

Who's Got The Opera?

The Dallas Opera revival of Dominick Argento's *The Aspern Papers* at the Winspear Opera House is quietly spectacular.

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photo: Karen Almond

"The Aspern Papers"

Dallas — Before getting into the substance of this review, let me say this. The **Dallas Opera** production of Dominick Argento's *The Aspern Papers* is spectacular, but in a subtle way. (You will understand that dichotomy when you see the production.) The cast is a collection of some of the greatest singers currently on the opera stage. **The direction, sets, costumes and lighting are right-on for creating the gothic feel of the unfolding plot, a psychological mystery that will keep you guessing.** Graeme Jenkins conducts a perfect performance, giving the music sweep and thrust, and the Dallas Opera Orchestra sounded marvelous.

Argento's brilliantly written and orchestrated score, sometimes lush and sometimes spare (at times down to one or two instruments), underpins the conversational vocal writing in such a way that opera and stage play meld into a taut drama. But, in an act of musical alchemy, the final result is neither play nor opera, but a hybrid that transcends both art forms. Slow to start, the opera picks up speed as it goes along, until it finally reaches its shattering conclusion and shocking aftermath.

The Aspern Papers is an opera based on a novella by Henry James—which in turn was based on a collection of letters between the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley and Claire

Clairmont, Mary Shelley's stepsister. Mary Shelley was the poet's wife, but she is best known nowadays for her gothic novel *Frankenstein*. There was some mystery about what happened to this eyebrow-raising correspondence, but history says Clairmont saved every scrap until she died. Nothing is known about the letters after that. Shelley died in a way similar to Aspern in the opera, an incident involving a boat and a drowning that may or may not have been accidental.

There is something creepy about biographers poking around in the papers of the dead and famous, which were never intended for any viewer but the addressee. Of course, we see this even today in a much more invasive way, when even the cell phone conversations of the British Royals are pruriently published for all to hear.

James turns this material into an evocative novella that tells you precisely nothing, yet assumes that *you* know what he is talking about and that *he* knows that you know...and so on into the night. To turn this into an opera, composer Dominick Argento, who was also his own librettist, had to move the plot from the vague to the operatic. This he did admirably, and the excellent production by the Dallas Opera that opened on Friday evening at the **Winspear Opera House** is a moving experience.

Tenor Joseph Kaiser, as Aspern, sings as good as he looks. Alexandra Deshorties delivers a beautiful soprano voice and a tour de force acting job, portraying both the brokenhearted and alluring young Juliana and the bitter old crone she becomes. Nathan Gunn has one of the most beautiful baritone voices around, and is handsome in a Cary Grant sort of way. This makes him completely believable as The Lodger, who comes sniffing around searching for the missing opera and is willing to use his charms on Tina, the spinster niece, to achieve his aims.

And Susan Graham is amazing as Tina, that spinster niece. Of course, vocally she is at the top of her form and the reigning Queen of Mezzoland. She paints a pathetic picture of Tina: conflicted and anguished, torn between loyalty to Juliana, the responsibility of possessing what might be a masterpiece, and her desire for even a chance at love, and a life beyond the crumbling villa. The usually glamorous Graham is transformed into a dowdy and drab cipher of a woman with mousey hair severely pulled back from her face. Such a tempestuous situation, suddenly blowing into her monotonously empty life, leaves her completely drained of what little gumption she ever had.

Lyric tenor Joseph Kaiser, as Jeffery Aspern, is a hunk at the opposite end of the spectrum from Gunn's debonair and classic good looks. He is a handsome, wavy-haired, hail-and-hearty heartthrob who looks like he just tumbled out of bed. His character is played relatively one-dimensional, but it's a dimension that is the stuff of sweep-you-off-your-feet dreams, even if you know it would only last for a moment.

