

The Europeans on Broadway

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Abstract

Henry James's early work *The Europeans* has proved surprisingly difficult to adapt, both on screen and in the theater. This article reconstructs a version of the play *Eugenia*, written in 1957 by the dramatist Randolph Carter and starring Tallulah Bankhead, which attracted indifferent reviews and ran for a short time on Broadway. The play rewrites a considerable amount of the source-text, but perhaps the main reason for its short run was the problems experienced by the leading actress, rather than any problems experienced by the company with the adapted text.

Keywords

Broadway, *The Europeans*, Henry James, Tallulah Bankhead, stage adaptation, Randolph Carter

Conventional wisdom is that Henry James and the theater were not a good mix. Indeed, many of his biographers have seen the failure of his play *Guy Domville* in 1895 as a traumatic turning point in James's personal and professional lives. James, who was too nervous to sit in the audience for his play's opening night, attended instead Oscar Wilde's *Ideal Husband*, which was an instant hit. Returning to the St. James Theatre (where *Guy Domville* was first performed) he was thrust onstage by the director, and booed by the audience. In fact, James wrote several pieces that found their way to the stage, the most successful of which was *The American* (1891). But it is certainly true that he never achieved during his lifetime the critical acclaim, audience enthusiasm, and—perhaps most important—substantial profits that he had hoped for in the theater.

Plays adapted by others from Henry James's fiction found better success, though not inevitably so. The best-known of these is *The Heiress*

(1947) with a script by Augustus and Ruth Goetz. Based on James's *Washington Square*, *The Heiress* has had three successful Broadway runs: 1947-48, 1976, and the 2013 production with Jessica Chastain, Dan Stevens, David Strathairn, and Judith Ivey. It was also the source for the terrific 1949 William Wyler film by the same name, starring Olivia de Havilland, Montgomery Clift, Ralph Richardson, and Miriam Hopkins. In addition, there have been theater productions based on *The Turn of the Screw* (*The Innocents* 1950 and again in 1976), *The Aspern Papers* (*The Aspern Papers* 1962 and *The Golden Age* 1984), *The Wings of the Dove* (*Child of Fortune* 1956), *The Portrait of a Lady* (1954), and, as Michael Anesko has recently discussed, a musical based on *The Ambassadors* (1972) with Danielle Darrieux. And these are just the Broadway productions.

It was while working on James's early comic novel (some would say his only comic novel) *The Europeans* for the forthcoming Cambridge University Press edition of Henry James's work that I came across *Eugenia*, a 1957 Broadway play based on *The Europeans*, starring, of all people, Tallulah Bankhead. This was a surprise to me and, as far as I can tell, to most others as well: there is virtually no scholarship on *Eugenia*. There is, however, an uncatalogued archive of materials related to the production at Harvard's Houghton Library¹ where I happily spent a couple of days in January 2013. The archive, one box (.1 linear feet) of materials from 1956-58, includes investors' correspondence, publicity materials, and financial records as well as two scripts of *Eugenia*, one that was used in the out-of-town previews; the other, the revised script for the Broadway production. There are letters to and from directors, actors, and producers, as well as a great deal of correspondence soliciting funds from potential backers, a playbill, and clippings.

Eugenia had an impressive team. The original script was written by Randolph Carter, a playwright as well as a script doctor for J. J. Shubert, one of the influential Shubert brothers, both major American theater impresarios. (A younger writer, Waldemar Hansen, did later revisions). The director was Herbert Machiz, a well-known and accomplished professional who had directed Tallulah Bankhead's most recent Broadway appearance in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1956). (Others Machiz worked with over the

1 Papers concerning the Broadway play *Eugenia*, 1956-58 (MS Am 2796). Houghton Library, Harvard University. Unless noted otherwise, all quoted material is from this source.

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years included everyone from Kurt Weill, Langston Hughes, and Orson Welles to Jean Cocteau and James Earl Jones). John C. (Jack) Wilson, who was brought on as producer, invoked both Carter's and Machiz's names as guarantors of the productions' quality when he began raising money from investors. Wilson himself was former stockbroker whose relationship with Noël Coward had led to a successful career as a Broadway producer and director, so his network was extensive. He mapped out a high-end production, managing to secure the brilliant Oliver Smith to design the sets, the equally gifted Miles White for the costumes. (Charles McHarry in the *New York Daily News* was to judge "Miss Bankhead's gowns, the highlight of the evening" [369]—but more on that later). Wilson was also able to book the highly desirable Ambassador Theatre, a premier Broadway playhouse, for *Eugenia*—all selling points for investors. (The Ambassador, by the way, is still going strong).

