THE SHINING
An in-depth guide by Stu Lewis
INTRODUCTION: A HORRIFIC TRAGEDY

It is likely that many Lyric Opera subscribers have been surprised that after the more traditional fare of operas by Donizetti, Mozart, and Puccini, the Lyric will be closing its season with *The Shining*. And many more fans might be additionally surprised to learn that this is not the first opera to be based on a Stephen King novel. That honor goes to the 2013 *Dolores Claiborne*, based on King’s 1992 novel of the same title, with music and libretto by Tobias Picker and J. D. McClatchy, which, following its premiere in San Francisco, has been performed by New York City Opera and Boston University opera program. After all, the Gothic horror of Stephen King and the high art of opera seem at first to be an odd combination.

Of course, opera has long been connected with the supernatural. It began with plots based on classical mythology; the oldest opera for which we have the score is based on the legend of Orfeo, who descended into Hell to rescue his beloved Euridice—the same legend which inspired a recent Tony Award-winning musical. Most of Wagner’s operas were mythological, featuring gods and goddesses with superpowers. Faust’s bargain with the Devil has inspired at least two operas and one popular musical; Verdi’s *Masked Ball* and *Macbeth* both feature witches, as do Humperdinck’s *Hansel and Gretel* and Dvorak’s *Rusalka*.

Even Puccini, generally associated with the verismo, or realistic, school of opera, began his career with the supernatural tale of *Le Villi*. However, when one thinks of true horror stories in the standard opera repertoire, the one that comes to mind first is Benjamin Britten and Myfanwy Piper’s adaptation of Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, the story of a governess in an isolated mansion who is convinced that two ghosts are attempting to seduce the children in her charge. While literary critics may debate whether the ghosts are real or a product of the governess’s imagination, the opera leaves no doubt that they are truly ghosts.

The first thing that one must do when approaching this opera is to forget the film version of the novel, which may prove to be as difficult as trying not to think of an elephant, given that the image of Jack Torrance chopping down the door and shouting “Heeeere’s Johnny” is among the most iconic scenes in the history of cinematic horror flicks, and it is hard to read the novel without thinking of Jack Nicholson. But that ironic reference to the Tonight Show, along with many other innovations added by Stanley Kubrick to the film, won’t be found in this opera, for which Moravec and Campbell returned to the original novel as their source.

Stephen King has made no secret of his dissatisfaction with the film version of his novel. Among other things, before the film was shot, he asked Kubrick not to cast Jack Nicholson in the role of Jack Torrance, because he seemed to be too dark a character; he preferred either John Voigt or Michael Moriarty. He said that “the horror in the novel comes from the fact that Jack Torrance is a nice guy.” Seen this way, the story becomes a genuine tragedy, the tale of a man literally condemned by his demons. King
also criticized Shelly Duvall’s portrayal of Wendy as weak and helpless, whereas in the book she is intelligent and resourceful. He commented, that Duvall’s role was “basically just there to scream and be stupid, and that’s not the woman that I wrote about.”

Other significant changes made by the film include a reduced emphasis on the significance of alcohol on Jack’s deterioration and the fact that less attention is paid to Danny’s psychic gifts. In the film, Jack kills Halloran immediately as he enters the hotel, making his trip meaningless; in the book (as in the opera) Halloran not only regains consciousness in time to aid in the escape but also helps with Wendy’s recovery.

One small point which some people might notice: in the film, unlike the book and the opera, the room where Mrs. Massey died is 237, not 217. This is because the owner of the hotel used for the exterior shots was afraid that no one would want to stay in Room 217 (the hotel did not have a Room 237). Ironically, fans of the book have specifically requested to be placed in Room 217.

The most significant change made by the film is the ending. In the book and opera, Jack momentarily becomes himself again and allows time for Danny to escape, along with Wendy, before allowing the hotel to be destroyed by a boiler explosion which has been foreshadowed from the beginning. In the film, the hotel survives, and Jack’s photo from years before is shown among other photos of the hotel staff, implying that somehow Jack has always been a part of the hotel. In short, the original ending, somewhat clarified in the opera’s libretto, lifts the story above the horror genre into a genuine tragedy in which the hero gains a sense of redemption in his death.

