



LEFT: The House of the Seven Gables at night; ABOVE: Steve Walsh as Clifford Pyncheon in *Spirits of the Gables*.

THEATER

Hawthorne's Haunting

IN SALEM, **HISTORIC HOMES** SET THE SCENE TO EXPLORE THE AUTHOR'S PSYCHE

Forget fake blood, famished zombies and other mainstays of typical Halloween entertainment. This time of year, original plays performed inside two historic homes in Salem, Mass., offer far scarier notions: revenge, guilt and the execution of the innocent.

It's for this more cerebral seasonal attraction that literature lovers and history buffs come to the House of the Seven Gables each fall. The 347-year-old wooden mansion inspired Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1851 novel of the same name; it's now a museum whose campus includes Hawthorne's relocated birth home and four other historic houses.

Come October, these houses become theaters. The audience enters in small groups, meeting a new character in each room. The plays run on nine evenings between Oct. 9 and 31.

Spirits of the Gables, which winds through eight rooms of the mansion, is based on Hawthorne's novel about the descendants of the greedy Colonel Pyncheon, who was able to build the home only after accusing the land's owner of witchcraft. The "wizard" was hanged but cursed Pyncheon from the scaffold.

In the more modest birth home, *Legacy of the Hanging Judge* dramatizes the infamous witch trials and the role Hawthorne's great-great-grandfather, Judge John Hathorne, played in the executions in 1692. (It is believed Hawthorne added

the "w" to his name in hopes of distancing himself.)

"Hawthorne was very ashamed of his past, and very haunted by it," says Anne Lucas, the production's director; she wrote *Hanging Judge* and much of *Spirits*.

Visitors hear it for themselves in the first room of the birthplace, where they crowd around a distracted Hawthorne sitting at his desk and trying to write.

Hawthorne reveals that his great-great-grandfather had 19 people hanged and one man crushed to death, all on the basis of "spectral evidence"—basically wild imaginings of accusers.

"His legacy to me is the guilt of the cost: hundreds of lives ruined, the horrors of those lost to hanging, torture, imprisonment and starvation. These souls seek me in the dark of night and bid me write," Hawthorne says.

The *Spirits* play is lighter, Lucas says, largely because the melodrama of Hawthorne's writing is somewhat humorous to modern audiences. Hawthorne visited the home often when it was owned by his cousin, one of a handful of private owners from its construction until 1910, when it became a museum.

"You're seeing those characters brought to life within the house that inspired it. It's a really unique way of seeing theater," says Ryan Canary, marketing coordinator of the museum.

And while Canary acknowledges there's no evidence that the house was built over an "unquiet grave," as Hawthorne writes in his fiction, "It's fun to think that, definitely." 7gables.org
—Meredith Heagney

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The 2.5-acre property, a National Historic Landmark District, includes six houses built in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries.

The House of the Seven Gables (Turner-Ingersoll Mansion)—1668

Nathaniel Hawthorne Birthplace—circa 1750

Retire Beckett House—1655

Hooper-Hathaway House—1682

Phippen House—circa 1782

Counting House—circa 1830