If one accepts the premise that adapting Henry James to the stage is a good idea (a premise about which there is certainly no consensus), *The Europeans* is a promising choice. It offers a relatively straightforward narrative, a light comic tone, the amusing clash of two cultures, multiple love plots, an American setting, and readily understandable character types—not to mention the opportunity for those beautiful costumes. Here is a quick summary of the novel: the Wentworth family—Mr. Wentworth and his three young adult children, Gertrude, Charlotte, and Clifford—are Puritanical, wealthy New Englanders, residing outside of Boston. Nearby lives Robert Acton, their cousin, his invalid mother, and his young sister, Lizzie (in *Eugenia* she becomes his daughter). Robert is also wealthy and, for his milieu, sophisticated, having traveled widely. Gertrude Wentworth, the rebel of the family, is being wooed by Mr. Brand, the priggish local minister. Clifford Wentworth and Lizzie Acton are in love. The plot turns around the visit to the Wentworths of their exotic European relatives, Felix Young and his sister, the Baroness Munster (*Eugenia*). (Carter changed their last name to "de Costa" for the play, presumably because it sounded more European than "Young," possibly because he wanted to hint at Jewish origins for these cosmopolitan characters). Whatever their names, the visitors stay in a guest cottage on the family estate, which *Eugenia* transforms into a sort of European salon. Acton is attracted to *Eugenia*, but she is the morganatic wife of a royal younger son (that is to say, the Prince has married her as a commoner). In addition, Acton doubts that a worldly

woman can be an honest one. Eugenia, in turn, is interested in Acton's wealth and position. The good-natured Felix, a Bohemian (who dabbles in all the arts and adores all of the American women) eventually falls in love with Gertrude. The novel ends with Felix and Gertrude, Charlotte and Mr. Brand, and Clifford and Lizzie marrying. Robert Acton fails to propose to the Baroness, who returns to Europe alone. We can recognize here what were to become familiar Jamesian characters: in the passive Robert Acton, we can see an early version of both Ralph Touchett and Lambert Strether; Gertrude is a relatively crude foreshadowing of Isabel Archer; Madame Merle's outline can be traced in Eugenia.

Randolph Carter's stageplay centers around this last character. *Eugenia* was seen as a star vehicle for Tallulah Bankhead. This focus is a departure from the novel itself, in which Eugenia undoubtedly plays a major part, but where Gertrude Wentworth's coming-of-age love story is accorded equal weight and space. (Although it is also the case that on 30 October 1878, James wrote to his friend Lizzie Boott, "You are quite right to hate Gertrude, whom I also personally dislike!" [*Henry James Letters* 190]). The archival correspondence available shows Bankhead on board with the production of *Eugenia* early on. The flamboyant actress was to be the main attraction. Bankhead had begun her career in the theater, debuting on Broadway in 1918. After spending the twenties largely in London, she returned to New York in 1931, becoming an established box-office presence, starring most successfully in Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes* (1939) and Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942). Tallulah Bankhead was also known, of course, for her roles in films (most notably Alfred Hitchcock's 1944 *Lifeboat*). By the fifties, her career and her health had begun to decline, but she was still a well-known, indeed, notorious star. James's Eugenia is a woman of the world, a sophisticated European, elaborately dressed and coiffed, mannered, and ironic. The New Englanders in James's novel do not know how to regard hermorganatic marriage to the younger son of a royal family, suspecting that she is, if not a fallen woman, at least not wholly pure and fully sincere enough to meet their high moral standards. Casting Tallulah Bankhead in such a role could not have seemed like much of a stretch: Bankhead had a history of very public sexual escapades with both men and women. Her talk was witty, profane, and pointedly outrageous. While she was not European, she was Southern, and played up that exoticism whenever opportune. With

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Bankhead as Eugenia, theatergoers would have arrived primed to encounter an unconventional character and a (possibly) extravagant performance.

Then there was the fact that at this point in her career a contingent of Tallulah Bankhead's audience had enshrined her as a dramatic diva. This had been a problem when she played Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*: expecting her to perform as Tallulah Bankhead, the coterie laughed at her dramatic lines, and Bankhead sometimes cooperated, camping it up for this largely gay crowd. This conjunction of celebrity and gay cultures make it intriguing to speculate regarding how Henry James would have felt about having Tallulah Bankhead as his leading lady. James was certainly not indifferent to matters of casting; in fact, he had opinions about virtually every detail of theatrical staging. For example, in an essay titled "Elizabeth Robins's Hair," Eric Savoy quotes from James's decidedly bitchy complaint about a hairstyle worn by the leading lady in *The American* (183). Savoy, who calls James a "drama queen," is among the critics who have recently begun to look more closely at Henry James's multiple, close, and varied relationships with women, neither dismissing them as trivial nor reading them as failed or rejected heterosexual romances. Women of the theater—Elizabeth Robins, Frances Kemble, and Ellen Terry—were James's intimates and his friendships and correspondences with them signal as well his participation in the modern cult of the actress. Tallulah Bankhead, who became a favorite model for drag queens, whose onstage acting was often eclipsed by her offstage performances (she was famous for her refusal to wear undergarments as well as her penchant for performing cartwheels), was herself nothing if not a theater queen. And, I have to say, that reflecting on her casting has made me realize just how campy James's Eugenia in *The Europeans* is: The Baroness is always deliberately, flamboyantly, playing the part of the sophisticated woman of mystery. We learn this in the very first scene of the novel when we meet her flouncing around her Boston hotel room:

She turned away from the window at last,
pressing her hands to her eyes. 'It's too horrible!'
she exclaimed. 'I shall go back—I shall go back!'
And she flung herself into a chair before the fire.
(7)

Although this performance does not make it into the *Eugenia* script, it is nothing if not a Tallulah Bankhead scene. My guess is that James

would have been at once delighted and appalled by Miss Bankhead as his leading lady.

Back to practicalities: Bankhead's contract (included in the Houghton materials) gave her not only a weekly salary, but also twenty-five percent of all profits from the production, including (but not limited to) "moving picture rights, television and radio rights, stock rights, etc." So, she had a very strong vested interest, both career-wise and financially, in the play's success.

The correspondence indicates that the producer Jack Wilson was particularly hopeful that the play would make it to television. On 24 October 1956, he wrote to Bill Paley, Chairman of the Board of CBS:

Here is the script, and I hope that you will like it. I think it is a magnificent part for Tallulah, and I will do my best to give the production every elegance and distinction possible. I have engaged Oliver Smith to do the set and Miles White to do the costumes and, in her supporting cast, we have lined up Anne Meacham, Nicholas Joy, Tom Ellis and, I think, a top flight group of supporting players.

The deal would be, if you are interested, 100% of the money for 50% of the profits, plus an option on the television rights, which Tallulah is willing to do if you want her, and, naturally, your proportionate share of any film sale that might ensue.

Wilson goes on to ask for a quick answer; if Bill Paley says no, Wilson will go to his normal backers and collect the money in smaller amounts. On 30 October 1956, Bill Paley did say "No." In fact, he did not even read the script himself, passing it off to "associates," who reported that "although it is a very good script and one which should do well in the theatre, they do not consider it ideal fare for television."

Thereafter Wilson certainly seems to have really hustled to raise money. Billy Rose, the theatrical impresario, was an early investor, whose name Wilson dropped in a number of his "invitations" to other potential

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backers. The correspondence at the Houghton reads at times like the script of Mel Brooks's *The Producers* in which the unscrupulous Max Bialystock hustles to sucker the unwitting into investing in what are inevitably box-office disasters. Wilson's records include a mailing list of possible investors, with penciled notations on the left (e.g., "James," presumably indicating that the person might have some interest in Henry James or "Millionaire" — the meaning there is pretty clear. By the way, these categories do not seem to have overlapped). Noted as well are the responses to these solicitations (that is, either "NO" written in large red letters or, more happily, the amount invested). The list is very specific as to how individuals are to be addressed, for example "Dear, dear Schonceits," "Dear Mrs. Loeb," "Dear Roger."

One of my particular favorites among these fund-raising letters is written to Tad Adoue (the manager of the Dallas Civic Theater and administrator of the Margo Jones Award, an important theatrical honor) on 26 November 1956. Wilson says:

If you like the script but don't feel you have sufficient money to involve yourself at the moment, perhaps you would want to recommend the production to some of your millionaire friends who you once told me would follow your advice in such matters.

Although the records show Wilson to be an old hand at persuading investors, he nonetheless claims that: "I have very rarely recommended any of my productions to potential backers. This time, however, I feel 'EUGENIA' to be as sound an investment as one can find in the theatre today."

In addition to hopes for a television production, Wilson also attempted to work *Eugenia's* movie potential, using Noël Coward's name and Bankhead's participation as enticements, and writing on 7 November 1956, to Sidney Phillips at MGM-Loew:

Dear Sidney,

Here is the script of the play I talked to you about for Tallulah. I think it's wonderful and my friend, Mr. Coward, agrees with me. Although

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it is in period, it seems to us that the dialogue is modern and exciting, especially in her role.

MGM-Loew declined.

The file contains several instances in which those writing to Wilson say that they are just back in town and have only now gotten his invitation, expressing sorrow that it is now too late to invest. Surely in some cases this was a polite fiction, but Wilson persistently writes back, "No! It's not too late to kick in some funds."

