

PLAYS FOR
New Audiences

A Division of Children's Theatre Company

***The House of Seven
Gables***

by Barbara Field

Based on the story by Nathaniel Hawthorne

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Five Actors: 3 men, 2 women

A: Narrator, Jaffrey Pyncheon, Clifford Pyncheon, Gervayse Pyncheon
Male, 50's

B: Narrator, Old Venner, Matthew Maule II
Male, 60's

C: Narrator, Holgrave, Ned Higgens, train conductor
Male, 20's

D: Narrator, Hepzibah Pyncheon, Alice Pyncheon
Female, 50's

E: Narrator, Phoebe Pyncheon, Sam, Gentleman on the train
Female, 20.

The narrators function in a direct conversation with the audience. They must lead the audience through some exposition that might otherwise be heavy-going. It is their job, variously, to woo, to seduce the audience into the shared story. Occasionally, a narrator may comment on one of the characters he/she plays.

NOTE: Narrator A switches between Jaffrey and Clifford. On page 32, Clifford's offstage voice should be recorded. Page 60 requires that there be a substitute for the dead Jaffrey, either a puppet or a mannequin or a non-speaking extra. Note also that the armchair in which he sits should be able to swivel.

THE HOUSE AND STAGE ARE BLACK.
IN THE DARK, A SOLITARY SPOT COMES UP ON A SWINGING GALLOWS NOOSE.
A VOICE RINGS OUT:

VOICE

You will be sentenced for the crime of Witchcraft. You will be hung by the neck at dawn tomorrow!

A HUGE CRACK—ALMOST LIKE A SHOT—IS HEARD SIMULTANEOUSLY WITH A BLACKOUT. THE NOOSE DISAPPEARS.

AS THE LIGHTS COME UP, THE COMPANY ASSEMBLES AND GREETS THE AUDIENCE.

C: Half-way down a by-street in one of our New England towns stands a rusty wooden house with seven acutely peaked gables facing toward various points of the compass.

A: The street is Pyncheon Street; the house is the old Pyncheon House. The House of the Seven Gables.

C: An old elm of wide circumference rooted by the door is familiar to every town-born child by the title of *the Pyncheon elm*.

A: Can you see it? Salem, Massachusetts. Our story includes a chain of events extending over two centuries.

B: The House of the Seven Gables was not the first dwelling erected on this spot. Pyncheon Street formerly bore a humbler name: Maule's Lane. Not much then. Matthew Maule had a shaggy thatch cottage and a cow path. And something much better: a natural spring of sweet and pleasant water—a rare treasure on the sea-girt peninsula where the Puritans first settled.

C: As Salem grew, this site became desirable—

B: Extremely desirable—

C: In the eyes of one prominent, powerful personage.

A: Colonel George Pyncheon. A man driven by an iron energy of purpose, Colonel Pyncheon claimed ownership of this property on the strength of a grant from the legislature.

B: Matthew Maule, on the other hand, was stubborn in defense of *his* right of ownership.

A: No written record of this dispute is known to exist.

C: The controversy dragged on for several years between the ill-matched antagonists until...,the Colonel found a way to solve the problem.

D: The death of Matthew Maule. The ghastly mode of Maule's death affects the mind differently in our day from what it did nearly two centuries ago. In a word, he was executed for the crime of witchcraft.

GESTURE TO A ROPE HANGING FROM THE PYNCHION ELM.

E: Witchcraft...?

BEAT.

B: Clergymen, judges, statesmen—

D: The wisest, calmest, holiest persons of their day stood in the inner circle round about the gallows, loudest to applaud this work of blood, latest to confess themselves miserably deceived in old Matthew Maule.

E: Much later, when the frenzy of that time had subsided, it was remembered how loudly Colonel Pyncheon had joined in the general cry to—

A: Purge the land from witchcraft.

D: At the moment of execution, with the halter around his neck, and while Colonel Pyncheon gazed grimly on the scene....Matthew Maule addressed him from the scaffold with a prophecy:

B: "God will give him blood to drink!"

ECHOS (TUTTI) :

God will give him blood to drink.

God will give him blood to drink....

D: Over this unquiet grave Colonel Pyncheon erected his new house. The House of the Seven Gables.

C: And who do you think was the architect of this mansion? None other than the son of the man from whom Pyncheon had stolen the land: Thomas Maule. Thomas built it so well that here it still stands, two hundred years later.

B: The colonel was perfectly delighted....except for one detail. He had also acquired a vast tract of Indian land up in what we now call Maine. Worth a fortune!

D: A deed, signed and sealed, testified to the purchase of this land.

B: But the Colonel could not find the deed! He must have misplaced it. Oh well, he would find it later.