The secondary characters all do a fine job. Dean Peterson is impressive as the impresario Barelli, who tries in vain to keep his composer and leading lady from mutual self-destruction. Sasha Cooke, as Sonia, is believable as Barelli's current mistress and Aspern's most recent conquest. Eric Jordan was an odd addition as a portrait artist

painting Aspern, but he did a fine job. Jennifer Youngs was also good as the Maid and it was a pleasure to see the underused Mark McCrory as the Gardener.

Alexander Rom's chorus was in an unusual role. Here, they are part of the orchestra—at some times singing an echo of the words on the stage, at other times singing on “ah” or humming. Of course, most movie scores these days have a wordless chorus in the orchestrations. When the Dallas Symphony does a concert of movie music, they always bring in a chorus. However, Argento's singular use of that effect is innovative in opera and was quite effective.

The set, by Andrew Lieberman, is an interior of a grand 19th-century villa. But, just as the characters in the opera, it goes from grand to dilapidated to completely gone at the end, leaving just a chair or two and, of course, the sacred piano of Jeffery Aspern. These few remnants are set against a Robert Wilson-like hazy sky and shoreline, created by a gray cyclorama; it is the beach where Aspern was last seen. This concept succeeds thanks to the subtle lighting designs of Thomas Hase. Constance Hoffman successfully defines the two eras of the opera with her thoughtful dual-period costume designs.

Now some ruminations.

This is the 25th anniversary of the première of the opera, a Dallas Opera commission. TDO revamped it with a new set and, hard as it is to believe, replaced the stellar original cast with an equally distinguished one. Three superstars played the major roles 25 years ago: Frederica von Stade, Elisabeth Söderström and Richard Stilwell. Three superstars took the stage on Friday: Susan Graham, Alexandra Deshorties and Nathan Gunn. The results were pure magic.

Argento's take on the plot is a little hard to follow if you arrive armed with only the novella in your mind. James' story all takes place in his present day while Argento gives us the present and the past at the same time. We see the characters back in 1835, when the actual events that shape the future were taking place. We also see the bitter conclusion (in 1885) engendered by those earlier events. He moves the location from a canal in Venice to the scenic-but-glacial Lake Como for no apparent reason. However, Argento keeps the pager-turning mystery-novel style of the novella and, like James, keeps us guessing about what will happen right up to the last moments. He changes Juliana, the protagonist (and jilted mistress of Aspern) into an opera singer, Aspern himself into a composer and the missing poet's papers to a just-completed opera written for Juliana to premiere.

In these changes, though, lies a bit of a quandary. In the James novella, we are asked to imagine the character of Aspern, since he is long dead by drowning, either by happenstance or by his own hand. Though he is long gone, he dominates the novella and the lives of all other characters. Some may picture the beautiful Shelley or the tubercular and tortured Keats in the role, while others have a gaunt and pale waif in mind. The point is that James lets each of us create our own Aspern. But with the use of

flashbacks in the opera, here we see Aspern in the dashing flesh. This is not to say that the Dallas Opera production didn't supply us with a dreamboat in Kaiser's Aspern, but to note that Henry James wanted us to see our own.

The other question to ponder is, perhaps, about the impact of changing the object of the search: from the hunt for a poet's missing papers and letters, into a search for the book and score to a missing opera. While the former would be of great academic interest, a missing masterpiece by a major composer is a theft from the entire world. Imagine if Verdi had finished a setting of *King Lear* and one person had life or death control over it?

Argento's opera succeeds on many levels if you let him tell his story his way, and don't expect an opera like the excellent TDO production of *Turandot* that is running concurrently. The two shows are opposites of each other. *Turandot* is the grandest of grand opera, full of pageantry, singers with glorious high notes and Puccini's greatest music. *The Aspern Papers* is a subtle drama playing out between a few characters confined within the four walls of a neglected house, trapped between two time periods by nothing more than their own suspicions. In a way, it is reminiscent of a Hitchcock film, in that the mysteries and plot twists are used to explore the interior thoughts and psychological workings of the characters. **TJ**