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Dramatic Publishing

House of the Seven Gables

A Play in Three Acts

by

VIN MORREALE, JR.

Based on the classic novel

by

Nathaniel Hawthorne



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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Author's Notes

Although Nathaniel Hawthorne would probably roll over in his grave, if casting requires, the role of Uncle Venner could be played by a woman. Simply change the character name to Aunt Venia and replace all the “hes” and “hims” with “shes” and “hers.” She would still possess the same jovial, exuberant and slightly scattered personality.

In addition, directors with smaller casts may choose to double cast roles. For example, the 19th-century Townsfolk in Act One, Scene 1 may reappear as 17th-century Party Guests in the following scene, and as Ghosts and Spirits throughout the play. All that's needed is a change of costuming, as well as a manner of stance and movements that separates the characters.

HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES

A Drama in Three Acts

For 8 men, 6 women, plus extras, who may be doublecast

CHARACTERS

COLONEL PYNCHION / JUDGE
MATTHEW MAULE
UNCLE VENNER
HARGROVE
PHOEBE
HEPZIBAH
CLIFFORD
LADY FAIRCHILD
MRS. LAMB
MRS. MULDAUR
SERVANT GIRL
SERVANT BOY
17TH-CENTURY PARTY GUESTS
19TH-CENTURY TOWNSPEOPLE
ASSORTED GHOSTS AND SPIRITS
TWO SOLDIERS
TWO GUARDS

SETTING

Prelude - Forest, 1683
Act One, Scene 1 - Street in Massachusetts, 1841 and
House of the Seven Gables, 1687
Act One, Scene 2 - Street in Massachusetts, 1841
Act One, Scenes 3 through 5 - House of the Seven Gables, 1841
Act Two, Scenes 1 though 5 - House of the Seven Gables, 1841
Act Three, Scene 1 - Street in Massachusetts, 1841
Act Three, Scenes 2 and 3 - House of the Seven Gables, 1841

Prelude

The year is 1683. Lights barely rise on an old forest clearing. Flashes of lightning stab the early morning darkness.

COLONEL PYNCHION enters DL, flanked by TWO SOLDIERS. The COLONEL, sixty, is tall and stern-faced—intimidating in his red uniform, white powdered wig and military bearing. A sword dangles from his belt. The SOLDIERS flinch at the thunder and lightning, but the COLONEL betrays no emotion.

From DR (or through the audience), a prisoner is shoved forward by TWO GUARDS. The prisoner, MATTHEW MAULE, is in his mid-fifties, a thickly built man with an expression of pure malevolence. He wears drab, peasant clothes, and his hands are bound behind his back. He is brought face-to-face with the COLONEL.

COLONEL. Matthew Maule... according to the laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, you have been sentenced to death for the crime of witchcraft... in the year of our Lord sixteen hundred and eighty-three.

MATTHEW MAULE. You may deceive the others, Colonel Pyncheon... but I see right through to your black soul.

COLONEL. And what is it you see, wizard?

MATTHEW MAULE. An evil man of outward respectability and inward corruption. A piece of wood, solid to some... but rotten to the core.

(GUARD #1 knocks him roughly on the head, and MAULE crumples to his knees.)

GUARD #1. You dare not speak to Colonel Pyncheon that way!

MATTHEW MAULE. I'll bow my head to him soon enough, but only at the urging of the noose.

COLONEL. It is your crime that brought you here, Matthew Maule. Not mine.

MATTHEW MAULE. No, Pyncheon. You have long coveted my property, and these false charges are the only way you can get your hands on it.

COLONEL. You are a witch, Matthew Maule. A practitioner of the black arts! According to the law, you must hang for your crimes.

MATTHEW MAULE. I will hang, you have seen to that. But my death and my property will bring you no peace. Mark my words!

(The COLONEL gestures to the GUARDS, and they drag the prisoner offstage. With the flash of lightning, he reappears as a silhouette behind the rear scrim, UL. We see the shadow of a hangman's noose dangling from a twisted tree branch. The GUARDS pull MAULE up to the noose. As he struggles, they insert his head into its twisted caress.)

MATTHEW MAULE *(offstage)*. Hear my curse, Colonel Pyncheon! You may take my life...but as long as you and your descendants claim my land, you will choke on your own blood! You will all choke on your own blood!