E: Colonel Pyncheon gave a great party to consecrate his new home. A prayer by the pastor, followed by ale, cider, wine and brandy; and by roast venison, codfish chowder and numerous meats and fowls.

Maule's Lane—or Pyncheon Street—as it was now called, was thronged. Citizens of all classes were invited. They ate and drank and enjoyed. But one absence was noted: the founder of this mansion was as yet invisible. Where was the host?

SERVANT

C: The Master is still in his study, your honor, he said to the mayor. The master wishes not to be disturbed.

MAYOR

D: But don't you see, fellow, the lieutenant governor is waiting. Call your master instantly.

SERVANT

C: My master's orders were exact. I dare not disturb him!

MAYOR

D: Then I must take matters into my own hands! The Lieutenant Governor has been waiting for an hour! He's growing impatient.

THE MAYOR KNOCKS LOUDLY ON THE STUDY DOOR.

No answer. Is he asleep?

A LOUDER KNOCK.

B: Again, no answer. Finally the mayor flung the door wide open and guests crowded in. And what did they see? Nothing extraordinary at first. Books, maps, a mirror with a shattered reflection...and a portrait of the colonel—

Beneath which sat the Colonel himself, staring fixedly ahead.

There was blood on the ruff of his shirt, and his hoary beard was saturated with it!

A VOICE

E: He's dead!

ANOTHER

C: God hath given him blood to drink!

ANOTHER

D: God *has* given him blood to drink!

A BEAT.

C: Be patient, friends, just a little more history.

B: About that piece of paper—

D: The deed—

B: The claim, which was to be a source of incalculable wealth to the Pyncheon family.

E: They could not find the document. And, alas, there was no public record of it! Generation after generation, the family searched for that paper, to no avail.

C: Time passed.

B: During the Revolutionary War, the Pyncheon of that time adopted the Royal side and became a refugee in London—

WAVES A UNION JACK.

But when the tide turned, he repented just in time to prevent the House of the Seven Gables from confiscation.

WAVES A STARS AND STRIPES.

For the past fifty years the only notable event was the violent death—

C: (Or so it was adjudged—)

B: Of one Pyncheon, Silas, by another. The murderer? A nephew of Silas, Clifford Pyncheon, who was tried and convicted of the crime and lodged in a prison for the criminally insane. This sad affair had chanced about thirty years before we begin our story.

C: So much history. So many names! Patience...for now, let us switch to the present tense.

E: At last!

C: Who is left of the mighty Pyncheon family?

A: Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon, nephew of Silas, the murdered man. Jaffrey now lives in the comfort of a grand new mansion elsewhere in Salem. Also, that other nephew, Jaffrey's cousin Clifford—

B: The man imprisoned for that murder thirty years ago...

A: And last but not least, still residing in the House of the Seven Gables, Clifford's spinster sister, Miss Hepzibah Pyncheon.

C: Here she comes, opening a pathetic, dusty little shop on the ground floor of her dwelling: the House of the Seven Gables. The pennies she earns from this humiliating business venture will keep meager food on her table. What are the goods her store offers?

D: Three barrels: one with flour, one with Indian meal, and one with softening apples. A pine box full of soap bars, another with tallow candles (ten to the pound). A pot of rendered lard. A cask of penny nails. And gingerbread...

TWO BOYS APPEAR.

E: You're *never* goin' in? SAM

C: I am. NED HIGGINS

E: But she's a witch. SAM

C: She *looks* like a witch. She don't scare me. NED

E: She has a dreadful scowl on her, Ned. SAM

C: I'm going in anyway. I ain't scared. I've got a penny. NED

E: Watcha gonna buy? SAM

C: Gingerbread. She's got gingerbread shaped like a camel, and an elephant— NED

HE ENTERS THE "SHOP", AND THE BELL RINGS.

LIGHT SHIFT.

A: Across the dusty road Hepzibah sees an older man of dignified demeanor. Anyone could recognize him as a personage of marked influence and authority. It is her cousin, Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon.

His eyes rest on the little shop window.

JAFFREY STARES AT IT THOUGH A PAIR OF GOLD-BOWED SPECTACLES.

At first the sight seems not to please him.

Yet the very next moment he catches a glimpse of Hepzibah, and smiles.

JAFFREY DOFFS HIS HAT AT HEPZIBAH. SHE IGNORES HIM.

HEPZIBAH

There he is! What does he think of my shop? Does it please him?

Take it as you like, Cousin Jaffrey! You have seen my shop window. Think what you like, the Pyncheon House is my own, while I still live!

JAFFREY STARTS OFF, RAISES HIS HAT TO UNCLE VENNER AS HE GOES. UNCLE VENNER ENTERS WITH HIS WAGON OF TOOLS. HE SURVEYS THE SHOP.