**THE CHARACTERS**

*Human*

**Jack Torrance**, age 30-35, baritone

**Wendy Torrance**, same age, Jack’s wife, soprano

**Danny Torrance**, age 6, their son, treble (boy soprano)

**Dick Halloran**, age 50-60, hotel cook, bass-baritone (identified in the book as African-American)

**Stuart Ullman**, age 45-50, hotel manager, tenor

**Bill Watson**, age 55-60, hotel custodian, tenor

*Apparitions*

**Mark Torrance**, age 45-55, Jack’s father, bass

**Delbert Grady**, age 30-35, former hotel caretaker, tenor
Lloyd, age 65-70, bartender, tenor
Horace Derwent, age 25-30, former owner of the hotel, baritone
Enid Massey, age 55, wealthy hotel guest, soprano
Mrs. Grady, age 30, Delbert's wife
Grady girls, ages 6 and 8, child sopranos
A Crooner, tenor
Chorus of former hotel guests

THE STORY

The entire action of the opera takes place from September to November 1975 at the Overlook Hotel in Western Colorado, except for an Epilogue, which takes place at a hotel in Maine. While several scenes are indicated in the libretto, scene changes are made mechanically and with projections, without interruption.

We should note here that as is the case with most operas composed in recent years, The Shining is not “tuneful” in the traditional sense—that is, you won’t leave the theater humming the melodies. The music exists not as separate from the story but rather to intensify the emotions of the narrative, much in the way that a film score does. But opera is more intense than film in that there is never a break between dialogue and music: the music is fully integrated with the story in a way that is true of no other medium.

ACT I

Scene 1: A scenic overlook en route to the hotel
Jack Torrance, accompanied by his wife and son, has been hired as winter caretaker for the Overlook Hotel, which closes during the winter season due to the prospect of blizzards which will make the roads impossible to traverse. The family stops briefly to appreciate the scenery. They look eagerly to beginning a new phase in their lives, during which Jack plans to work on a play that he has been writing.

Scene 2: The hotel
Stuart Ullman, the hotel manager, shows the family around the hotel, including a “Denver croquet” court, which will be significant later. He introduces them to the hotel cook, Halloran, and (according to a note in the libretto), the orchestra indicates a sudden bond between Halloran and Danny. Getting Jack alone for a moment, Ullman expresses some concern about Jack’s history of alcoholism, but Jack assures him that it
is in the past, and Ullman informs him that there are no alcoholic beverages on the premises. In the meantime, Halloran (who will be spending the winter in Florida) shows Wendy and Danny the well-stocked kitchen, addressing Danny by his nickname “Doc,” which surprises Wendy, because she had not referred to her son by that name in Halloran’s presence (the first sign of something supernatural in the opera).

Once again, our attention is directed to Jack, who is receiving instructions from the in-season caretaker, Watson, who explains the necessity of maintaining the boiler twice daily to prevent an explosion. Watson also relates some of the macabre history of the hotel—a former winter caretaker named Grady who went berserk and killed his family before committing suicide, and a guest, Mrs. Massey, who committed suicide.

Once again, our attention is focused on Danny and Halloran, both of whom have telepathic abilities, which Halloran refers to as “The Shining” (hence the title) and will be able to communicate with one another even when they are thousands of miles apart. During a brief orchestral interlude, Jack starts typing his play, Wendy knits, and Danny wanders through the hotel, pausing briefly in front of Room 217 before running away.

Scene 3: A few weeks later

The scene in the family’s quarters begins with an idyllic picture of family life. Wendy is reading Treasure Island to Danny, and when Danny goes to the bathroom to get ready for bed, Wendy sings a brief aria telling Jack that she has never stopped loving him.

The mood is broken when Danny locks the door to the bathroom and refuses to open it. Jack forces the door open and finds that Danny is having a fit. Jack grabs him, and Wendy reminds him to be careful, since on an earlier occasion Jack had broken Danny’s arm. Danny suddenly screams, along with offstage voices. He yells “stop,” and suddenly comes to his senses, not realizing what has happened. Wendy sings Danny a lullaby, while Jack’s father appears in a vision, reminding Jack of the abuse he suffered as a child. Danny, who had apparently fallen asleep, asks ominously what the word “redrum” means. (Read it backwards).