(The COLONEL nods solemnly and the silhouette of MATTHEW MAULE is knocked from his support and hangs in a macabre dance of death. One last flash of lightning, and the scene descends to darkness.)

ACT ONE

SCENE 1

In place of the shadowy forest of 1683, we open to an early morning street scene in a respectable neighborhood in a quaint Massachusetts town. The year is 1841. Flowering trees betray the first blush of spring.

A FISH SELLER enters from UL, wheels his pushcart across stage.

FISH SELLER. Fresh fish! I have fresh fish today!

(UNCLE VENNER enters from DR. He is a kindly old man, with an engaging smile and openness. His clothes are worn and patched, yet he carries himself with the dignity of age and happily greets all he sees.)

UNCLE VENNER. Good morning to you, Hezekiah!

FISH SELLER. And good morn to you, Uncle Venner.

UNCLE VENNER. Is that halibut I smell?

FISH SELLER. Cod. I sold halibut last week.

UNCLE VENNER. Not making frequent use of that new bathtub you purchased, are you now?

FISH SELLER *(exits, laughing)*. Maybe next week. Good day to you, Uncle Venner.

UNCLE VENNER. Good day, Hezekiah. (*He breathes in the crisp morning air, then turns to the audience, as if meeting a stranger who just crossed his path. To audience.*) And good day to you, also! Are you new in town? I don't seem to recall the face. And I know the face of everyone who has ever set foot here on Pyncheon Street. But where are my manners? I am Uncle Venner...at least that is what everyone in these parts calls me, whether I be related or not. You might say I am as much a fixture here on Pyncheon Street as those newfangled kerosene street lamps...or even the old House of the Seven Gables.

(*A small BOY enters R, pushes past him and dashes across the stage.*)

UNCLE VENNER. Mind yourself, young Franklin!

BOY. Sorry, Uncle Venner! I'm awfully late for school!
(*Dashes offstage.*)

UNCLE VENNER. Then run along! And be quick about it!
(*Sighs.*) Not that schooling will do that rapscaillon any good. If any child was destined for the jailhouse, it is that boy.

(*The street begins to fill with MERCHANTS, LADIES and various TOWNSFOLK. The cheerful population of a nineteenth-century New England town.*)

PEDESTRIAN. Good morning to you, Uncle Venner! How are your joints today?

UNCLE VENNER. Aging, stiff and complaining. How is your wife?

PEDESTRIAN (*shrugs*). Exactly the same.

(*The PEDESTRIAN exits, as UNCLE VENNER waves him off with a broad smile.*)

UNCLE VENNER. I have absolutely no idea who that is... Such is the curse of age. The hair turns white, while the head it covers leaks out memories like a sieve. (*Turning to audience.*) Yet, why should I complain? It is a gloriously sunny morning here in Massachusetts. We are at the height of progress. And I have lived long enough to see the single greatest year the Lord has ever blessed upon the earth! Eighteen forty-one. A glorious time to be alive! The western frontier is expanding every day. Whitney's cotton gin is bringing prosperity to our farmers. (*Suddenly serious.*) Of course, a few Southern plantation owners still cling to that abomination of slavery, but I am sure they will come to their senses soon. No man can suppress another's humanity for long. (*Cheerful again.*) No, I see nothing but good tidings ahead for these United States. Why, I wouldn't be surprised if we had peace and prosperity to last the next two hundred years! (*He crosses to DC as the curtain closes behind him.*) Of course, not everything is cheerful here on Pyncheon Street. (*Gestures offstage L.*) See that dark and brooding mansion on the corner? That ghastly place is the House of the Seven Gables. (*Shudders.*) The House of the Seven Gables... The home old Colonel Pyncheon built on land he stole more than a century ago! He accused old Matthew Maule of witchcraft, and some say there was cause for that claim. But the colonel was a man who never let the ruts of honesty sidetrack his cart

of ambition. The same day they hung Matthew Maule... (A sudden crack of thunder at MAULE's name makes him cringe.) Colonel Pyncheon seized the land and annexed it with his own. To defray suspicion, the colonel hired the wizard's very own son to build that mansion on the exact site his father's cabin once stood. The young carpenter built an elegant estate for the Pyncheon family, designed with seven imposing gables jutting out from the roof. The colonel spared no expense, to show one and all he had no fear of the curse Matthew Maule had placed on him. (Darkly.) He should have known better ...

