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## THE ASPERN PAPERS

By: *Eugene Paul*

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The works of Henry James have generated theatrical successes which ought to be of some generous comfort to his shade because he loved the theater so and was not successful with his own plays. He, nevertheless, incorporated his dramatic talents in his books which lent them urgency and suspense, invaluable for carrying along readers, Such a successful work was *The Aspern Papers*, which came to life on the stage most notably previously in an adaptation by Michael Redgrave, who also starred as the somewhat slippery book researcher hunting the papers of a long dead poet, Jeffery Aspern, known to have had a passionate liaison with the beautiful Juliana Bordereau when they were very young. Redgrave's drama served him exceedingly well. He appeared in the play again decades later with his daughter, Vanessa. On Broadway, Maurice Evans and Flora Robson starred, in 1962. Reception for the actors was good although there were reservations about the play itself as dusty, musty, a period piece. Well, of course it is a period piece but it was written that way originally, and in the current version by Martin Zuckerman, the period remains important to the play but Zuckerman has had the sense to tighten the structure around his three main characters and left all extraneous matter where it should have been, in among the glories of Venice in the 1880's.

Our hero, or should we call him our instigating protagonist, purposefully wanders into a hidden garden of a great, mouldering mansion standing on one of the islands that make up Venice, remote, once glorious, as was its owner. He professes to a great love of the garden's beauty and vows to the frightened, intrigued spinsterish lady he finds there that he will restore the garden to its lush beauty and fill it with roses if she will permit him to take up quarters in the great house as a paying guest. Youngish Tita Bordereau asks permission from her ancient aunt, Juliana, who casts a suspicious eye on this ingratiating interloper and demands an exorbitant rental. Walter protests, then pays. It isn't long before he is finding out everything he can from Tita about anything to do with Jeffrey Aspern, about whom he has been searching documentation for years. He winds Tita around his little finger, as the saying goes, and when he recites some unpublished erotic poetry Jeffrey had written about his Juliana, Tita is smitten enough to go along with his plans to search for any papers of Aspern's that might still be in Juliana's hands. Juliana, far more worldly than her niece, knows what he's up to. She has long worried about her niece's future –

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Tita has no one else – and Juliana knows she has a most effective weapon to secure that future: Jeffrey Aspern's papers. But when she finds Walter searching for them, in her rage, she tries to burn them, only to have a stroke and perish. Then, Tita, in an excruciating exposure of her own feelings, attempts to inveigle Walter to commit to marrying her for the papers, if nothing else. She has fallen in love with him. How does he feel? He bolts. When he reconsiders and comes back, she is murderous in her enjoyment of the way she burned the papers.

This comeuppance theme is quite similar to that in *Washington Square* and just as effective, saying something revealing about Henry James himself. This is more than just dramatic device. Different versions appear in other adaptations of James's book, such as in the opera of *The Aspern Papers*. One version aspired to a happier ending. Not Zuckerman. Kelly King, ingratiating and convincing as the man after Aspern's papers, Elisabeth Grace Rothan as uptight, innocent, niece Tita, and Carol Lambert as her ancient aunt Juliana, here combine their talents to tell the tale with an interesting weave of Victorian overlayment in delivery with a thorough grasp underlying their "indicating" that relates character to character. The play is better for it. Much more could be done with costumes and scenery in different circumstances but director Shawn Rozsa has stuck with the main meat: the players. Could things work more smoothly? Yes. Could they look more convincing? Yes. But these actors are playing in enough of a grand style to fulfill the atmosphere Henry James would have liked to see. *The Aspern Papers* continues its theatrical life revitalized.

\*

*The Aspern Papers*. At the Turtle Shell Theater. 300 W. 43<sup>rd</sup> Street. (Times Square Arts Center, 4<sup>th</sup> Floor. ) Tickets, \$18 at theatermania.com or 212-352-3101.

\*

[Reviewer's bio](#) Eugene can be contacted at



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