

The Ghost Children: The story of a Louisiana haunting

A musical by John Farndon

It's a steamy summer evening on the bayou, as young Grace and Henry turn up outside the dilapidated old house by the lake. Both are determined to put the stresses of life in Chicago behind them and get back to nature – and old Maison Blanc seems perfect. Isolated, charmingly overgrown – and going for a song. Empty as long as anyone can remember, Willy Jongleroo the old caretaker tells them as he hands over the key. Willy chatters on for ages, telling them about another Grace long ago, the black lover of white landowner Louis Blanc, who once lived here then mysteriously disappeared. Intrigued as they are by the story, Grace and Henry can't wait for Willy to go, so they can get on with the business of life in their new home.

After a brief flurry of activity, they settle down for a cool beer on the verandah, and listen for a while in the gathering gloom to the haunting sounds of the swamp. Suddenly, Grace jumps up, convinced she has heard a child singing. Henry tells her she's already suffering swamp fever, and hopes it's not catching. As they go off to bed, a little girl drifts into view in the darkness clutching a doll, and singing quietly a melancholy song. ("it's cold in here"). And from somewhere in the dark, two other lonely voices join in, the other two ghost children. As their song drifts away in the night, a sudden yell of laughter from Henry in the bedroom breaks the spell, and instantly there is a feeling of malevolence.

From this point on, Henry and Grace begin to feel the house turning against them. The atmosphere turns nastier and nastier, and they are disturbed by a series of unexplained and increasingly threatening phenomena – smashing vases, exploding bulbs, falling chairs, flying knives, mysterious fires and so on. Soon even Henry is seriously frightened, and wants to leave. Grace, though, is determined to stay, convinced that there is a child involved, and it is trying to tell her something.

Grace is right, the two eldest ghost children Genevieve and Eugene are determined to drive the couple from the house – at any cost – but the youngest ghost child Amelie feels a strange empathy for Grace and wants her to learn their story. Amelie feels that if only Grace can learn their story somehow their misery will be ended – and she keeps leading Grace to clues – an old picture, a hidden letter, a box of pills – unbeknown to Genevieve and Eugene who become increasingly angry with Grace's refusal to go.

As events become more and more disturbing, Henry suggests they get some help from a voodoo witch doctor or something of the like. They head into New Orleans, and after persisting in the face of hostile replies, a little bribery gets them to a writhing, turbulent, voodoo animal sacrificing ceremony presided over by Marie Lafitte, the famous Voodoo Queen, supposedly born in the 1820s, almost two centuries ago. As they try to locate their witch doctor, they find themselves increasingly threatened. Eventually, they discover that this is not a real voodoo event, but a performance for hardline tourists looking for excitement, and the Voodoo Queen is in fact a transvestite – a nasty piece of work who fuels his/her performance with crack. (this can be softened a little for Haringey!). Marie tells them that if they want real voodoo medicine, they should go to old Willy Jongleroo.

Sceptical, they go to Willy – and find Marie is right. They beg Willy to come to the house to try and drive the ghosts out. Willy is reluctant but eventually agrees.

Later that night Willy turns up at Maison Blanc. Willy begins to perform a ceremony, but is soon overtaken by increasingly terrifying events in which Willy loses a finger. In terror, Willy leaves the house, but not before giving Grace a vital piece of advice which she uses later.

Further clues left by Amelie enable Grace to piece together the story of the children and their mother. It turns out that Maison Blanc was the house provided for the earlier Grace by Louis. He was forced by his family to marry Jennifer, a young white heiress, but still loved Grace and her children. Jealous of Louis's love for Grace, Jennifer tries to prove her worth by secretly obtaining herbal medicine and giving it to Grace's children when they fall ill. In her eagerness, Jennifer overdoes the dose, and the children die. Only the youngest, a babe in arms, survives. Finding traces of the medicine, the doctor is convinced Grace has killed her own children by foolishly dabbling in voodoo medicine. The law closes in. Terrified and distraught, Grace runs away with her young baby. After some hesitation, Jennifer owns up, but with Grace gone, no-one will believe her except Louis, who goes off to search for Grace again and again, but never finds her.

As Grace learns the story she suddenly realizes that Grace's baby could be her own grandmother, now very old and living in Chicago. Remembering Willy's advice, Grace sends Henry off to bring her grandmother here. With Henry gone, the atmosphere becomes quieter. Suddenly Genevieve and Eugene discover what Amelie has been doing, and they become enraged with her and more determined than ever to get rid of Grace.

Events become increasingly terrifying as Genevieve and Eugene try to punish Amelie and drive out Grace. The two somehow survive until they are at their last gasp when Henry finally arrives with grandma. At first, the terror whirls on, but when grandma begins to sing an old song, the atmosphere grows quieter as the ghost children realize it is their long lost baby sister.

Wrap up as Grace and Henry settle on the verandah, Willy comes round to chat grandma up, and the ghost children happily linger in the house, and will eventually fade away altogether. Or will they?