(UNCLE VENNER crosses DR. As he crosses, the curtain rises on the elegant, brightly lit interior of the House of the Seven Gables. L is a drawing room with a dining table overloaded with food. A staircase leads to the upper bedchambers UL. An arch, DL, leads to a kitchen offstage. UC is an ornate door which leads out to the main entrance offstage. A large chandelier throws pools of light C, which opens upon a spacious foyer. Far R is the colonel's study, filled with books and dark paneled walls. A large draped window looks out upon the offstage garden. Access to the garden is provided by a DR door. The study is in darkness, although the rest of the house is lit with enthusiasm. Heavy shades to the garden emit no light. We can barely make out a shadowy figure in the study, perched in an old wooden chair. The motionless figure faces away from the audience, as if contemplating the dark drapes.)

UNCLE VENNER. By sixteen eighty-seven, Matthew Maule's son had completed his work. Colonel Pyncheon

threw a lavish party to unveil his mansion to the world. With the promise of free food and drink, the whole town turned out for the celebration, including dignitaries from as far away as Boston itself!

(A minuet plays in the background, as the elegant foyer fills with 17TH-CENTURY GUESTS dressed in their Sunday finest. HERRINGDALE enters L and intercepts a SERVANT GIRL, crossing R.)

HERRINGDALE. Have you seen the colonel?

SERVANT GIRL. I haven't seen him all evening, sir.

HERRINGDALE. Where the devil could he be?

(They exit to opposite ends of the stage, just as three well-dressed men—BROWFORD, HURSTBOURNE and WILEY enter from UC.)

WILEY. Quite a house, wouldn't you say?

BROWFORD. Quite a house, indeed.

HURSTBOURNE. I am certain Colonel Pyncheon would have nothing less. He believes a man's soul is reflected in the home he occupies.

BROWFORD. Then perhaps he should have built a dungeon.

WILEY. Or an outhouse.

HURSTBOURNE *(whispering)*. Be careful with your tongue! The colonel has become a powerful man. We all know his enemies have a habit of disappearing.

BROWFORD. Or getting themselves hung, like old Matthew Maule.

HURSTBOURNE. The man was a witch. He was tried and found guilty in a court of law.

WILEY. With Colonel Pyncheon bringing the charges, and his cronies presiding!

(A young BOY runs through the room, exits again.)

HURSTBOURNE. Hush! Here is the man's son. You dare not chew on a man's reputation in front of his offspring.

WILEY. I do not come to chew his reputation... I come to chew his food.

BROWFORD. As do I! I would sup with the devil himself, if he served a meal as bountiful as this!

HURSTBOURNE. If the colonel hears you, Browford, you may get your wish!

(The three exit, L, just as HERRINGDALE enters R and intercepts a SERVANT BOY crossing from L.)

HERRINGDALE. Tell me. Do you know where Colonel Pyncheon is?

SERVANT BOY. I believe he is still in his study, sir. He has been there since early morning.

HERRINGDALE. Well, fetch him this instant! His guests grow impatient!

SERVANT BOY *(frightened)*. Begging your pardon, sir... but the colonel is not a man who will tolerate being fetched...

HERRINGDALE. Bah!

(They exit to opposite ends of the stage, as three young ladies—ELIZABETH, MARGARET and CATHERINE enter from the garden and saunter to the table.)

MARGARET. Have you ever seen such opulence?

ELIZABETH. Not since we left our home in England.

CATHERINE. I would fit in quite nicely with the furniture here, wouldn't you say?

MARGARET. The furniture is far less wooden than the man who would place you on it. All this finery cannot decorate away the sternness of the owner.

ELIZABETH. That man could even give the Puritans a bad name!

MARGARET. Some say his eyes are green because he can only see the money in things.

CATHERINE *(shrugs)*. There are worse men.

ELIZABETH. And you have courted them.

MARGARET. Yet, somehow failed to marry them.

CATHERINE. I consider that to be their misfortune.

MARGARET. Perhaps. But they say no man wants a pillow in his home which everyone else has already laid upon.

CATHERINE *(seductively)*. He will... if the pillow remains sufficiently soft and inviting.

ELIZABETH. Talk like that can earn you a scarlet letter in this town, Catherine. Or have you so quickly forgotten what happened to Hester Prynne?

CATHERINE. Men only brand women they cannot own. But they always guard the reputation of the ones they possess... I believe the colonel has been a widower far too long.

