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Dramatic Publishing

THE TURN OF THE SCREW

by
DOUGLAS JONES

Adapted from the story by
HENRY JAMES



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(THE TURN OF THE SCREW)

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The Turn of the Screw was originally commissioned by and first produced at the Barksdale Theatre in Richmond, Virginia—John Glenn, artistic director—on August 19, 1994. The play was directed by John Glenn, with sets by Coleen McDuffee; lighting by Jay Ryan; costumes by Thomas W. Hammond; and sound by Ron Barnett. The cast was as follows:

The Uncle	JOSEPH PABST
The Governess	JOANNA FOSTER
Mrs. Grose.	STACI TROWBRIDGE
Flora	KRISTA ROOP, SARAH STRICKLER
Miles	KENT FOGG
Peter Quint	ANDREW BOOTHBY
Miss Jessel	JACQUELINE O'CONNOR, DEBRA WAGONER

THE TURN OF THE SCREW

A Play in Two Acts

For 2 men, 3 women, 1 girl, 1 boy

CHARACTERS

THE GOVERNESS 20; bright, but inexperienced;
the youngest daughter of a country parson

THE UNCLE late 30s; handsome; a bachelor

MRS. GROSE mid-40s; housekeeper at Bly

FLORA 8; the uncle's niece

MILES 10, the uncle's nephew

PETER QUINT early 30s; former manservant at Bly

MISS JESSEL early to mid-20s; former governess at Bly

TIME: 1858.

PLACE: England.

Running time: 110 minutes

Playwright's Notes

The first scene of the play occurs in The Uncle's well-furnished home in Harley Street, London; the rest are at Bly, his country home in Essex. Furniture is minimal, against a backdrop of sheer curtains and scrims representing walls and windows. The sheers can be agitated (silently) by fans to suggest a breeze, or the passing of a ghost. Scrims can represent either exterior or interior walls, depending on how they are lit. The set also requires a turntable. Its operation need not be silent, and its eventual turning should surprise us.

Incidental music bridges scenes. Flora's offstage speech during Act Two, Miss Jessel's sobbing, overheard voices, and the opening and closing lines of dialogue may be taped.

All of the poems by William Blake are from his *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. The (very loose) translation of "Der Erlkönig" is mine.

ACT ONE

(We hear voices in the dark.)

QUINT. Do you like this?

MILES. No.

QUINT. Are you afraid?

MILES. Yes. *(Pause.)*

QUINT. Good.

(After a moment, THE GOVERNESS speaks in darkness.)

GOVERNESS. I remember the whole beginning as a succession of flights and drops, a little seesaw of the right throbs and the wrong...

(Music under. We hear street vendors, carriages passing on cobblestones; sounds of nineteenth-century London. After a moment, THE UNCLE speaks in darkness.)

UNCLE. ...two of them, a boy and a girl.

SCENE 1: Harley Street

(Lights come up on a room in THE UNCLE's Harley Street home. He is interviewing THE GOVERNESS; she has traveled to London from Hampshire, and wears her best hat and gloves.)

UNCLE. They are my younger brother's children. His untimely death, two years ago, left them under my parents' care. The death of my parents has left them with me. *(Pause.)* Well. I'm fond of children. Please don't misunderstand. And they are delightful, both of them. But I am a bachelor. My affairs keep me occupied here in London, and require my full attention. I simply haven't the right sort of lifestyle for children...you understand. It's all terribly awkward.

GOVERNESS. Yes.

UNCLE. I'm sure I've made mistakes. And I do feel sorry for the poor pups. I've done for them as best I can. The real difficulty is that they have no other relations. For a little more than a year now they've been living at Bly, my old country home in Essex. Actually the boy's away at school, but he'll return in a day or two for the summer holiday. And the girl is with my housekeeper, Mrs. Grose. *(Pause.)* There was a governess too, who did quite well for them...but we had the misfortune to lose her. *(He turns to her.)* How old are you, my dear? If you don't mind my asking.

GOVERNESS. Just twenty, sir.

UNCLE. And this would be your first position.

GOVERNESS. Yes.

UNCLE. Well. Mrs. Grose is an excellent woman. She was my mother's maid. She handles things quite capably, below-stairs. And the rest are the best people I could find—even parted with my own man, for a time. But now I want someone to take charge of the place. I want someone younger—to teach the children, and to govern them.

GOVERNESS. A new governess.

UNCLE. Yes. (*He produces a folded slip of paper.*) You haven't asked about compensation. I wish to be sure we are both comfortable. (*He hands her the paper; she opens it.*)

GOVERNESS. Oh my ...

UNCLE. Would that satisfy?

GOVERNESS. It's quite more than I expected.

UNCLE. Yes. (*Pause. He has been warming up to this.*) There is a condition. For others, it proved...prohibitive. It made them somehow afraid.

GOVERNESS. What is it?

UNCLE. That you are to be solely responsible for everything. That whatever happens, you must never trouble me—never write—never complain—but use instead your own best judgment.