Scene 4: a week later, the basement

Jack, tending to the boiler, starts rummaging through boxes of hotel records and finds a scrapbook providing a history of the hotel, including the fact that the hotel had once been owned by the mafia, and that there had been a gangland shooting at the hotel. There was also the Grady affair referred to earlier, and the cover-up of Mrs. Massey’s suicide. Meanwhile, the apparitions act out the incidents described. Jack decides that the scrapbook could provide him with the material for a book. Suddenly, he sees an oversized croquet mallet poised in mid-air.

Scene 5: The next evening, caretaker’s quarters

Wendy and Danny have returned from the doctor’s office in a nearby town, where Danny has been given a clean bill of health. Jack enters, in a jovial mood. Wendy tells
him she is worried about Danny, and she suggests that they should leave the hotel, but Jack reminds her of their need for the income the job provides.

During an orchestral interlude, Danny again approaches Room 217 but runs away.

**Scene 6: Early November, caretaker’s quarters**

Jack is at his desk and Wendy is asleep. From offstage, we hear a band playing and a sudden shot. For a moment, Jack sees a bar, but when it disappears, he decides that it was just his imagination. He returns to Wendy and assures her that nothing is wrong. She again sings a lullaby.

Following a brief blackout, there is another orchestral interlude, indicated in the libretto as occurring a few weeks later. Danny has obtained the key to Room 217 and enters. A woman with rotting flesh emerges from the bathtub, and Danny flees.

**Scene 7: The hotel office, mid-November**

Jack is listening to the weather forecast, predicting a blizzard. He expresses a wish he could have just one drink. Suddenly, his father’s voice replaces the forecast, ordering Jack to kill Danny and Wendy. Impulsively, Jack smashes the CB radio.

Wendy enters, upset that their link to the outside world has been destroyed. They look for Danny, and find him bruised, telling them that the dead lady kissed him. Wendy decides it is time to leave the hotel, but Jack reminds her that the weather will prevent their escape. As he assures Wendy that he will protect them, the voices of the various apparitions overlap his. Danny attempts to use his psychic powers to call upon Halloran for help, as the curtain falls on Act One.

**ACT TWO**

**Scene 1: A few days later, the basement**

Jack is tending to the boiler, and in a monologue, he considers allowing Wendy and Danny to leave before he allows the building to explode. From this point on, the apparitions will appear to be living human beings. Grady enters and invites Jack to a party upstairs. He tells Jack that Danny and Wendy need to be “corrected” as he “corrected” his own family.

**Scene 2: A few days later, the kitchen**

Wendy is serving Danny a snack, as he tells her that the hotel has possessed Jack. She tries to reassure him that everything will work out all right.

**Scene 3: Shortly afterward, the ballroom**

Jack enters the ballroom, and Lloyd the Bartender places several martinis on the bar for him. Suddenly, the entire room comes alive with partiers. Several of the men sing a 1940's style song.
As quickly as it appeared, the party disappears, and Wendy enters, offering to help Jack return to their room, but he angrily accuses her of teaming with Danny to try to destroy him. He starts to strangle her, but Danny comes to the rescue, diverting his attention long enough that Wendy is able to knock him unconscious with a bottle. The two drag him out of the ballroom.

**Scene 4: Immediately afterward, the pantry**

Wendy and Danny have dragged Jack to the kitchen. He begins to wake up, but despite his pleading, they lock him inside. Wendy assures Danny that the man they are locking up is no longer his father but rather “the hotel,” which has possessed him.

Grady suddenly appears and, after getting Jack’s assurance that he will bring the boy to the “hotel” people, he informs Jack of a way to escape the pantry.

**Scene 5: Shortly afterward, the caretaker’s quarters**

Wendy and Danny are playing cards. She reminds Danny again that the monster that Jack has become is no longer Danny’s real father. She exits to get some food for the two of them.

**Scene 6: Immediately afterward, the ballroom**

Wendy enters the ballroom. One by one, the apparitions appear and suddenly disappear. Jack appears with a croquet mallet and tries to kill Wendy, but she escapes.

