

**Review of *Turn of the Screw*, by Henry James, adapted for theatre by Jeffrey Hatcher, directed by Michael Adams, performed by David Allen and Nataliya Oryshchuk.**

**Performance by “No Productions Theatre”, at the Gloucester Room, Isaac Theatre Royal, Christchurch.**

**Saturday, 26 March, 2016.**

Henry James' *Turn of the Screw*, first published in 1898, is a classic late-Victorian gothic tale. Framed as ghost yarn told as a tale within a tale, the story involves macabre events with a governess sent to look after two strange children in an isolated country house, confronted by apparitions and uncanny happenings.

Jeffrey Hatcher's theatrical adaptation pares down some of the surrounding narrative that frames the original, less necessary when you can launch more directly into the tale as a recounted ghost story, yet the production retains a short prologue introduction and epilogue, simple and effective in establishing a sepulchral tone and delivering a final twist to the tale. Under Michael Adams' direction, the central action is all the more effectively handled by similarly pared-back staging, lighting and sound, and sober period costume which does not distract from the acting and the story. The lighting and costume are particularly effective in establishing the actors' faces as the primary focus for the audience; the actors also make good use of the simple stage arrangement, moving well in relationship to each other to give depth to dialogue and separation for moments of narrative description. The spare use of music also lends itself well to setting tone at important points, with the corruption of the nursery-style Brahms well-suited to the play's concern with children's fate, and the boy, Miles' piano-playing an important cue to the uncanny haunting and substitution hinted at.

This minimalist staging concentrates attention on the performances of the two actors. David Allen and Nataliya Oryshchuk project conviction, wit and gravity into their roles: the former convincingly performs multiple characters with excellent control of vocal and physical mannerisms; the latter delivers a bravura performance as the governess, equally convincing in her emotional negotiation of the role and the shifts into highly descriptive passages. Both actors' timing and interplay is impressive, demonstrating that the power of silence and a look often speaks volumes. As a two-person show, the demands put on the actors are intense: they have no break for the full duration, with emotionally-charged engagement to sustain throughout -- whether evincing extreme shock or developing more subtle responses; being surrounded on three sides by the audience further lends the performance a kinetic intensity, with nowhere to hide. Some of the more powerful interchanges involve one or the other of the actors with their backs turned to the other; it is telling to perceive the clear connection maintained in these exchanges. Similarly so in the case with the actors projecting their sightlines to the imagined other characters, whether apparition or "real": it is very easy to believe that they really see them. Mr Allen and Ms. Oryshchuk also do justice to a very detailed script: James' densely-elaborated language, painting scenes in stark detail and revealing the psychological realisms of the characters, could easily trip less well-prepared actors. Instead, both Mr Allen and Ms Oryshchuk deliver their lines with fluency yet still maintain an appropriate sense of the *un-naturalness* in their register.

Overall, while this adaptation plays ironically with the kinds of genre cliché available to the ghost story or horror, perhaps evoking references to Hammer Horror kitsch from the outset, the quality of the acting and staging of James' story reaffirms its power to disturb well into its second century.

**--- Dr Daniel Bedggood, Senior Lecturer in English, University of Canterbury.**