

# Well-acted chiller lacks suspense

By BARBARA MICHALS

## review

Deliberate ambiguity is the key to "Turn of the Screw," an original adaptation from the Henry James novel currently offered by Oakland University's Theater Arts Program.

Written and directed by Adeline Hirschfeld-Medalia, director of the Theater Arts Program, the drama features an original musical score by Oakland student David Gottlieb. It's an intriguing production, generally well-acted, though it falls short on the kind of chilling suspense it aims for.

"Turn of the Screw" continues Friday and Saturday, Nov. 23-24; Thursday and Friday Nov. 29-30; and Saturday and Sunday, Dec. 1-2 in the Studio

Theatre of Varner Hall on the Oakland University campus. Curtains are at 8 p.m. except on Dec. 2, when performances are at 2:30 and 6:30 p.m.

The story is an eerie one of a young governess (Janet Marie Cheff) who struggles to protect her two young charges against evil spirits threatening to possess them. The spirits are those of the children's previous guardians, a governess and a valet, who have died mysteriously.

GOTTLIEB'S ORCHESTRATION effectively underscores the evil hovering

over the English country house in the 1840s, but the chanting chorus seems unnecessary, one touch of evil too much.

Gottlieb worked under a grant from the Michigan Council for the Arts, and "Turn of the Screw" is Oakland's entry in the American College Theatre Festival.

As the young governess, Ms. Cheff does a fine job. Initially she projects the governess' shyness and vulnerability. As she gradually becomes aware of the challenge she faces, she toughens and throws herself wholeheartedly into the emotional struggle.

One of the adaptor's most striking innovations is having the story narrated by a second actress (Mary Strous), who plays the governess 20 years later.

The two persons often speak directly to each other, memory and conscience interacting.

Ms. Strous has a dignified bearing and delivery, but at times she is drowned out by an too loud an orchestra. Saturday night she had some difficulty with lines as well.

Henrietta Kryshalla portrays Mrs. Grose, the housekeeper who befriends the young governess but remains blind to the evil presences that stalk the house. Ms. Kryshalla's strong delivery at times becomes overbearing, a turn that seems inappropriate for the mild-mannered housekeeper.

KIM WERKMAN is outstanding as Miles, playing the role with considerable understatement.

Miles is the older of the two children and the one whose soul is most nearly lost. Not the little demon of "The Omen," Miles appears very normal even when he is at his most troubled. It is that apparent normalcy that offers the one really chilling note to the evening's proceedings.

Eleven-year-old Cindy Woodbridge gives a very competent performance as Flora, the younger child, though a lot less make-up would be preferable.

Christopher Howe and Mickey Vonderwerth have the thankless task of playing the ghosts. Their make-up is so dominant that they are left no opportunity to project any character. Ms. Vonderwerth is painted light green, while Howe skulks around in a Halloween mask. The original novel is a morass of subtleties, but there is nothing subtle about these ghosts.

Director Hirschfeld-Medalia states in the play program that she has tried to preserve the deliberate ambiguities of the novel, but it seems to fall in the wrong places. Ghosts and chorus are given heavy-handed treatment. The action is at other times hard to follow for those not familiar with the original story.

Many in Saturday night's audience were heard to murmur their bewilderment at the ending, which is somewhat clearer in the original.

James Hatfield's set is restrained Victorian Gothic and works efficiently, except for some awkward entrances by the ghosts.

Thomas Hansen's lighting functions smoothly and effectively throughout.



Kim Werkman of Rochester (left) as Miles, Janet Cheff of Hazel Park (center) as the young governess and Cindy Woodbridge of Southfield as Flora appear in "Turn of the Screw" at Oakland University.

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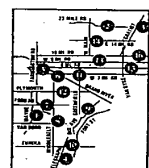
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