

Chicago Sun-Times

COT opens season with engrossing 'Turn'

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BY [WYNNE DELACOMA](#) Classical Music Critic

Stage director Diane Paulus and conductor Jane Glover have been intimately involved with Chicago Opera Theater's current rebirth. In 2001, they created a production of Monteverdi's "Orfeo" that was both stylishly updated and sumptuously sung. For COT's 2002 season, their take on "Cosi fan tutte" also updated to contemporary times, turned da Ponte's cynical libretto into a thoughtful look at the battle of the sexes without doing violence to one of Mozart's most beautiful scores.

Paulus and Glover are working their magic again, opening COT's 2003 season Wednesday night at the Athenaeum Theatre with a production of Benjamin Britten's 1954 gripping chamber opera, "The Turn of the Screw," with a libretto by Myfanwy Piper, based on Henry James novella.

Using minimal sets and retaining the 19th-century English country setting of James' story, COT's "Turn of the Screw" takes us into a world as familiar as a Jane Austen novel or a Merchant-Ivory film, yet as disorienting as a fog-shrouded Impressionist landscape. With a strong cast and a superb band of 13 musicians in the pit, Britten's tale of two orphaned children menaced by the ghosts of their dead governess, Miss Jessel, and a mysterious man-servant, Peter Quint, becomes an engrossing swirl of reality and fantasy, unbounded goodness and absolute malevolence.

OPERA REVIEW

'THE TURN OF THE SCREW'

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

When: 7:30 tonight, April 3 and 5; 3 p.m. Sunday

Where: Athenaeum Theatre, 2936 N. Southport

Tickets: \$35-\$75

Call: (312) 704-8414

This is a precarious world, one in which the ghostly Quint and Miss Jessel do battle for the children's souls against their loving new governess (Arianna Zukerman) and kindly housekeeper, Mrs. Grose (Kathleen Flynn). The sheer sound of the voices Wednesday night, especially Zukerman's governess and those of two children, Miles and Flora (played by 12-year-old Adam Benkendorf and Elizabeth Reiter), underscored the disturbing, off-kilter atmosphere that saturates Britten's score.

As the governess, Zukerman's clear, crystalline soprano had both a hysterical edge and a touching fragility. The daughter of Pinchas Zukerman, who's here as guest conductor with

the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (and was in the audience Wednesday), she sometimes moved awkwardly in her tightly corseted jacket and voluminous skirt. But every fierce vocal leap, each staccato, short-breathed flight took us inside her tormented psyche. Zukerman is a thoughtful presence onstage, and through her expressive eyes as well as her agile voice, we could almost see her character evolving from an uncertain young woman to an adult determined to face her own fears.

Benkendorf and Reiter, young singers whose credits already range from Lyric Opera of Chicago to Goodman Theatre, were remarkable as the children, outwardly angelic but bedeviled by a shadowy bad seed. From the first, these were fully rounded characters, Flora watchful as she played her games, Miles moving with the faintly arrogant air of a child well aware of his own cleverness and beauty. The high, light sound of their surprisingly strong voices was a constant reminder that they were teetering on the brink, vulnerable children buffeted by crosscurrents of whirling darkness and light.

Robin Leggate's Peter Quint was a chilling figure, his tenor seductive and strong, as well as obviously alluring to the fatherless Miles. From her warm smile and rosy face to her satiny mezzo soprano, Flynn was the essence of good-hearted generosity as Mrs. Grose. As Miss Jessel, Kara Shay Thomson was an unsettling presence, moving with a gentle woman's stately grace but using her rich soprano like a lance, slashing the air as she slowly stalked her prey. In the ensemble numbers, whether duets for the governess and Mrs. Grose or the furious confrontation of all four adults late in the opera, the voices blended in a lustrous glow that perfectly evoked the opera's central theme, the tragic loss of beauty corrupted.

Britten deploys his chamber-size orchestra like auxiliary characters in "Turn of the Screw," and Glover and her musicians made the most of his vividly colored score. The innocent tinkle of Israel Gorsky's celeste added to the horror of Quint's scenes, and the clash of the children's nursery song "Lavender Blue," with its darker orchestral music, was psychologically telling.

Set and costume designer Mark Wendland opened the Athenaeum's stage to its brick back wall, creating an atmosphere that was both expansive and claustrophobic. Props of a simple swing, a towering dollhouse and a hobby horse were grace notes equally capable of evoking childlike innocence or adult depravity. The sunny, white mists of Kevin Adams' lighting in the opening scene told us everything we needed to know about the charm of the opera's dappled countryside setting. But later, with the characters' black silhouettes hurled against the golden-lit wall, the atmosphere was one of menace as well as summertime idyll.

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