



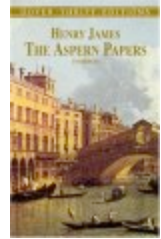
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REVIEW

Theater Review (NYC): Henry James's *The Aspern Papers*, Adapted by Martin Zuckerman

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Adapting a Henry James story for the stage poses a challenge: how, and how much, to capture, in such an extroverted medium, the exactness and penetration of James' interior eye?

The novella *The Aspern Papers* is a tragedy of personality, and an expert first-person psychological study of duplicity. Here it is neatly distilled by Martin Zuckerman and director Shawn Rozsa (Rozsa did a brilliant job last year with [Scapin](#)) into a third-person staging that retains much of the characters' richness and the story's waterlogged Venetian flavor.

A literary critic and historian insinuates himself into the petrified household of the fictional poet Jeffrey Aspern's ancient lover, Juliana Bordereau, who lives in an old manse in a backwater of Venice. Tended by her shy spinster niece, the old lady nurses her memories – along with a sheaf the poet's private letters, of immense value to the interloper.

Charming the niece while matching wits with the suspicious and still sharp old woman, our unheroic protagonist is, in the original story, the narrator, and thus becomes a sympathetic character, if far from admirable. Unnamed in the tale but here given the name "Walter Scampo," he comes across here, in Kelly King's performance, as more oily and less pleasant, an unctuous and stilted sort of charmer.

Still, we are convinced why the pinched, no-longer-young Miss Tita – played with prim yet colorful exactitude by Elisabeth Grace Rothan – finds him so appealing. Stirred from her drab existence by his gaudy speeches, his love for flowers and poetry, his money, and his gondola, the niece eventually enters his confidence and reluctantly agrees to help him get his hands on the papers.

Zuckerman and Rozsa find a way to pace the story well for the stage – certainly on the stately side, but appropriately so for James and for this sort of period drama in general. There's a good bit of suspense, and a delightful performance by Carol Lambert as the sharp-witted old lady. Importantly, there's also Kyle Dixon's spectacular garden set, which draws "ahs" from the audience even before the action begins. Luridly lit by Shaun Suchan, it seems to crawl with life and decay; add a big bush or two, and it could house a staging of "Rappaccini's Daughter." A clever folding wall then transforms part of it into

magnetism – Juliana is said to have called him a "god." But the verses presented here, while evocative and clever, are simply not good enough to make me believe their author would elicit such devotion by serious scholars. The real poet behind the events on which James loosely based this tale was Shelley. Perhaps the adaptation could have used some lines from one of the great Romantic poets, or simply found a way to suggest the fictitious Aspern's brilliance without quoting him – after all, James did.

Presented by [Turtle Shell Productions](#) at the Turtle's Shell Theater (in the Times Square Arts Center), 300 W. 43 St., NYC. Through May 24. Tickets at [TheaterMania](#) or call (212) 352-3101.



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Comments

