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Z 99
1992
S-17

Libretto by Myfanwy Piper
— Based on a novel by Henry James

The Turn of the Screw
An Opera by Benjamin Britten

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May 13, 15, & 17 in Meany Theater

*"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold...
and everywhere
the ceremony of innocence is drowned."*

SECOND COMING, W. B. Yeats

ARTISTIC STAFF

- MUSIC DIRECTOR..... Peter Erös
- STAGE DIRECTOR..... Theodore Deacon
- SETS & LIGHTS..... Richard K. Hogle*
- COSTUMES..... Gail McKee

CAST (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

- PROLOGUE / PETER QUINT..... Kurt Alakulppi
- THE GOVERNESS (May 13 and 17)..... Lesley Chapin
- THE GOVERNESS (May 15)..... Sandra Glover
- MRS. GROSE (May 13 and 17)..... Catherine Treadgold
- MRS. GROSE (May 15)..... Carolyn Gronlund
- MILES..... Alison Guay
- FLORA..... Jennifer Lee Robinson
- MISS JESSEL..... Virginia Voulgaris

*In partial fulfillment for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

SYNOPSIS

PROLOGUE

The Prologue introduces a manuscript written long ago by a young, impressionable woman who is governess to two young orphaned children. Though the Governess is infatuated with the children's guardian, her hopes are shattered by the instruction never to contact him or worry him about any matter whatsoever.

THE JOURNEY

While traveling in a coach to meet her charges for the first time, the Governess reflects on her apprehensions about beginning a new life, her sense of loss of her past, and the bittersweet attraction she feels for the children's guardian.

THE WELCOME

The Governess arrives at Bly House and is greeted by the housekeeper, Mrs. Grose and the two charming children, Miles and Flora. The warmth of their welcome eases her anxiety.

THE LETTER

A letter arrives dismissing Miles permanently from his school. The Governess is at first greatly disturbed and imagines the worst, but the innocence of the children reassures her and she resolves to keep the matter from their guardian.

THE TOWER

A late walk through the grounds of Bly momentarily allays the Governess' troubled thoughts about the guardian and the letter. Her peace is disturbed when a mysterious man appears on one of the house's turrets and then unexplainably vanishes.

THE WINDOW

The figure she saw on the tower appears once again outside a window and the frightened Governess questions Mrs. Grose. The distressed housekeeper tells the story of the former valet and governess of the house, Peter Quint and Miss Jessel. Mrs. Grose shudders at the memory of Quint's malevolent influence over the house, the children, and Miss Jessel, weeping at the memory of Miss Jessel's pathetic death. To her horror, the Governess learns that Quint has also died, leading her to the conclusion that the valet has returned to possess Miles.

THE LESSON

During a simple Latin exercise Miles drifts into a sad, unnervingly ambiguous song on the word "malo"—bad.

THE LAKE

The Governess takes Flora on a outing near a lake on the estate. A silent, veiled woman appears whom the Governess believes to be the ghost of Miss Jessel.

AT NIGHT

As if in a dream, Quint and Miss Jessel call out to the children. After a frantic search, the Governess and Mrs. Grose find the children wandering in the night.

CASS 11,991 ↑ (49')

INTERMISSION

CASS 11,992 ↓ (49')

COLLOQUY AND SOLILOQUY

The Governess wanders through the house seeking out the source of her fears. The ghosts appear and speak of their desire to possess the children, proclaiming "the ceremony of innocence is drowned." Her dread confirmed, the Governess struggles with her labyrinthine terror.

THE BELLS

The troubled Governess is barred from entering church by Miles, who questions her about his schooling. The Governess avoids answering him directly, prompting the boy to challenge her to write to their guardian.

MISS JESSEL

Unable to attend church with the children, the Governess rushes to Bly only to find Miss Jessel drifting through her apartments. At her wits' end, the Governess breaks down and writes to the guardian.

THE BEDROOM

Finding Miles not yet in bed, the Governess questions him about his behavior. Receiving no response, she confesses that she has written the boy's guardian.

QUINT

Seemingly under Quint's influence, Miles steals the letter from the Governess' desk.

THE PIANO

While distracting the Governess with his piano playing, Miles allows Flora to slip away unattended.

FLORA

Mrs. Grose and the Governess catch up with Flora at the shore of the lake. The Governess drives Flora into hysteria trying to compel the child into acknowledging the presence of Miss Jessel. Mrs. Grose, who does not see any ghost, whisks the weeping Flora away.

MILES

Alone in the house with Miles, the Governess interrogates the boy about the missing letter. Quint appears and the Governess forces Miles to cry out the tormentor's name. The ghost disappears leaving the Governess with a momentary sense of victory—a triumph that is shattered by one last devastating failure.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

Oscar Wilde once wrote of *The Turn of the Screw*, "It is a most wonderful, lurid, poisonous little tale." Unquestionably one of the most celebrated works of suspense and subtle terror in English prose, Henry James' novella has spawned a wildly divergent body of criticism and interpretation. On one level it is a simple ghost story, on another it is a darkly complex journey through paranoia and neurotic hallucination. In approaching the story one must grapple with the question of whether the ghosts of Quint and Jessel are a real, tangible evil or merely a manifestation of the Governess' deteriorating mental state. James' ambiguous answer to this dilemma is what creates the power of his narrative.

In adapting this multi-leveled plot for the operatic stage, Benjamin Britten and his librettist Myfanwy Piper had to deal with James' literary device of the unreliable narrator, in this case the Governess. In allowing the ghosts to sing it might appear that Piper and Britten's intent is to show them as the real instigators of a haunting. But Piper wisely retains the idea of a prologue from the novella, thus distancing the observer, and then immediately presents the Governess in a soliloquy that introduces doubt as to her emotional stability. Britten, too, retains some of James' ambiguity by implanting musical motifs related to the ghosts into the Governess' utterances long before Quint and Jessel become factors in the drama.

The characterizations in Piper's libretto are finely drawn. The Governess' fragile state of mind is delineated by frequent, sudden shifts from expansively elegiac phrases to terse neurotic outbursts. Mrs. Grose's lower-class earthiness comes out in her long stretches of prattle. Miles and Flora are often seen singing simple children's songs and mnemonic patterns—an affectation that is given ominous significance by the ghosts' penchant for expressing themselves in rhyme.

The score itself is masterful. Britten's use of a chamber orchestra, with its open, detailed sound underscores the sense of remoteness and alienation that lies at the core of the plot. The structural use of "theme and variation" in the interludes linking scenes musically "turns the screw" of the plot tighter and tighter as each of the acts build toward its shattering climax. While not the most faithful operatic adaptation of literature, Britten's *The Turn of the Screw* is one of the most dramatically compelling.

Theodore Deacon

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