GOVERNESS. I see.

UNCLE. As it's important that you do, it bears repeating. You are never to trouble me—never. Should I engage you, I would be placing my trust entirely in you; I would be placing the children entirely in your hands. Do you understand? (*He looks at her.*) Because I can't be troubled. That is precisely the point.

GOVERNESS (*after a moment*). The former governess, how did you lose her?

UNCLE. You may as well know. She died. (*Quickly.*) Oh—not at Bly. She went away. It was ...awkward. When she

died, there was no alternative but school for the boy, and Mrs. Grose to look after the girl. (*Pause; he looks at THE GOVERNESS, who remains silent.*) I promise—the children didn't kill her. (*THE GOVERNESS laughs.*) Such a pretty laugh. When you smile, your face is really—quite pretty. Yet you hesitate. What can I do to persuade you? Perhaps I should kneel.

GOVERNESS. Oh, no...

UNCLE. Very well. (*Moving closer to her.*) But I do beseech you. I need someone special. You're bright, and young, and pretty. I know the children will love you. And I need your help, my dear. (*He takes her hand; she looks at him.*) I very much need your help. Please. Tell me you will give it.

GOVERNESS (*softly*). Yes. I will.

(*Blackout. Music under, ending as lights come up.*)

SCENE 2: The Garden, Bly

GOVERNESS. You must be Mrs. Grose.

(*Lights up; a sunny afternoon. We are in the garden at Bly. We hear birds chirping. THE GOVERNESS stands, bags in hand, facing MRS. GROSE and FLORA.*)

MRS. GROSE (*curtsies*). Welcome to Bly, miss.

GOVERNESS. And this must be Flora!

(*FLORA curtsies, shyly. THE GOVERNESS sets down her bags and bends closer to her.*)

GOVERNESS. It's a pleasure to meet you, Flora. You curtsey very nicely.

FLORA. Thank you.

MRS. GROSE. How was your trip, miss?

GOVERNESS. Oh, it was lovely. (*Looking up.*) And such a beautiful house! It was all in silhouette as we pulled up—the tall terraces—I could hear rooks calling from the lake. I had no idea! (*To FLORA.*) Your house is like something out of a storybook!

FLORA. I'm a little shy, at first.

GOVERNESS. So am I. In fact... (*Conspiratorially, as FLORA leans closer.*) In fact, let's pretend I'm terribly shy—someone you've never met before—from some whole other part of the world. And it's your job to try and think of a way to draw me out.

FLORA. It is?

GOVERNESS (*nods*). Only I don't know if even *you* can help me. Have you got any ideas?

FLORA (*thinks a moment*). Perhaps you'd like to meet my dolls.

GOVERNESS. I *think* I should like that very much.

FLORA. I'll get them.

GOVERNESS. All right. (*FLORA runs off.*) What a *beautiful* little girl.

MRS. GROSE. You've a natural way with her, miss.

GOVERNESS. And the little boy—is he just as remarkable?

MRS. GROSE. Oh, well—if you think well of Miss Flora, you'll be quite carried away by young Master Miles.

GOVERNESS. I'm afraid I'm rather easily carried away. That's what happened in London.

MRS. GROSE. You mean their uncle? (*She laughs.*) Well miss, I venture to say you're not the first—and I doubt you'll be the last.

GOVERNESS. I didn't—I mean, I don't pretend to be. (*Looking around.*) Oh, but to be here at last—to have something finally happening to me...I'll love it here, I know I will. I was so afraid I might be making a mistake.

MRS. GROSE. A mistake?

GOVERNESS. I had a few bad days, thinking it over. I think I expected something so positively dreary—oh, I don't know what I expected. It sounded lonely...and to be solely in charge...such responsibility!

MRS. GROSE. Well, miss—it's not like some country houses, as are all parties and dinners. Bly has settled into itself. It's quiet, what with the master gone and all. But it's a good place for children.

GOVERNESS. I quite agree. I grew up in the country. (*She looks around.*) But doesn't their uncle visit them? It's a terrible thing to neglect a child.

MRS. GROSE. Almost never, miss. His affairs keep him busy in town.

GOVERNESS. I see.

MRS. GROSE (*after a moment*). I'm glad you're here, miss. God knows I am.

GOVERNESS. Is it a large staff?

MRS. GROSE. Not very. There's Luke, as looks after the horses...

GOVERNESS. Yes. He brought my trunk from the coach.

MRS. GROSE. ...and Mrs. Reilly, the cook—and the two maids—and the gardener, three times a week. I'll see

you meet everyone, naturally—they'll all be very pleased to meet you, I'm sure.

GOVERNESS (*almost to herself*). It would be as charming as a charming story to meet someone here; to turn a corner, suddenly, and see him... (*She turns to MRS. GROSE.*) Where does Flora sleep nights?

MRS. GROSE. She had been sleeping with me, miss.

GOVERNESS. Do you think it would be all right if she slept in my room, after tonight? I think it would help break the ice between us—if you think it's all right, I mean.

