

Tightening the screw

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Cory Weaver, Portland Opera Ryan MacPherson and Michael Kepler Meo A drumming emergency -- I'll tell you about it later -- called me out of town Friday, so I missed opening night of "The Turn of the Screw," but I saw it Sunday and have been mulling it over ever since. My colleague, James McQuillen, reviews it [here](#).

Hands down, it's the creepiest thing I've seen [Portland Opera](#) do. Probably the creepiest thing they've *ever* done. Shadows, piercing spotlights, silent figures, silhouettes and lots of black and red create an Edgar Allen Poe-like feel to a drawing room in rural England. Thomas Hase's lighting was fabulous, a big factor in the show's creep factor.

Like McQuillen, I could have done without the ghostly servants -- all 40 of them -- who didn't have enough to do to warrant their silent presence. But praise to director Nicholas Muni for not pulling his punches. While he preserves Henry James' original ambiguities over the ghostly presences of Quint and Miss Jessel, he makes clear the emotional damage of childhood sexual abuse. I'm sure I wasn't the only one who wanted to look away as Miles proffered a kiss to the Governess, then lay back on the bed, inviting her to join him.

I could feel people around me recoiling.

In fact, at intermission, one woman said to her companion, "I don't like stories like this."

Yeah, and the rest of us just love them.

You can't watch "Turn of the Screw" without asking the question, who turns the screw?

You might think it's the unseen guardian, who sets the action in motion by hiring the Governess. But it's really the Governess who creates the tension and keeps the story moving. She's the one who takes the job and realizes the kids have been traumatized. She's the only one who tries to help them. If she

can get them to confess, she can heal them, she thinks. In reality, she's totally untrained to do any such thing, but she believes love will heal all. Along the way, she questions herself, just about bolts, freaks out and yet persists. On the brink of breaking through his repressed memories, Miles shouts "Quint, you devil!" and the story reaches its denouement.

In my conversation with director Muni a couple of weeks ago, he talked about the image of the screw -- turning, tightening, seemingly not aggressive, yet relentless and binding. Its turning action always brings it back around. Knowing about Benjamin Britten's own attraction to boys creates an unsettling parallel universe. David Hemmings ("Blow Up") was the first Miles and, according to reports, including Humphrey Carpenter's [biography](#), Britten was infatuated with him. Hemmings maintained until the end of his life that Britten never touched him sexually, but several boys, including Hemmings, did sleep in the same bed as Britten. They all deny anything happened, but still.

For the most part, the singers gave engrossing performances, to the point where you could, for moments at a time, lose yourself in the story. Brenda Harris was pivotal as the Governess, questioning herself, her new job, the dawning horror, with a combination of vulnerability and steel. She's a marvelous actor, but I sometimes wished her voice had been smoother, less forced and with a less intrusive vibrato. Still, a bravura performance. Judith Forst's Mrs. Grose aimed high, too. Mrs. Grose is the housekeeper who means well, but doesn't protect the children because "it's not my place." Between the two of them, they brought impressive vocal power, even when it turned raw.

Ryan MacPherson was a slickly effective Quint, insinuating his voice and presence from out of the shadows. Cool entrance, too, a slow descending float from high behind a scrim, as if into Hell itself. His warm tenor was unforced, yet powerful, nicely modulated throughout. Next season, we'll hear him as Ferrando in "Cosi" and Heurtebise in Philip Glass' "Orphee." I also liked Joelle Harvey's Flora, who acted like a kid even if her voice was big, bold and beautiful.

Miles is the opera's other key role and Michael Kepler Meo was a natural. Britten gives the 10-year-old boy a lot to sing and we are constantly looking at him to see how he's reacting to the story. Meo carried his part off like a professional, singing with a clear, in-tune voice while acting by turns boyish, fearful, arrogant and aggressive. A rare, believable performance from a child. Brendan Tuohy sounded great in the Prologue.

I should also add that conductor Christopher Larkin and the 13 instrumentalists in the pit did a fine job with the interludes, adding atmosphere and punch without sounding forced or tinny. I was surprised how well their sound carried in the cavernous Keller.

While watching on Sunday, I remembered again that under Chris Mattaliano, Portland Opera does its best work when it's not tackling the war horses. Think back to "Journey to Reims," "Nixon in China," "The Rape of Lucretia," "The Flying Dutchman." And now "The Turn of the Screw."

Two performances left, Thursday and Saturday at Keller Auditorium.