

CLASSIC THEATER

Mind games, ghosts haunt 'Turn of Screw'

By Tim Keller
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The Chronicle-News

Henry James designed his 1898 novella, "The Turn of the Screw," to be a tense and deeply psychological ghost story. As realized in a new Shuler Theater production, he succeeded.

Indiana's Tom Evans has directed a two-actor adaptation by Jeffrey Hatcher, author of "Colombo" TV episodes along with many other screenplays and teleplays. Chicago actors Nora Leahy and Ian McCabe build the tension steadily through the drama's 72 minutes. When the audience slowly realizes that the show has ended, there's a palpable sense of relief.

Leahy plays an attractive young governess thrilled to be hired to care for a young brother and sister while managing Bly, a

the audience.

Saturday night's opening performance was attended by far fewer patrons than the pair of comedies that opened the company's summer repertory season. Viewers were gradually caught in a dark, macabre tale that contains strong overtones of pedophilia and evil. It's a fight for the children's souls, and for the future. "This is what we're fighting for, Mrs. Grose — innocence," says the governess. "If Miles confesses, he's saved," she says.

The Garden of Eden is invoked throughout the script. The governess says, "The best stories always begin in the garden — a man, a woman, a serpent." Miles has been expelled from school for his difference — "I've seen things, I know things," he says.

What he's seen, we can only imagine. But we'd rather not.

So why would we go to experience this



Photos by Tim Keller / The Chronicle-News

Nora Leahy and Ian McCabe star in the Shuler Theater's new production of Henry James' intense psychological ghost story, "The Turn of the Screw," continuing through the weekend.



remote estate in the English countryside. McCabe plays the children's uncle, "the master," who hires the governess in London. McCabe continues into the roles of 10-year-old Miles and the estate's dowdy longtime housekeeper, Mrs. Grose — all without changing costume.

The children are haunted first, then Mrs. Grose is. It takes the story's length for the governess to peel away the layers of mystery; as she does, the infection — the haunting — gradually spreads to her, and thus to

production? There are plenty of reasons, actually. It's masterful theater.

Evans' set is all askew, wall panels and stairs where nothing is square, where every line is subtly canted. The Gothic black set and costumes are set off by blood-red splashes of color in a chair and framing the walls, windows and stairs. The stairs go up and stop: They don't go anywhere. There's no escape. Tony Penna's lighting design accentuates the set design, bringing out the darkness and the shadows. The costumes

— McCabe's black suit and, especially, Leahy's black dress — couldn't be better, suggesting repression, while accentuating the sense of doom.

Raton is fortunate to have a company of this caliber. Nowhere is that more evident than in the work of McCabe and Leahy, each starring in three Shuler Theater productions this summer. In "The Turn of the Screw," McCabe repeats his "Cotton Patch Gospel" trick of playing multiple roles in a single costume. He's good enough to quiet skeptics as he convincingly shape-shifts through characters.

