

Review: Small-scale opera "Turn of the Screw" delivers big chill

by James McQuillen, Special to The Oregonian

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Brent Wojahn/The Oregonian
Mary Phillips (left) plays Miss Jessel, a ghost, and, Joelle Harvey plays Flora, in Portland Opera's "The Turn of The Screw."

Portland Opera set a goal a few years ago of presenting Benjamin Britten's three great chamber operas, and its productions of the first two, "The Rape of Lucretia" and "Albert Herring," were successes. But they were staged at the tiny studio theater at the company's offices, which raised the question about the third, "The Turn of the Screw": Would this small-scale piece -- with a cast of six, an orchestra of 13 and a story that relies not on events so much as on a sense of dread--be big enough for the main stage? Friday night's opener answered with a resounding "yes": It was a musically compelling, satisfyingly unsettling night of theater.

Based on Henry James' cryptic ghost-story novella of the same name, the opera tells of a governess charged with the care of two orphaned children at their absentee uncle's country estate, where they suffered unspecified abuse from a former valet, Peter Quint. The ghosts of Quint and his lover, Miss Jessel, the former governess, haunt the place; their implicit threat to the children, the corruption of innocence with a creepy psychosexual subtext, is the horror that propels the story.

"The Turn of the Screw" by Benjamin Britten

When: Final shows 7:30 p.m. Thursday and Saturday

Where: Keller Auditorium, 222 S.W. Clay St.

Tickets: \$20-\$162, 503-241-1802 or [Ticketmaster](#); \$10 rush tickets students/seniors/military

Web site: portlandopera.org

Nicholas Muni's staging preserved the opera's essential ambiguities -- about whether the specters are real to anyone but the Governess, and about the essential nature of the children -- and incorporated just enough action to prevent stasis, without needlessly busy motion. But Muni also overpopulated the stage at times with as many as forty supernumeraries, meant to represent the estate's staff. Made up with an ashen, corpse-like pallor, their effect was bizarre, like "Night of the Living Gosford Park;" I half-expected a chorus of "Braaaains!" He also included a silent appearance by the uncle, whose role in the opera is more powerful as a reference than as a presence.

Peter Werner's set, a room with black doors, black trim and a vast semicircular expanse of black drapery, is dark and gothic -- it could have been conceived for Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven," right down to the "pallid bust of Pallas" on the piano (well, it could be Pallas). It's effective in its way, especially with Thomas Hase's moody lighting design, but it's unsubtle. Britten's spare music, with its vivid orchestral colors and snippets of children's songs, suggests a brighter but no less sinister scene.

As the Governess, Brenda Harris initially seemed incongruously cast. In her previous Portland Opera appearances -- the title role in "Norma" two years ago, and Lady Billows in last season's "Albert Herring" -- she projected a naturally mature, majestic presence ill-suited to a character described in the the Prologue as "innocent, untested." But her emotionally intense and unsparing performance did more than anything to carry the show, and her rich soprano and sensitive phrasing made poignant work of Britten's vocal lines.

Filling in for Anthony Dean Griffey (who withdrew because of ailing parents), tenor Ryan MacPherson was a terrifically insidious Quint, combining sweet seduction and dark power in his singing while moving around the stage like a predatory animal. As the children, Joelle Harvey sang with a fresh, supple voice and round, musical phrases; and Michael Kepler Meo, a tremendously talented 10-year-old, lent a pure treble tone, the sound of innocence itself, while also hinting at past wounds and present conflict. Rounding out the cast was mezzo Mary Phillips as a tortured, angry Miss Jessel; mezzo Judith Forst as the anguished housekeeper Mrs. Grose; and the fine tenor Brendan Tuohy singing the prologue.

Conductor Christopher Larkin led the tiny orchestra nimbly and with careful attention to Britten's textures. The sound came across so well in the cavernous Keller Auditorium, I was surprised to learn that the players weren't amplified at all. Sometimes less is really more.