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Syracuse Stage's scary 'Turn of the Screw' questions what is real, what is imagined

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By



Photo courtesy of Syracuse Stage/Michael Davis

Curzon Dobell, as the affluent bachelor, and Kristen Sieh, as the governess, act in Syracuse Stage's production of "The Turn of the Screw," a stage adaptation of Henry James novella by the same name.

Everyone loves a ghost story. In 1898, when Henry James wrote "**The Turn of the Screw**," fascination with the supernatural ran high.

Jeffrey Hatcher's stage adaptation, which opens at **Syracuse Stage** Friday, shows that more than a century later, ghost stories still have appeal. The Stage season opener also connects the past with the present as Henry James' family had Syracuse ties.

But James' novella takes place far from Syracuse, in England. Its plot resembles many gothic novels that came before it. A wealthy bachelor hires a naive, lonely governess to watch his orphaned niece and nephew. When she arrives at his country estate, ominous noises and strange occurrences

lead her to believe not everything is as it seems.

In Hatcher's 90-minute, one-act re-imagining of the story, there is a simple set and just two actors. Kristen Sieh plays the governess who is losing her grasp on reality. Curzon Dobell plays the part of the housekeeper, the nephew and the affluent bachelor.

"The different levels of reality in this play really call into question what is real," says director Michael Barakiva. "When one actor plays different parts, it immediately calls attention to the illusion of theater."

Dobell says he was drawn to Hatcher's rendering of the story because it captures the nature of psychosis by challenging the conventions of theater.

"Part of what makes this a scary story — not just a ghost story, but a scary story — is that it is about questioning your sanity," Dobell says. "Something that is completely real to one person, another person sees a different way."

Barakiva says the play requires imagination to fill in the gaps.

"It takes on a life of its own for each person watching it," Barakiva says. "The play is about the way that fear seduces us, and the audience is so close, almost intimate with the actors."

"The Turn of the Screw" will be the first production in the newly designed Storch Theatre with its three-quarter thrust stage. The stage is "thrust" into the audience, and seats surround three sides of the stage for a personal experience. The space previously had been used mainly for Syracuse University's drama department, with Syracuse Stage productions usually in the Archbold Theatre.

The play also is a sort of homecoming for **Henry James**, who was famous for novels about traveling abroad, including "Daisy Miller" and "The American." His grandfather, William James, was an Albany businessman in the early 19th century who invested in the Erie Canal and bought up what is now the downtown business district of Syracuse.

"In some ways, it is because of the money that his grandfather made from the Syracuse area that Henry James was able to have the literary career that he did," says Greg Zacharias, executive director of the international **Henry James Society**, based in Omaha, Neb.

The writer did visit Syracuse in the 1880s. He called James Street, which was named for his grandfather, one of the "handsomest" American streets, according to the 2007 biography "Henry James: Mature Master," by Sheldon M. Novick.

Also, during the run of "The Turn of the Screw," the Onondaga Historical Association has organized a lobby exhibit about the James family's connections with Syracuse.

The details

What: "The Turn of the Screw," Jeffrey Hatcher's adaptation of the book by Henry James.

When: Friday through Oct. 16.

Where: Storch Theatre, Syracuse Stage, 820 E. Genesee St., Syracuse.

Tickets: \$28 to \$50, adults; \$28, 40 years and younger; and \$18, 18 years and younger. To purchase, call 443-3275 or go to the **Syracuse Stage website**.

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