

# Palo Alto Online Palo Alto Weekly: A good ghost story (November 12, 2010)

Arts & Entertainment - Friday, November 12, 2010

## A good ghost story

*After 98 years, the modern adaptation of 'The Turn of the Screw' still delivers shock and horror*

by Kevin Kirby

It's hard to believe that Dragon Productions is 10 years old, but so it is. After five years as a migratory theater group, performing up and down the Peninsula in venues from San Francisco to San Jose, and five more years in its cozy home in downtown Palo Alto, the company marks the end of its 10th season with its current production: an adaptation of the classic Henry James ghost story "The Turn of the Screw."

In many ways, the play is a perfect example of what Dragon does best. The modern adaptation by Jeffrey Hatcher — first produced in 1996, 98 years after the publication of James's novella — employs just two actors on a nearly bare stage. (The set consists of a Victorian armchair and a piano surrounded by blackness.) With no set changes, no costume changes, no complex technical demands and few props, the show is an ideal fit for Dragon's intimate performance space and shoestring budgets.

Directed by Dragon's founder and artistic director, Meredith Hagedorn, "The Turn of the Screw" seems designed to remind us of what, at its core, theater is all about: the actor's ability to create character, mood and even a sense of place with only his or her body and voice as tools.

The actors in Dragon's production are Katie Anderson, who plays an inexperienced yet ardent Victorian governess, and George Psarras, who plays virtually everyone else. As the story opens, Anderson's character is granted a position caring for the orphaned niece and nephew of a London businessman. Having agreed to the uncle's demand that she never contact him for any reason, she is shipped off to Bly, the country house where the children reside with elderly housekeeper Mrs. Grose.

Psarras plays the uncle, Mrs. Grose, 10-year-old nephew Miles and an unnamed narrator who frames the story and announces the passage of time. (He also provides the show's only sound effects: intoning "Whip crack, wheel rattle," from offstage as the governess makes her trip to Bly, and hammering out an ominous ostinato on the piano at key moments.) It's a difficult task that Psarras handles well. His characters are clearly delineated, both physically and vocally, and are generally believable; his

narrator never quite crosses the line into Vincent Price caricature, and Mrs. Grose never devolves into a Monty Python pepperpot.

As the governess, Anderson has an equally daunting task. Since the tale is ostensibly taken from the governess's diary, Anderson must serve as both protagonist and storyteller, switching constantly between living the scene and describing it. She is also the audience's surrogate for the show's inherent horror: As the situation at Bly goes from unsettling to creepy to dire, we experience the inhabitants' peril through her.

The governess's rosy expectations are scuppered almost as soon as she arrives at Bly. The niece, Flora, is mute — "shy," says Mrs. Grose, but we soon learn that her silence has a more sinister cause. And Miles, a seemingly well-mannered boy, has been sent home from boarding school for behavior so abhorrent that the headmaster's letter barely hints at the outlines.

Soon, the governess is seeing silent specters around the house and grounds. Based on her descriptions, Mrs. Grose identifies them as Miss Jessel, the former governess, and Jessel's depraved lover, Peter Quint, both of whom committed suicide on the grounds of the estate. It is intimated that, while alive, the couple involved Miles and Flora in their debauchery, as unwilling voyeurs if not more.

Though the children will not admit it, the governess believes that they too can see the spirits, and she is driven to desperation by the belief that the ghosts have returned to claim Miles and Flora.

It is difficult to discuss what happens next without giving away too much. The tale ends tragically, but Hatcher has carefully constructed the narrative so that the exact cause of that tragedy remains unclear. In doing so, the playwright has merely amplified the ambiguity in the original novella. While there is no overt evidence that James intended the governess to be an unreliable narrator, "The Turn of The Screw" has been a source of critical debate for decades, with some readers insisting that the ghosts are real while others believe them to be a product of the governess's imagination, created by some mixture of isolation, repressed sexuality and outright psychosis.

If Anderson or Hagedorn have any personal beliefs on this issue, they have kept those beliefs to themselves, allowing the audience to draw their own conclusions. Anderson is especially good at delivering the requisite beats of shock, horror and near-hysteria, and the impact of the story is strong. (One wonders if it might be even stronger had Hagedorn not decided to break the tension midway through the 90-minute tale by inserting an unnecessary intermission.)

The production is not perfect. Each of Psarras' characters could use a bit more variety. In particular, he could increase the show's overall creepiness greatly by hinting at the darker undercurrents in young Miles.

Also, everyone involved should rethink each one's approach to the unseen Flora. Since the girl never speaks, Hatcher has left her unportrayed on stage: She is visible to the other characters but not to the audience. The device works reasonably well, but both actors damage the illusion by holding Flora's hand in an unnatural fashion. (Psarras, in particular, seems to be holding a piece of string.) And a special effect utilizing a back-lit screen to show a silhouette of the live actors with a cut-out Flora only damages the illusion further, hitting us over the head with trickery when we've already accepted the stage convention of the invisible girl.

Such quibbles aside, this is a very solid production, worthy of Hagedorn and the loose circle of artists, volunteers and supporters who have seen the Dragon through its first 10 years. If you enjoy a good ghost story — or if you need to restore your faith in the power of the simplest theatrical magic — "The Turn of the Screw" is well worth your time.

**What: "The Turn of the Screw," a play presented by Dragon Productions**

**Where: Dragon Theatre, 535 Alma St., Palo Alto**

**When: Thursday through Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m., through Nov. 28. (No performance Nov. 25 or 27.)**

**Cost: \$20 general, \$16 students and seniors**

**Info: Go to [www.dragonproductions.net](http://www.dragonproductions.net) or call 650-493-2006.**