierre” — a play that gives voice to the women who supported him throughout his career: his mother, wife, sisters and daughters.

Doss initially brought the play, “Poor Herman,” to Arrowhead in 2017, as a staged reading. This summer, she returns to Arrowhead with the play, which will receive a full production in the estate’s historic barn, July 26 through Aug. 3.

FAMILY LEGACY

“The first time I came to Arrowhead, I was 5. So, I’ve always had an understanding, through my family, that there was an important writer who was in my life. That sort of sat tangentially with me as a young person who was always interested in writing, especially as a teenager,” Doss said during an interview at Arrowhead, where Melville lived and wrote “Moby-Dick.”

She first became interested in “Pierre” when she was 16. She was interning at a theater company and met a singer-songwriter, whom she told about an upcoming part — she was playing Ishmael in a version of “Moby-Dick.” The singer-songwriter told



From left, Katie Bender, Alexis Scott and Diane Small receive direction from playwright and director Elizabeth Doss, right, Melville’s great-great-great-granddaughter, during a rehearsal of “Poor Herman,” which runs July 26 through Aug. 3 at Arrowhead.

her about his favorite Melville novel, “Pierre; or, the Ambiguities.”

“As a young girl, I had read the Bronte sisters. I had read these more Gothic romances. In knowing ‘Bartleby’ and ‘Moby-Dick,’ I kind of wanted Herman to have written something that was about women. So, when I heard about this book, ‘Pierre,’ it always fascinated me, like maybe one day I’ll do something with that,” she said.

Her initial impulse was to write a straight theatrical adaptation.

GENIUS OR FAILURE?

“When I started reading ‘Pierre,’ I was no longer interested in doing a straight adaptation. Instead, the question was, what possessed a person to write this book?” Doss said. “It oscillates so quickly from genius to: Are they really saying this? Is this really what he wrote? He wrote ‘mystery of Isabel 15 times on one page? It’s so absurd.”

“When you begin reading any of the scholarship about it, people start calling it proto-camp; people saying it’s as if you can feel Herman mouth-ing the characters’ words and you can’t keep a straight face while he’s doing it.”

PLAY TAKES SHAPE

Doss wanted to know more about the origins of this book.

“It’s just not like anything, any other text I ever touched.

When I started reading and thinking about ‘Pierre,’ which was the inception of this play, it opened up really big for me. I was like, ‘what actually compelled him to write this book?’” she said.

She began her research — reading Hershel Parker’s and Andrew Delbanco’s biographies. She visited Arrowhead. Along the way, she began piecing together a story in which the Gothic romance had become popular. His mother and sisters were reading “Wuthering Heights.” His close friend and contemporary, Nathaniel Hawthorne, had just published “The Scarlet Letter.”

“So, Herman was like, ‘I’ll write one of those kinds of books and it’ll be really successful and this will get it us out of debt. I’ll stop writing my ‘Moby-Dick’ kind of book and instead write something that is calculated for public approval.’” Doss said.

So, what went wrong?

“Instead of being able to actually write that, he writes something that is the most beautiful train wreck. It still has these beautiful passages that you can recognize as brilliant Melville writing, but the plot is so absurd,” she said.

‘POOR HERMAN’

“Poor Herman,” a play in three acts, begins at Arrowhead, in the moments leading up to Melville writing

“Pierre; or, the Ambiguities.” The second act is the theatrical adaptation of “Pierre” and the third act examines the legacy of “Pierre;” how it ruined Melville professionally and personally.

“I think it was Hershel Parker who described it as ‘the single worst reviewed book in the history of American literature.’ As a descendant of Melville, his legacy is ultimately failure. It’s not about achievement. It’s not about success,” Doss said.

“It’s really a legacy of: I started with a glimmer of success. I fell from that star, but my whole life, I kept writing and kept making things and went to the grave doing that unsuccessfully. As a 41-year-old woman, I started this play in my 30s, I am not calculating anything for popular approval. I’m never making headlines. I’m never going to be famous. That’s not me. The legacy for me, is what do I want to do with my own? What can I take to heart from that legacy? I’m going to work my whole life and make my art and my writing and never need that thing that Melville never had. I do get that feeling that he wanted to be famous.”

THE WOMEN

But even more intriguing than Melville’s desire for fame were the women around him.

“In doing my research, I

was struck — as a woman; as a feminist — by really seeing that Melville was surrounded, supported and sustained by the women in his life and also maybe driven a little mad by his mother. But, he was so immersed in their world,” she said. “I felt like I wanted to dig into this material from their point of view. My theater interest is very much in an ensemble-made, ensemble-driven theater.”

The cast, she said, is entirely made of women.

“When I started saying I was writing a play about Herman Melville, all my male actor friends said they want to play him or Nathaniel Hawthorne. There was an assumption, this immediate identity of who he was. I was kind of like, I don’t want a man in this play. As I was writing and thinking about it, I decided I wanted every woman in the play to play Melville at one time or another, so we would watch Melville become a different person on stage, which I think how icons are made. I think there’s a metaphor in that. Icons are how we interpret them. An icon is in the eye of the beholder.”

This play, she said, is not putting anyone on a pedestal.

“We are paying homage to someone who did something spectacular, but he’s not deified. He’s not revered. It’s all about his complications. All of his imperfections are very much at work in the

If You Go

What: “Poor Herman” by Elizabeth Doss.

Who: Berkshire County Historical Society

With: Diana Lynn Small, Katie Bender, Alexis Scott, Marie Ponce and Zoë Laiz.

When: 7 p.m. July 26 — Aug. 3

Where: Arrowhead, 780 Holmes Road, Pittsfield

Tickets: \$30 general; \$25 BCHS members; \$10 EBT cardholders; free for 12 and under. \$45 ticket includes Arrowhead tour

Information and reservations: berkshirehistory.org

play,” Doss said. “In our version, [his mother] Maria is very worried about his hedonistic ways; his points of view; how people are receiving him because she is such a good Puritan and he is such a bad one. [His wife] Lizzy and [his sister] Augusta — in our play, it’s really Augusta, — they were his copyists. They were his editors. They were doing the labor and keeping him writing. They were believing in him when no one else was. I think it’s well documented that Lizzy believed in him when other people wouldn’t ...

“Holding all that complication, the play is first and foremost a work of theater; it’s not realism, it’s not a kitchen-sink drama. That’s not the kind of work that interests me. I’m built and made from experimental theater. We’re trying things, mixing genres, bringing in dance and other disciplines. That’s just me and this is perhaps where I find more kinship with Melville than anything else. That is Melville too. He was not writing clean naturalism. His style was wild and experimental and departed when it felt like it wanted to depart and did what it felt like doing.”

For Doss, Melville’s willingness to step away from the conventional is the best type of legacy to have.

“He’s not leading with character. He’s not leading with plot as like the most important aspects of his of his storytelling. I feel like [my] play is also built in a very Melvillian-style. It’s also shamelessly funny and clownish and not a serious drama about being a failure — that’s no fun. It’s a wild romp of comedy and surrealism and about that legacy of what is it to feel so bad to do something so, so wrong.”

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