VENNER (TO HIMSELF)

So she's done it! She's really gone into trade.

C: Let us welcome another citizen of Salem. He is known to all as Uncle Venner. He collects rags and old bottles. He gathers potato peelings and cabbage leaves to feed his pig. He chops wood for the local widows. And he is considered the Town Philosopher for his amiable opinions of the locals. He has neither kith nor kin, and his origins are obscure. But he is a fixture in the town.

VENNER STICK HIS HEAD INTO THE SHOP.

VENNER

I'm glad to see you at work, Miss Hepzibah.

HEPZIBAH

Thank you, Uncle Venner. I've just begun. Although I'm of an age when I should be giving up.

VENNER

Never say that, Miss Hepzibah, you're a young woman yet. It seems only yesterday when I saw you playing around the house, a small girl. By the way, I just saw your

cousin in the road. He tipped his hat to me. He smiled.

HEPZIBAH

My cousin Jaffrey is thought to have a very pleasant smile.

VENNER

Which is remarkable in a Pyncheon for, begging your pardon, Miss Hepzibah, they were never known as an agreeable lot. Yourself excepted, of course. (HE IS STRUCK BY AN IDEA.) Why, if an old man may be bold to ask, why don't Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon, with all his money, give you the means to close the shop—

HEPZIBAH

Don't talk of it, please, Uncle Venner. If I choose to earn my own bread, it is not Judge Pyncheon's fault, nor will he deserve the blame if I, by and by, retire with you to the poor house.

VENNER

Please, I call it The Farm, not the poor house. It's not so bad a place—but you—you never need go there, I foresee. Something better will come to you, I know it in my bones. Meanwhile will you listen to an old friend's advice?

HEPZIBAH

Of course.

VENNER

One: give no credit. Two: never take paper money. Three: always count your change. Four: ring the silver on the four-pound weight. And five: put on a brighter face for your customers. You'll catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.

SHE SIGHS. A BEAT.

When's he coming home?

A BEAT.

HEPZIBAH

What?

VENNER

When is he being released?

HEPZIBAH

Who?

VENNER

Clifford, Clifford. Your *brother!* And I wonder who freed him from prison? (BEAT)
Ah, you don't want to talk about it. I see. I'd best be off, for here comes a customer.

BOWING HIS WAY OUT, HE RUNS INTO HOLGRAVE.

Mister Holgrave?

HE GOES.

HOLGRAVE

Good morning, Uncle Venner. And to you, Miss Hepzibah.

B: Into the shop comes a cheerful young man not entirely unknown to Hepzibah, for the fellow, a Mr. Holgrave, has rented rooms on the third floor of the seven-gabled house.

HOLGRAVE

So, my dear Miss Pyncheon, your shop is open! Congratulations! Is there any way I may assist you?

“SHE BREAKS INTO AN HYSTERICAL GIGGLE.”

HEPZIBAH

Ah, Mr. Holgrave, I can never go through with this business. The world's too cold and I'm too feeble, too hopeless! I was once a lady—

HOLGRAVE

A lady? No matter, let go of the past! I was not born a gentleman, so you can hardly expect me to sympathize with such old fashioned thinking. The words *lady* and *gentleman* meant something in the past; but in the present and the future they imply, not privilege, but restriction!

HEPZIBAH

You've got such strange new notions, Mr. Holgrave. I'll never understand them. I shall do my best to be a good shop-keeper. But I'm so lacking in merchandise: no root beer, no yeast, no tallow—

HOLGRAVE

In good time. Let me have the pleasure of being your first customer—

HEPZIBAH

There has already been one—

HOLGRAVE

The second, then. Before I go down to my shop, I'll stroll on the seashore. A few of your biscuits, dipped in seawater, will make a fine breakfast.

HEPZIBAH

Let me be a lady a moment longer, please. A Pyncheon must not receive money from a friend, for a morsel of bread.

HOLGRAVE

As you wish, Miss Hepzibah! Today. But I'll return as a customer often.
HE EXITS, NEARLY COLLIDING WITH YOUNG NED.

NED HIGGINS

C: Here's another penny, Miss. I want a gingerbread elephant.

VENNER (FROM OFF)

Always count your change!

LIGHTS SHIFT.

A: Finally the day ends. Hepzibah has blundered through it, committing the most unheard-of errors. She has sold ginger for snuff, pins for needles, needles for pins, misreckoning her change, sometimes to the public detriment, more often to her own. She is about to bolt the shop door when an omnibus draws to a stop under the elm tree. And a young girl alights.

PHOEBE STRUGGLES IN WITH A VALISE.

HEPZIBAH

Who can that be? They must have come to the wrong house. Who—

PHOEBE NEARS.