**Scene 7: Immediately afterward, the caretaker’s quarters**

Wendy tries to lock herself in the room, but Jack begins smashing down the door with a mallet. He reaches through a hole he has created, but Wendy cuts his hands with a knife. The apparitions intervene and tell Jack that they really want Danny, not her. They are angered that Danny has requested outside help—Halloran—who is approaching the hotel on a snowmobile.

**Scene 8: Immediately afterward, the ballroom**

Halloran enters, but as he sees Danny, Jack strikes Halloran down with the mallet and goes after Danny again. Danny exclaims, “You are not my father!” Momentarily becoming himself again, Jack tells Danny to flee, whereupon the apparitions appear again, angered that Jack has let the boy get away. They remind him that he has forgotten about the boiler.

**Scene 9: Immediately afterward, the ballroom**

Wendy enters just as Halloran is regaining consciousness. Danny comes in and reminds them that they need to get away as soon as possible.

**Scene 10: The basement**
The apparitions, afraid that a boiler explosion will end their existence, urge Jack to adjust the boiler, but he is now himself again, and declaring, "I love you, Wendy; I love you, Danny," he deliberately allows the boiler to explode, engulfing the hotel in fire.

**Scene 11 (epilogue): July, a hotel in Maine**

Halloran, who is now working at a hotel in Maine, has invited Danny and Wendy to stay there. Wendy tells him that she plans to accept a job offer in Maryland. Halloran offers Danny some words of encouragement as the opera ends.

Though not included in the opera, Stephen King wrote a sequel to *The Shining* called *Doctor Sleep*, a film of which was recently released in theaters. One gap that the book fills in (between the final two scenes of the opera) is that the three survivors have chosen not to report Jack’s decline, and that Jack is considered a hero for his valiant attempt to save the hotel.

**THE BACKGROUND**

While operatic world premieres are glamorous, exciting affairs which generally get nationwide, if not worldwide attention, second productions in many ways are equally significant, as they indicate that the new work has staying power and could be on its way to a place in the operatic repertoire.

For example, in 2017 Kansas City Lyric Opera presented the second production of *Everest*, and a number of other productions have either followed or are scheduled in the near future. *The Shining* was originally a project of Minnesota Opera, a company which has devoted considerable resources to the development of new American opera. Its premiere on May 7, 2016 was greeted with great critical acclaim. The critic for the Wall Street Journal proclaimed that “It elevates the story from a horror story to a human drama,” and another critic commented that, unlike the film version, the opera makes us care about the characters. The current Lyric Opera production will be its second appearance on the operatic stage.

Other significant second productions at the Lyric include *Of Mice and Men* [1971] and *Vanessa* [1963].

The idea of presenting Stephen King’s novel as an opera originated with stage director Eric Simonson, who presided over the world premiere and brought together the creative team of composer Paul Moravec and librettist Mark Campbell. Paul Moravec was born in Buffalo, NY in 1957. After studying composition at both Harvard and Columbia universities, he went on to write a number of musical pieces in a variety of genres, including opera, oratorio, chamber, and orchestral music. His chamber work *Tempest Fantasy* won the Pulitzer Prize in 2004. His style of composition has sometimes been described as “new tonal,” a rejection of the atonalism of many modern composers, but the term “unclassifiable” may be a better description.
Despite his success, Moravec suffered through periods of crippling depression which nearly ended his career—and perhaps his life as well. With the help of electroshock therapy, he considers himself to be fully recovered, and rather than keep his illness a secret, he has spoken about it publicly based on his desire to give hope to others who suffer from this debilitating illness.

Librettist Mark Campbell is no stranger to Kansas City audiences. Among his nearly 20 operatic librettos are Silent Night, the story of the one-day Christmas truce during the First World War (performed in 2015 at the Lyric) and As One, about a young person’s emotionally painful transition from male to female, performed as part of the Lyric’s Explorations series. Among the best-known composers with whom he has collaborated are John Musto, William Bolcom, and Ricky Ian Gordon. After graduating from the University of Colorado, he started his theater career as a lyricist for Broadway-style musicals, but he soon sensed that his true potential lay in opera. His principal goal is to bring new audiences to the medium: “One thing I hope I’m doing in my writing is helping break down the public’s perceptions of contemporary opera as pretentious and boring.”

Note: Several brief video excerpts from the opera are available on YouTube.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Wikipedia.