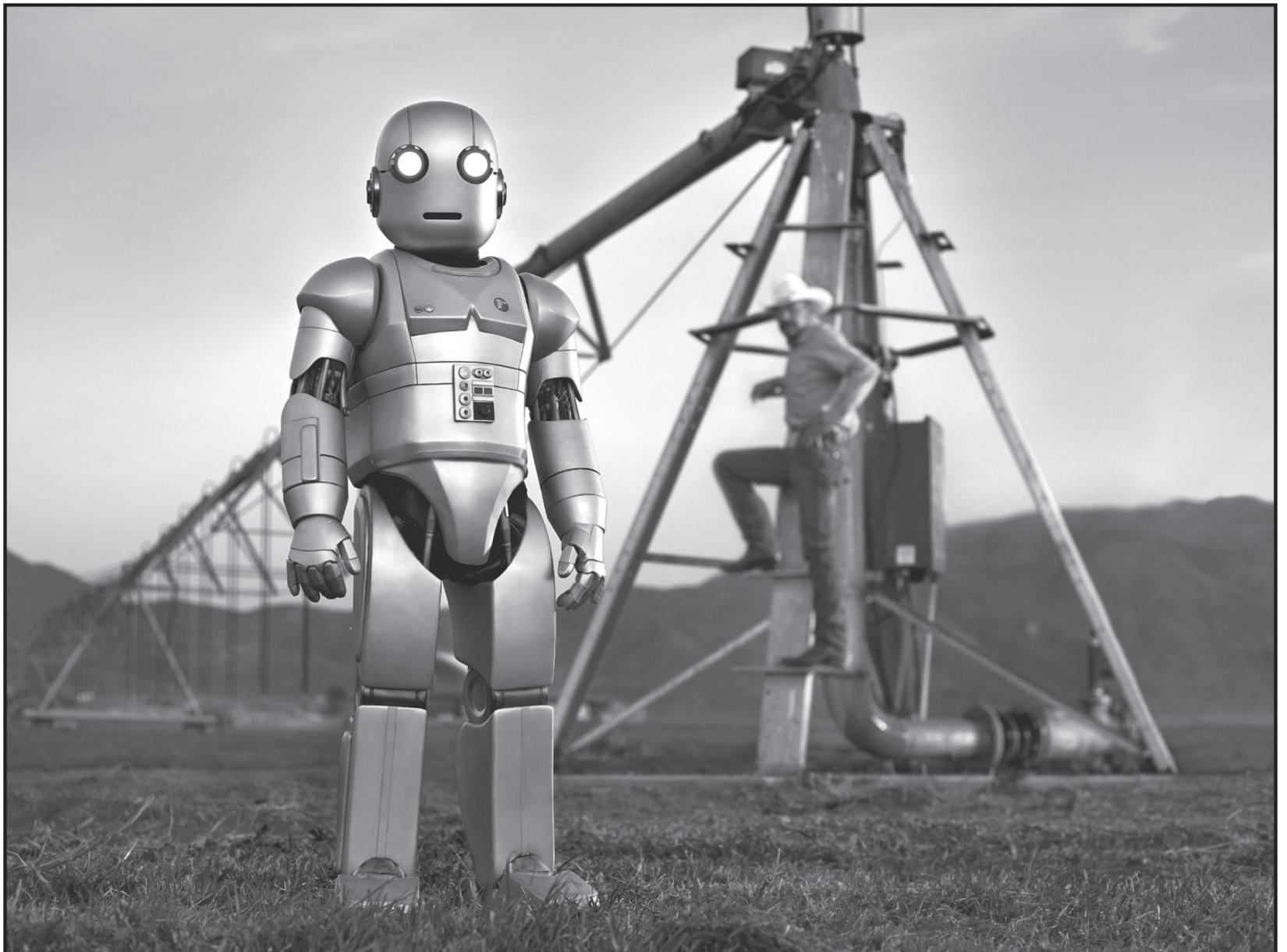
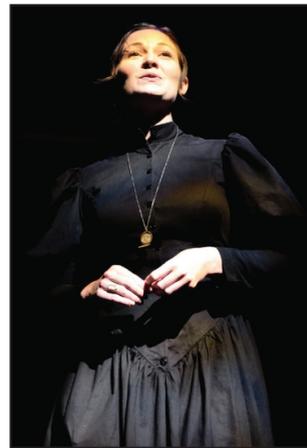
Leahy's governess is at the center of every scene. She evolves from girlish delight and maternal tenderness to assertive authority and, finally, terror. If the ghosts are real, she is lost. If the ghosts are not real, she is insane. This cannot be a comfortable experience for

Leahy's character or for the audience, and it's not.

There's an abrupt *denouement* at play's end, but when the lights went up on Saturday night, the discomfort lingered. No actors' curtain call broke the tension. People wondered aloud, "Is it over?" As it became clear that it was, the relief and release were unmistakable.

"The Turn of the Screw" continues on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights, July 17-19, at 7:30 p.m., then closes with a Sunday matinee at 2:30 p.m. Audiences should not bring children to this performance, despite it being a matinee; this is not a show for small children.

Tickets and information are available at the Shuler Theater, located at 131 N. 2nd St., and theatergoers can call the Shuler at 575-445-4746.



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