Is it—can it be little Phoebe? She looks quite like her mother—

PHOEBE
Cousin Hepzibah! It's me, Cousin Phoebe—I've come—

HEPZIBAH
Without a day's notice?

PHOEBE
For a visit—

HEPZIBAH
Without an invitation?

PHOEBE
To stay with you—

HEPZIBAH
No, no, no!

PHOEBE
For a while—

HEPZIBAH
You can only stay for one night. I'm expecting another guest—
BEAT.

PHOEBE
Oh dear. I am supposed to *stay* with you.

HEPZIBAH
Cousin Phoebe, I really can't see my way clear to keep you—

PHOEBE
You see, my father remarried last month, and he decided I should come here for a long visit.

BEAT.

HEPZIBAH

Oh. Oh my.

PHOEBE

Dear cousin, I really think we may suit each other better than you suppose.

HEPZIBAH

You're a nice girl, I see it plainly, but you've arrived at the wrong moment. This is a melancholy place for a young girl, and I cannot so much as give you bread to eat—

PHOEBE

I mean to earn my bread! I wasn't raised like a Pyncheon, I'm a country girl. And I'll take care of the garden. And the house—

HEPZIBAH

Phoebe, Phoebe! The master of this house is coming!

PHOEBE

You mean Judge Pyncheon?

HEPZIBAH

Jaffrey? Never! That man will never cross the threshold while I'm alive! No! I speak of someone else. Phoebe, come look upon *his* face.

SHE BRINGS OUT A FRAMED MINIATURE.

How do you like this face?

PHOEBE STUDIES IT.

PHOEBE

It is very handsome, with a sweetness. It has something of a child's expression, and yet not exactly childish. One feels very kindly toward him.

HEPZIBAH. GIVES A LITTLE MOAN.

What's the matter, Cousin Hepzibah?

HEPZIBAH

Did you never hear of Clifford Pyncheon?

PHOEBE

I thought there were no Pyncheons left, beside yourself and the judge. And yet...the name sounds familiar. Hasn't he been dead a long while?

HEPZIBAH LAUGHS.

HEPZIBAH

Well, well, perhaps he has. But in old houses, dead people are apt to come back again. (BEAT) Very well, my child. You are welcome...for the present.

SHE WANTS TO EMBRACE THE GIRL, BUT CAN'T BRING HERSELF TO DO IT. BUT PHOEBE THROWS HER ARMS ABOUT HEPZIBAH.

THE SHOP BELL RINGS AND HEPZIBAH BREAKS AWAY.

PHOEBE

Don't trouble yourself, Cousin, I'll be shopkeeper today.

LIGHT SHIFT.

B: And before the next day is over, the girl has manufactured fine yeast—

E: Both liquid and in cakes ; brewed excellent ginger beer; and even baked tasty little spice cakes, which prove very popular with the customers.

HEPZIBAH

What a nice little body she is! If only she could be a lady too—but that's impossible! Phoebe's no Pyncheon, she takes after her mother's family. Pity.

C: Pity indeed. To find a born and educated lady we need look no further than the forlorn Hepzibah, with her cherished memory of long descent, and her shadowy claims to princely territory.

HEPZIBAH DROPS SOMETHING.

By the end of the first week, the neighborhood has become aware of the girl's cheerful presence, and Ned Higgins, the devourer of gingerbread, has consumed the rest of the stock: two dromedaries and a locomotive.

PHOEBE

We must renew our stock, Cousin Hepzibah!

HEPZIBAH

We must contrive to get a peck of russet apples, late in the season as it is!

PHOEBE

And some lard, white sugar, and penny nails and—what an enormous heap of copper we've earned. A mountain of copper!

UNCLE VENNER ENTERS.

VENNER

Well done, well done. I foresee that this young lady will never end her days at The Farm—

PHOEBE

The Farm?

HEPZIBAH

He means the poor house, Phoebe. You've met Uncle Venner?

PHOEBE SMILES. VENNER TAKES HER FACE IN HIS HANDS.

VENNER

A pleasure, my dear. (TO HEPZIBAH) I'm an old man, I've been round the town, but I've never seen a person do her work so much like one of God's angels as this child. Her presence is a blessing for you.

HEPZIBAH

You're quite right, Uncle Venner.

B: As the days pass, the old gentlewoman shares with the girl all the secrets of the house, pointing out the scar made by the mayor's sword-hilt on the study door, where the Colonel lay dead. She shows Phoebe the ancient map of the Pyncheon territory Down East. And the antique mirror with its cloudy reflection, rumored to be magic. And she relates the story of a certain Alice Pyncheon—

C: Alice Pyncheon, another ancestor, a young woman of great beauty, whom a mysterious calamity had overtaken—

B: (to C:) Later, later...

PURCHASE PERUSAL FOR FULL SCRIPT