



THE INNOCENTS is a Fourth Quarter 2016 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. Below is Kino Ken's review of that release.

10 of a possible 20 points

1/2 of a possible ***

United Kingdom 1961 black-and-white 100 minutes live action feature
horror drama Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation Producer: Jack Clayton

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement
(j) designates a juvenile performer

Points:

- 0 Direction: Jack Clayton
- 2 Editing: James Clark
- 2 Cinematography: Freddie Francis*
- Still Photographer: Ted Reed
- 1 Lighting: Maurice Gillett

- 1** **Screenplay: William Archibald, creator of play based on Henry James’s
“The Turn of the Screw” novella
adapted by Truman Capote with additional scenes
and dialogues by John Mortimer**
- Script Supervision: Pamela Mann Script Editor: Jeanie Sims**
- 1** **Music: Georges Auric Orchestration: Lambert Williamson**
- 2** **Art Direction: Wilfred Shingleton**
- Set Dressing: Peter James**
- Scenic Artist: Alan Evans**
- Costume Design: Motley (Margaret Harris, Sophia Harris, Sophie Devine)**
- Makeup: Harold Fletcher**
- 2** **Sound**
- Sound Effects: Daphne Oram (electronic)**
- Dubbing: Peter Musgrave**
- Sound Recording: Buster Ambler and John Cox**
- 0** **Acting**
- 0** **Creativity**
- 10 total points**

Cast: Deborah Kerr (Miss Giddens, replacement governess), Michael Redgrave (The Uncle), Peter Wyngarde (Peter Quint), Megs Jenkins* (Mrs. Grose, Bly’s housekeeper), Martin Stephens (j) (Miles, brother to Flora), Pamela Franklin (j) (Flora, sister to Miles), Isla Cameron (Anna, a maid), Clytie Jessop (Miss Jessel, previous governess), Eric Woodman (Coachman)

Director Jack Clayton’s 1961 adaptation of Henry James’s harrowing novella “The Turn of the Screw” misses the mark by a considerable distance. Appropriately filmed in ghostly black-and-white, it was shot in a widescreen format diluting the text’s claustrophobic hothouse atmosphere.

Casting Martin Stephens as Miles proved to be another mistake. Stephens had previously played David Zellaby, completely unfeeling ringleader of supernatural children in VILLAGE OF THE DAMNED. Once again he offered a coldly sneering performance, quite at odds with the chivalrous

manipulativeness of James's original Miles. He is obviously corrupted, not corruptible. Which makes the question of supernatural influence moot.

Pamela Franklin, making her film debut, was selected to play Flora, a role at that time beyond her talents. Having to project both unruffled surface and camouflaged deviousness was too difficult, leaving her character only partly realized. She does a fine job in the breakdown scene, however, an indication of future loftier achievements.

Deborah Kerr's Miss Giddens, an imaginative, parsonage-raised young lady who fancies herself a governess, is defeated by a screenplay and sound mix overbalancing towards hysteria. She's obviously increasingly unhinged as action proceeds, making her point of view a highly questionable one. In James's original tale, it is less apparent she is being traumatized. He seemed interested in making her gradually paranoid. That would logically explain why Mrs. Grose, the housekeeper at Bly, drifts from ally to opponent. When Miss Giddens reports ghostly sightings unconfirmed by anyone else at the estate, it's obvious her mental state is unstable, confusing dream or nightmare with reality.

That doesn't solve the core riddle.

Is Miles truly an agent of evil?

For it is he who turns the screw in this story. Until his unscheduled return from boarding school, life at his uncle's country home is tranquil, cheery, upbeat. Once he arrives there in disgrace, expelled from contact with other boys his age, a nagging doubt about his personality begins forming in the governess's mind. What could he possibly have done to merit banishment? Because Mrs. Grose lauds him as a model child. The lad is intelligent, musically talented, at least superficially polite, still game for hide-and-seek and other childish pursuits. He doesn't appear malicious, troublemaking, or rebellious.

Yet some clues appear pointing to certain less attractive personality traits lurking below the surface.

A sort of tug-of-war begins for possession of Flora. Before Miss Giddens makes the appalling error of charging the girl with secret invocations of her predecessor's spirit, Flora seems content to partner with the newcomer as tractable student and agreeable companion. Miles amiably shares a schoolroom with her. The two confide in each other. No indication of what they discuss is

ever stated explicitly by the author, except when the two hatch schemes to distract their governess so one of them can wander off alone.

Their tutor, who prefers to keep them to herself all day, seems to think it odd siblings should desire quiet moments alone for exploration or contemplation. What fuels her darkest fancies is shocking appearances of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, both reportedly dead. Peter is spotted lurking at the top of a crenellated tower and skulks through hallways at night. Miss Jessel haunts schoolroom and small lake in the daytime. Neither ever joins forces with the other.

