

# THE TURN OF THE SCREW

## AN INTERVIEW WITH JOYCE CASTLE, MRS. GROSE IN BLO'S *THE TURN OF THE SCREW*

American mezzo-soprano Joyce Castle anticipates celebrating her ruby anniversary in 2010. An extraordinarily versatile artist, during the four decades of her professional performing career she has left an indelible imprint on her operatic repertoire which now includes over one hundred and thirty roles in works by composers ranging from Bernstein to Wagner. She remains on the roster of the New York City Opera where she has performed for twenty-five years. She also performed for fourteen years in leading roles at the Metropolitan Opera and has appeared in the preeminent operas houses around the globe. Critics worldwide have recognized her unique combination of a “richly nuanced voice, profound dramatic skills and a superb sense of musicianship.” She is a graduate of the University of Kansas and the Eastman School of Music.

### **Reflecting on 40 years in opera**

Miss Castle, who was born in Texas, raised in Kansas, and performs around the world, observed that music has “been my life.” Her first public performance was at three years old when she sang “God Bless America” in her church, accompanied on piano by her mother. “It’s a gift of a lifetime to be in the arts – it feeds the soul. Of course there is always more music to learn and discover, and thankfully there are new compositions being written to challenge and inspire musicians as well.”

### **On the more notable changes in opera in the past 40 years and where opera is heading**

Looking back, a particularly notable moment was when Miss Castle was with New York City Opera and Beverly Sills, who was General Director at the time, produced *Casanova’s Homecoming*. It was at that time that Miss Sills incorporated supertitles, which caused quite an uproar in the opera community at large. “She was very savvy, brilliant,” Miss Castle recalls. She believes right now is a “special” time for opera and the arts. To keep the passion for opera alive, she says, “We need to have innovative direction, credible acting, and it goes without saying that we need good voices. Creative directors can produce opera economically. We can do theatre very well with less if there’s a commitment and connection from and to the artists on the stage. Now more than ever singers need to remember that their number one responsibility is to make a connection with the audience, to move the audience and reaffirm its love of the transformative power of the arts.”

### **On memorable moments in her career**

Miss Castle remembers fondly starting out as a young artist at San Francisco Opera and the Western Opera Theatre before she moved to Paris where she lived for seven years. Although that period was challenging due to a lack of roles for American singers, it reaffirmed her commitment to her craft. 1983 was a breakthrough year for the mezzo-soprano: she sang for Hal Prince in London and he engaged her for Mrs. Lovett in the first opera house production of Sondheim’s *Sweeney Todd* at the Houston Grand Opera and Beverly Sills hired her at New York City Opera. “Steven Sondheim was with us in Houston, but still there was some pressure following Angela Lansbury [who had made the role famous on Broadway]!” At City Opera, “Beverly Sills gave me such wonderful roles. She entrusted me with Augusta Tabor in *The Ballad of Baby Doe* which was so associated with her career. And then came the production and Grammy

Award-winning recording of *Candide*, and over the years twenty more leading roles including *The Dialogues of the Carmelites* and *The Visit of the Old Lady*.” When asked about other highlights, she brings up performing the role of Queen Elizabeth I of England in the American stage premiere of Britten’s *Gloriana* at Central City Opera - “it was a real rush, a high.” She is known as an opera singer who is particularly successful in cross-over repertoire as well as dramatic roles. Her performance as the cabaret singer Yvette Guilbert, who inspired French artist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, in *Belle Epoque* at Lincoln Center’s Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater was a unique opportunity because she got to branch out from classic opera and appear in legitimate theater. “I do like to mix it up. It helps a lot to do a dramatic role followed by something lighter like *Candide*. It keeps me very interested in each role—keeps me fresh.”

**On having William Bolcom, National Medal of Arts and Pulitzer Prize-winning American composer, write a commissioned piece for her**

Miss Castle notes that while she has worked with a lot of living composers, she had not worked with Mr. Bolcom before, but she “sang a lot of his songs” and admired him greatly. “It is a great honor and very exciting because he’ll hear me and give his suggestions. It’s a collaboration, unlike singing the works of dead composers!”

**On Benjamin Britten and *The Turn of the Screw***

“*The Turn of the Screw* is one of the finest operas of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It’s perfect! Britten took that fantastic story and did right by it.” Miss Castle believes using a chamber orchestra for this opera, as Boston Lyric Opera is doing, is ideal because the orchestra’s size creates a more intimate experience that aptly reflects the story.

**On the role of Mrs. Grose**

“Mrs. Grose has been in that house all of these years and has seen too much. She has secrets. She tries to do her best with a very difficult situation. I’ve sung the role twice before (in Seattle and Fort Worth) and I look forward to identifying and exploring new elements of the role with BLO’s production.”

**What she hopes the audience will take away from the performance**

“I hope they’ll be drawn in. We can’t think about politics, work all the time. That’s one of the main reasons I do what I do, and why I tell young singers if they are able to make one person in the audience change his or her thought process or spend a few hours in a different world, then they succeeded in their role.”

**On performing *The Turn of the Screw* opera in a nontraditional space**

The mezzo-soprano observes that ‘The Castle’ at Boston Park Plaza is a “very interesting” choice and that she is eager to explore it – and not just because of its name, she says with a wink. She noted that various locations can help build relationships with the audience. “I’m very committed to connecting to the audience—if you can’t do that, forget it!”

**On what attracts her to performing in Boston**

Miss Castle recalls fondly “the Massachusetts’ audiences that I connected with early in my career when I worked at Tanglewood with Seiji [Ozawa] and the BSO, and at Berkshire Opera. I am so pleased to return to Boston where I enjoyed my work with Sam Helfrich on Kurt Weill’s *Mahagonny*. I hope to have more time to explore the museums and historic sites on this visit.”