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what's on on off-off broadway

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The Value of a Letter

by Amy Freeman

The Aspern Papers reviewed May 3, 2008

In an age where tabloids exploit the privacies of celebrities to an alarming degree, the question of whether a famous person has the right to have a private life or not is worth considering. What about after he is dead, can his private past become public knowledge? First published 120 years ago, Henry James' novella, *The Aspern Papers* explored such questions while exploring the lengths people will go to in order to get what they want. Turtle Shell Productions presents an able adaptation (by Martin Zuckerman) of the story, one that fully brings the characters and setting to life.



Kelly King and Elisabeth Grace Rothan
Photo Credit:Jeremy Handelman



Kelly King, Carol Lambert, and
Elisabeth Grace Rothan
Photo Credit:Jeremy Handelman

As the play opens, a man, Walter, appears at the secluded Venetian estate of Juliana Bordereau. He is enamored with the garden and begs Juliana's niece, Tita, to convince her aunt to allow him to lease a few rooms in the house and also tend to the garden. Juliana lets him the rooms, but for a dear price. Walter's intentions are not at first made known, but as time goes on (and flowers continue to bloom in the stage garden, as if by magic), he makes his intentions clear, at least to Tita.

Walter is an academic, and is after letters written from the late poet James Aspern to Juliana, in order to complete his biography. Tita, played in a chaste but beguiling manner by Elisabeth Grace Rothan, who has fallen for Walter, allows him to think that she will aid him



THE ASPERN PAPERS

The Turtle's Shell Theater

Category: Drama
Written by: Written by Henry James; Adapted by Martin Zuckerman
Directed by: Shawn Rozsa
Produced by: John W. Cooper & Turtle Shell Productions
Opens: April 30
Closes: May 24
Running Time: 2 hours

Theater: The Turtle's Shell Theater
Address: 300 West 43rd Street, Suite #403
 New York, NY 10036

BOX OFFICE

Tickets: \$18.00
 TDF & School Group Discounts
Phone: (212) 352-0255

CREDITS

Creative Team
Written by: Henry James
Adapted by: Martin M. Zuckerman
Directed by: Shawn Rozsa
Produced by: Turtle Shell

allows him to think that she will aid him in his quest. The play is suspenseful; never at any time is one able to predict the outcome. Will Tita win Walter? Will Walter get the papers? And, do we even want him to get them? The entire time, it is uncertain whether we can trust Walter, or whether we can trust any of the characters, as each is so bent on obtaining their desires that it seems they may put aside all reason and invoke any rationale in order to do so.

Elisabeth Grace Rothan and Carol Lambert
Photo Credit:Jeremy Handelman

The intriguing story is aided by the elements of the stage. The lighting, designed by Shaun Suchan, features deep blues and purples, which enhance the blue color of much of the set and furniture. Throughout the play, the originally dead garden is transformed into a living oasis of color. The costumes, by A. Christina Giannini, are exquisite and capture the style of the time. The actors each do a fine job. Carol Lambert, as Juliana, a 150-year-old woman, conveys strength while simultaneously seeming as if she may give out at any moment. Kelly King, as Walter, is charming, while Rothan is convincing as an isolated, slightly desperate spinster.

In the end, who do we side with, the scholar who wants personal information for the sake of academia or the woman who clings to her privacy? As each character has good and bad sides, it is hard to choose, although James makes his point clear enough in the end. *The Aspern Papers* is an engaging show, proof that literary adaptations are able to lift themselves from the page and become fully alive.

Productions

Light Designer: Shaun Suchan
Sound Designer: Patrick Grant
Set Designer: Kyle Dixon
Costume Designer: A. Christina Giannini

Cast

Walter Scampo: Kelly King
Tita Bordereau: Elisabeth Grace Rothan
Juliana Bordereau: Carol Lambert
Voice of Young Aspern: Nico Evers-Swindell

Crew

Production Manager: Jeremy Handelman
Stage Manager: Marina Steinberg