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A MUSEUM PIECE, IN PEARLS

Isabella Stewart Gardner, aided by character actress, shares tales of art and adventure in Billerica

By DENNIS SHAUGHNESSEY
Sun Staff

BILLERICA — Isabella Stewart Gardner is not particularly fond of the press. "I'm suspicious of reporters," she said. "The Boston Transcript has not at all treated me fairly in recent days."

The reference was to rumors of a scandal that have surrounded Gardner during the last year. It seems that Gardner, the Beacon Hill art collector, dubbed "The Patroness of the Arts," had four large crates of artwork and other antiques pass through customs from Italy to the United States.

"She led an amazing life."

Actress Jessa Piaia on Isabella Stewart Gardner

She had entrusted the crates to a friend who said they were filled with household goods valued at \$8,000. When the crates were opened, customs representatives discovered the treasure and fined Gardner \$153,000 for trying to circumvent the tariffs.

"But please do not think too harshly of me," she told her audience during a visit to the Billerica Memorial Library this week. "In fact, I just

Please see **GARDNER/10**



LIVING LEGEND: Dressed for the occasion with fan, gloves, choker and veil, actress Jessa Piaia portrays Boston socialite and art collector Isabella Stewart Gardner at the Billerica Memorial Library Tuesday night.

SUN / BILL BRIDGEFORD

Gardner portrayal shows personality behind legend

GARDNER/From Page 9

wrote out my first payment of \$12,075 in April and thought to myself, 'Who shall get the last laugh?'"

Ever the Boston aristocrat, Gardner indulged in a full-blown name-dropping session about her illustrious circle of friends, while chronicling the humble beginnings of Fenway Court, which she hopes will someday be known as the Isabella Gardner Museum in Boston.

Dressed in an elegant black Victorian dress, choker necklace, three-quarter-length gloves and veiled bonnet, the Boston socialite warmed quickly to the 40 or so library patrons.

The group listened with rapt attention as Gardner described her trips around the world in search of art and adventure, visiting such places as London, Paris, Venice, Rome and parts of Asia, including a journey through Cambodia on ox cart. She spoke of her flirtation with painter John Singer Sargent, for whom she sat through eight sessions while he painted her portrait.

"The portrait has caused tongues to wag," she said. "For that reason, the painting will remain in the Gothic Room at my Beacon Hill home, never to be shown again until after my passing."

Isabella Stewart Gardner died on July 17, 1924, but came to life again on Tuesday

evening, courtesy of character actress Jessa Piaia of Cambridge.

Piaia knows her subject well and takes on the persona of Gardner, even when taking questions from the audience. The discourse seems natural and unrehearsed, as if she is telling the story for the first time. When she stumbles over her words, which is rare, it only adds to the realism.

Gardner is only one of the characters portrayed by Piaia as part of her Women In History series. She also depicts such notables as Amelia Earhart, Clara Barton and Susan B. Anthony.

Piaia, who works in the History Department at Harvard University, has been performing at educational institutions, museums, public libraries, historical societies, worship services and women's groups and organizations for many years. She counts Gardner's character as one of her favorites.

"Isabella's character is constantly evolving as I do more research and discover more things about her," Piaia said. "She led an amazing life. She had fun, but she helped a lot of people in the process. She had very good intentions."



ELEGANT ARTISTRY: Jessa Piaia portrays Isabella Stewart Gardner at the Billerica Memorial Library. SUN / BILL BRIDGEFORD