Nor do the children report similar sightings of former employees of their uncle. No visitation is corroborated by maids, valets, or housekeeper.

They unnerve the governess, so she decides to keep a suffocating close vigil over Miles and Flora, a situation the children eventually come to regard as detestably oppressive. Miles attempts to pass himself off as a naughty truant, hoping vainly Miss Giddens will report his behavior to an intercessory uncle.

She, in turn, resolves on saving the souls of two imperiled innocents seemingly menaced by mute fiends inextricably fonder of them than of each other.

How such a roundabout dance of suspicion and tacit plotting will end is predictable to readers and viewers accustomed to Henry James's dim view of adult meddling in lives of misunderstood children. Director Clayton adds spectral dimensions with mortal embodiments of a deceased pair of servants and framing cemetery scene showing the final gulf between other residents of Bly and distraught, belatedly repentant Miss Giddens, now irrevocably isolated.

Too much love, like too much hate, leads to disastrous consequences.

Technically, cinematography by Freddie Francis is exquisite, taking full advantage of shadows as only black-and-white chiaroscuro can. Profile shots are generously employed to create enigmatic ambience at moments of confrontation between governess and "spirits" or governess and minors.

Georges Auric's music becomes fittingly chromatic in dramatic moments accompanying ghostly visitants. But the old folk tune "O Willow Waly" is even more atmospherically blighting, serving as Flora's leitmotif and reiterated connection to Miss Jessel, former governess, companion, and probable role model. It is likely Miss Giddens's ill-conceived attempt to sever the girl's

nostalgia for that cherished relationship that leads to their unbridgeable separation.

A poor mix of sound and dialogue results in loss of some of the latter, no asset in a literary adaptation.

Keen editing generates and maintains tautness of plot. Cutting of dialogue passages is especially admirable, keeping pregnant silences and verbal jousting in optimal counterpoint, just as James would probably have wished.

A brilliant find was the British country mansion doubling for Bly. Its external grandeur and internal decay neatly matches double layering James provided as foundation for his ghost story.

Most successful in the acting department is Megs Jenkins's portrayal of illiterate, superstitiously inclined Mrs. Grose, a woman more afraid of earning a reputation for gossip-mongering than concerned about arrogant overstepping of authority by servants. Unafraid of anything children might say or do, eager to present them initially as angels, she errs in thinking silence is golden and forbearance will be rewarded. Others may come and go as they will or should. After all, it's not her own offspring being potentially misguided or spoiled. With believable restraint and her willingness to let sleeping dogs lie communicated effectively to attentive Miles and Flora, Mrs. Grose is competent keymaster and dubious parental substitute.

Michael Redgrave makes a brief cameo as the children's selfish, flirtatious uncle. His sense of adult responsibility leaves much to be desired. Similarly, the man's picks for employees are peremptory, just as cavalier as his general dismissiveness.

The script devised by Truman Capote pursues Freudian symbolism with relish, incorporating scenes of cruelty to animals completely absent from the story as first written. It succeeds in making Flora and Miles small deviants, sadistic as well as deceitful. While the duo is capable of lying for self-protection, there's no evidence provided by James they are malicious or cruel. So Capote's additions are unwarranted. He also deletes most of the author's own humor, leaving sinister bleakness unleavened. James invented a more complicated world, much of it constructed through lengthy internal monologues of the governess. These Clayton and Capote discarded, to the detriment of their film.

THE INNOCENTS is a mixed bag of impressive visuals, hoary supernatural spirits, and riddling conversations revealing progressively less about children and more about adults. In showing Miles looking out into the scenery as he utters his curtain speech, the director plainly sides with the solution of otherworldly influences, something James refused to do.

The PBS version of this story, directed by Ben Bolt, boasts a more neutral approach. It features Jodhi May as a less neurotic governess, Colin Firth in the charismatic avuncular role, and, as cherubic Miles, a tonally and visually ideal Joe Sowerbutts. Any viewer disposed to treasure James's tongue-in-cheek recounting of proceedings should check out the WGBH 2004 telefilm production.

Criterion's dvd release of the 1961 British film includes an educational twenty-three minute introduction by cultural historian Christopher Frayling, a 2006 audio commentary by Frayling, a nineteen-minute interview with John Bailey about the film's eccentric cinematography, a fourteen-minute 2006 documentary featurette about making the film, a schlocky three-minute original theatrical trailer, and a partisan essay by Maitland McDonagh effusively praising **THE INNOCENTS**.

Suitable for teen and adult viewers, **THE INNOCENTS** is very adult in tone. It includes the deaths of several characters. Sensitive adolescents should delay viewing until they are older. The film includes scenes of violence and a little profanity. It will delight fans of Deborah Kerr, however, for she is almost constantly onscreen throughout its running time.