MARGARET. And I say, with a face like the colonel's, his deceased wife is the fortunate one.

(They exit giggling, UC, just as the SERVANT GIRL enters from the kitchen and intercepts the SERVANT BOY crossing from the upstairs chambers.)

SERVANT GIRL. Is the master still in his study?

SERVANT BOY. Yes, with no candles lit.

SERVANT GIRL. Perhaps you should disturb him?

SERVANT BOY. Perhaps you should.

(They both stare at the darkened study with palpable fear.)

SERVANT GIRL. Um... Perhaps the guests need more wine?

SERVANT BOY. I agree!

(They exit to opposite ends of the stage. PLOTKIN and ROSEN enter with plates in their hands.)

ROSEN. I hear this estate is only part of the Pyncheon family holdings. Rumor has it, the colonel is about to sue for a piece of property as large as all of New England!

PLOTKIN. As large as all New England?

ROSEN. He is said to possess an ancient deed granted to his ancestors by the king himself! The eastern holdings would make him the richest man in all the colonies!

PLOTKIN. Sigh... Only good fortune ever befalls the Pyncheons.

(They exit into the garden, just as the SERVANT GIRL enters R and intercepts the SERVANT BOY crossing from L.)

SERVANT GIRL. What shall we do? The lieutenant governor himself insists on seeing Colonel Pyncheon this instant!

SERVANT BOY. The lieutenant governor?!

(The LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR stomps in from UC, a tall, forceful...and very angry man. He calls out to the darkened study.)

LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR. Pyncheon! I have never been treated with such discourtesy! Come out and greet your guests this instant! Pyncheon!

(He storms into the study, far L. The COLONEL sits in his chair, facing the closed curtains. The LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR storms over and pulls open the curtains to let light flood into the room. The other guests spill into the study area, anticipating a fight between two politically powerful men.)

LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR. What is wrong with you, Pyncheon?! Do you know how far I have traveled at your invitation?! *(No reply.)* Speak, man!

(He grabs the shadowy figure's shoulders from behind and lifts him straight out of the chair. He turns the COLONEL to face the audience. The guests gasp in horror, for the COLONEL's high white collar is stained a deep crimson. In terror, the LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR releases the man's shoulders. The COLONEL collapses to the floor, his unseeing eyes and blood-stained face aimed toward the crowd. A woman screams.)

HERRINGDALE. That's blood!

BROWFORD. It's the curse! Old Matthew Maule's curse!

WILEY. The colonel has choked on his own blood! Just as the dark wizard said he would!

(A few women faint, as all the guests freeze in position. The lights dim on the house interior, and the 17th-CENTURY PARTY GUESTS quietly drift offstage.)

UNCLE VENNER crosses to DC.)

UNCLE VENNER. I have been to more successful parties... *(Shakes his head.)* As the years passed, the curse took hold. A number of men in the Pyncheon family reached a certain age... and though in the prime of health, they would suddenly fall dead... a dark stain of blood oozing from their mouths. *(He looks upstage as the SERVANTS drag the COLONEL's body offstage.)* Some said the colonel got his just rewards. Others argued that his bloody end proved the dark powers of the hanged wizard. In fear, they drove the remaining relatives of Matthew Maule from the town. Both the lordly Pyncheons and the line of the man he persecuted began to diminish from that day on. *(Still in shadows, the house interior takes on a blue and ghostly tint.)* As for the magnificent home? In the hundred and sixty years since that fateful party, the only ones to truly enjoy the House of the Seven Gables have been the ghosts, who many say appear in the halls at the stroke of midnight.

(A somber clock begins the midnight tolling. UNCLE VENNER exits nervously, as in the semi-darkness, GHOSTLY

APPARITIONS enter from all corners of the stage. The GHOSTS whirl happily about, as they begin to decorate the house with decay. The SPIRITS—cursed descendants of COLONEL PYNCHION and his brood—replace fixtures and furniture with broken items and scatter dust about. A strobe light flashes, adding to the eeriness, as the GHOSTS spread cobwebs around the rooms. By the twelfth peal of the clock, the SPIRITS have finished dressing down the eerie rooms. They slowly drift offstage with bone-chilling cackles. The once-classic mansion is now eerie with disrepair. The lights will stay dimmed on this set through most of the next act. Blackout.)