MRS. GROSE. You're in charge, miss. Naturally, Miss Flora will sleep wherever you think best.

GOVERNESS. And when does little Miles return from school?

MRS. GROSE. Day after tomorrow, miss, with the mail coach.

GOVERNESS. I was thinking of meeting him there.

MRS. GROSE. I'm sure that would be a nice surprise.

(*FLORA returns, carrying three dolls.*)

FLORA. Here they are.

GOVERNESS. Oh, they're lovely! Tell me about them.

FLORA. This is the little girl, and this is the governess.

GOVERNESS. And who's this?

FLORA. The other governess.

GOVERNESS (*laughs*). Is she so ungovernable?

MRS. GROSE (*smiling*). Only when she has a mind to be.

GOVERNESS. I see. (*Looking closely.*) Yes, there's something in her expression. Such lovely dresses, too. Only

they're rather heavy for the time of year. Perhaps we could make some new ones ...

FLORA. Could we?

GOVERNESS. If you like.

MRS. GROSE. I've a rag bag you're more than welcome to, miss.

FLORA. Oh yes, please.

GOVERNESS. We'll see. But it will cost you a hug. (*FLORA hugs her, then kisses her cheek.*) And now you must show me the house—I want you to show me everything!

MRS. GROSE. I'll help with the bags, miss ...

FLORA. Come on! (*She runs off.*)

MRS. GROSE (*looks at THE GOVERNESS a moment, as though considering whether to say something*). I'm glad you're here, miss. God knows I am.

(*THE GOVERNESS smiles, and takes her hand.*)

FLORA (*offstage*). Come on, then!

(*Music under. Lights fade as they exit with bags.*)

SCENE 3: Drawing Room, Bly

FLORA (*chanting, in the dark*). I saw Esau, sitting on a seesaw!

GOVERNESS (*likewise*). Tell me, then, what he saw?

FLORA. Esau, what I saw!

(*Lights up; morning. We are in the drawing room at Bly. There is a small table or escritoire near the windows, a*

chair or two—perhaps an ottoman. *THE GOVERNESS and FLORA are seated, playing together. MRS. GROSE is busy behind, dusting, or perhaps folding doilies.*)

GOVERNESS. Now don't you hug me! (*FLORA hugs her.*)

Oh, you hugged me. Well at least don't kiss me! (*FLORA kisses her.*) Oh, you kissed me! (*A whisper.*) Starting tonight, you'll sleep in my room. I hope we're going to be friends!

FLORA (*running off, chanting*). I saw Esau, sitting on a seesaw! Tell me, then, what he saw? Esau, what I saw!

(*She exits; THE GOVERNESS smiles, watching her go.*)

MRS. GROSE (*after a moment*). How did you sleep, miss?

GOVERNESS. Not very well, I'm afraid.

MRS. GROSE. I'm sorry. First night in a new place, and all.

GOVERNESS. Yes. Although I did think—there was a moment when I thought I heard someone—sobbing ...

MRS. GROSE. Miss Flora must have cried in her sleep.

GOVERNESS. And later I thought I heard a footstep—very light—just outside my door ... oh, probably I imagined it. (*She smiles.*) You must think me excitable.

MRS. GROSE. Not at all, miss. First night in a new place, and all.

GOVERNESS. Yes. Next it will be madwomen in the attic, or mysteries of Udolpho. (*Pause.*) My room is beautiful.

MRS. GROSE. I'm glad, miss.

GOVERNESS. It must be one of the best in the house. Such full draperies—and a looking glass like nothing I've ever seen! I can see myself in it from head to toe.

MRS. GROSE. I'm sure that's a pretty sight, miss.

GOVERNESS (*turning to her*). Am I pretty?

MRS. GROSE. Of course, miss.

GOVERNESS. I never felt pretty. In such a large family—
if I was, no one noticed it. (*She goes to the window and
looks out. We hear FLORA offstage.*)

FLORA. I see you, I saw you, I see you, I saw you ...

GOVERNESS. Mrs. Grose?

MRS. GROSE. Yes, miss?

GOVERNESS. Wouldn't you have heard, if Flora cried in
her sleep?

MRS. GROSE. I might not, miss. I'm a heavy sleeper.

(*FLORA skips back on.*)

FLORA. I see you, I saw you, I see you, I saw you ...

MRS. GROSE. Oh Miss Flora, now look—you've gone
and tracked dirt over this floor what was just clean this
morning.

FLORA. Oh, dear. I'm sorry, Mrs. Grose.

MRS. GROSE. Well. Take your shoes off, there's a dear.

(*FLORA sits and pulls at her shoes; THE GOVERNESS
helps.*)

GOVERNESS. Here we are.

FLORA (*to GOVERNESS*). Tomorrow may we go to the
lake?

GOVERNESS. We might. If it doesn't rain.

FLORA. It's my favorite place. Once when we were there,
Miles threw rocks at a dead fish. (*Lowering her voice.*)
Mrs. Grose told us not to play with its eyeballs.