

Actress brings arts benefactor Isabella Stewart Gardner to life

By ALAN BURKE
News staff

PEABODY — To most of us, Isabella Stewart Gardner exists in oils, or in the splendor of her home, or in the memory of an age that speaks all at once of wealth and elegance and art.

Separating the woman from the myth would seem all but impossible today. But on Wednesday at 7:30 p.m. in the Community Life Center, the Peabody Historical Society (978-531-0805) will present "Mrs. Jack" in the flesh. Refreshments will be served and tickets are \$3 for nonmembers.

Of course, it's not the real Isabella Stewart Gardner, who died in 1924, but a performance by Boston character actress Jessa Piaia, who speaks of her subject in reverent tones, as a role model and trail blazer.

"Her story holds great fascination for people," she says, adding that after 10 years of "being" Gardner she knows the woman very well.

Gardner, Piaia indicates, is remembered most importantly as one of the first people to encourage American artists, painters, sculptors and musicians.

"The history books credit her as America's first patroness of the arts," she says.

While she often traveled to Europe collecting classic works of art, she also nurtured home-grown genius, "so Americans would not always have to look to Europe, and we could cultivate our talent at home," says an admiring Piaia.

After her death, Gardner donated her home, Fenway Court in Boston's Fenway, to the public. It

was packed with her magnificent collection and built in the style of a Venetian villa. As the Gardner Museum, it remains today famous for its treasures and the beautiful, otherworldly, indoor courtyard.

"Her legacy is her home," says Piaia.

But Gardner was more than a collector, more than a wealthy woman throwing money around. She had a streak of non-conformity, a willingness to buck the system, that drew Piaia to her.

Born in Manhattan, Isabella married Jack Gardner Jr. on the eve of the Civil War. Her move to Boston was a rocky one. She came from a newly wealthy family while her in-laws often reminded their new daughter-in-law that they were "old money."

"She was able to transform the society she lived in and make her own way," says Piaia. Eccentric, strong-willed, she was known to have a short temper.

"But I feel she had a deep compassion and that she cared for others," says the actress.

"She was a baseball fan," Piaia relates with obvious delight, agreeing that Gardner, though by then in her declining years, likely rooted the Red Sox home to their last World Series victory in 1918. In that era, baseball was a game with a reputation that was anything but genteel, where contests were sometimes delayed by riots.

A Milwaukee native who came to Boston 20 years ago, Piaia made the Gardner Museum one of her first stops. There, she felt its "ambiance," and almost instantly fell under the

spell of the woman who created it. Some 10 years would pass before she began to perform as Gardner, but she was researching long before that, largely at the Gardner Museum.

A graduate of the University of Massachusetts at Boston, Piaia also studied acting at London's Oval House Theatre. Further, Gardner is not the only woman she portrays. Others in her repertoire include pioneer aviator Amelia Earhart, Civil War nurse Clara Barton and temperance leader Hannah Jumper. Thanks to Jumper's determination, Piaia notes, Rockport has been a dry town since the mid-19th century.

Piaia's performance Wednesday evening is part lecture and part play, with some scenes acted out. Gardner will be portrayed as she stops in Peabody in 1909, on the way to visit artist friends, including Harry Sleeper, on Eastern Point in Gloucester.

"She will talk about her various adventures," Piaia explains, including a small scandal where she was charged with trying to smuggle art works into the country. "She gives a justification of her innocence."

Gardner's long association with free-spirited artists has given rise to speculation about her personal life. Piaia describes her marriage as solid. Her husband died in 1898. But while little scandal became attached to her name, "sometimes tongues did wag."

She would not have blushed at any rumors, enjoying the attention that such stories brought, says Piaia. "And she always believed that you should never spoil a good story by telling the truth."

*As promised. It was a great evening and enjoyed
by all. Also, a pleasure meeting you.*

Barbara Danette