Many of those who decided against investment do so explicitly *because* it is a play "based on a novel by Henry James." Wary about James's stage-worthiness, these investors asked to see the script. In nearly every case, those who actually read the script declined to invest. For example, Sherman Ewing writes that he wanted to like the play because of Wilson and Bankhead but

Midge [his wife] and I were very sorry that we did not like your play EUGENIA better than we did because we would have loved being associated once more with you and Tallulah.

However, we must admit that the play disappointed us. It seemed to us to be Henry James at his least exciting. I am sure your production and Tallulah's acting would add immeasurably to the play's charm, but we did not feel that the script gave either you or Tallulah the opportunity that you both so richly deserve.
(14 November 1956)

On 18 December Frank O. Fredericks, returning the script, declined to invest on Jamesian grounds as well: "I regret that after reading the script, I don't believe that I will invest in this production. Unfortunately, like a number of plays based on Henry James's works, this one doesn't seem to have sufficient dramatic or comic punch."

The scripts at the Houghton support some of these reservations about bringing Henry James to the stage. The first typescript is undated: marked "Script #6," it is ninety-eight pages long. We know that revisions on the play began while it was in rehearsals and continued through its

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out-of-town runs (these started in December 1956 and took place in New Haven, Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore). The results can be seen in the second Houghton script, marked “Revised copy” 1/30/57 “New York version,” which has been shortened to eighty-four pages. Overall, the revisions tighten things considerably. When Waldemar Hansen was brought to Boston for urgent rewrites, he pointed to what he saw as the major problem with Randolph Carter’s initial script for *Eugenia*: “There’s no Drama here, you’ve got to keep some of the Jamesian elegance, but tool it to give it a dramatic shape” (qtd. in Lobenthal 464). The revisions show Hansen working to increase that drama. For example, act 1 of the original script of *Eugenia* opens with a series of conversations at the Wentworth estate that introduce the American characters, following which Felix arrives on the scene and introduces himself; only later does Eugenia appear. The revised script cuts more quickly to the main action: when the play begins the Wentworth sisters are already readying a cottage for their European cousins to stay in; Eugenia (and thus Tallulah Bankhead) comes onstage almost immediately. Drama is also heightened by the fact that Felix and Eugenia are now represented as cynical co-conspirators and the Baroness as outright dishonest, a practiced liar. The earlier script (and certainly James’s novel) are gentler in their portrayal of the European visitors.

The revision also inserts symbolic actions and props to emphasize the contest of wits between the Baroness and Robert Acton: Eugenia plays chess with Acton—and beats him. Acton’s doubts about Eugenia’s sincerity and honesty are reinforced symbolically for the audience in her gift to him of a porcelain figurine that may or may not be genuine.

But, jarringly, both Carter and Hansen use distinctly un-Jamesian phrases and actions that mix awkwardly with James’s prose and characterization. For example, Felix tells Eugenia that she needs to stop ranting or he will “slap” her “right in the face.” This crude remark is pretty much the equivalent of the ridiculous moment in Jane Campion’s film of *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996) when John Malkovich as Gilbert Osmond deliberately trips Nicole Kidman/Isabel. In both cases, the representational register is breached for the audience.

On the flip side, *Eugenia* retains some details from *The Europeans* that no longer make sense: in the novel, the Baroness, newly-arrived in America, complains about the “hideous” blue flames of a coal fire, an

American innovation which she despises (7). In the play, she makes the same complaint, but, unintelligibly, she does so while looking at a wood fire. An additional source of the script's awkwardness is the necessary loss of the Jamesian narrator. As many critics have noted, the narrative voice that James uses in both *The Europeans* and in *Washington Square*, two early novels set in the America of his youth, is anomalously present, even personified. The voice reminiscences about personal past experiences and comments directly on the characters in a way that James eschews in his later work. For example, in *The Europeans*, the narrator takes us aside, as it were, to characterize the Baroness:

It is my misfortune that in attempting to describe in a short compass the deportment of this remarkable woman I am obliged to express things rather brutally. I feel this to be the case, for instance, when I say that she had primarily detected such an aid to advancement [of her fortune] in the person of Robert Acton, but that she had afterward remembered that a prudent archer has always a second bow-string. Eugenia was a woman of finely-mingled motive, and her intentions were never sensibly gross. She had a sort of aesthetic ideal for Clifford which seemed to her a disinterested reason for taking him in hand. (108-09).

In the playscript, however, this delicately-balanced, even affectionate, irony is lost. When Eugenia herself articulates her plans, they can only seem coldly cynical and deliberate:

EUGENIA: Felix—wouldn't you say that my motives are always finely mingled?

FELIX: Shall we say—entwined?

EUGENIA: That's right. Your idea about Clifford rather amuses me. My intentions are seldom, you know, consciously manifest. But I think you will agree that a prudent archer should always have a second string to her bow.

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That is really not dialogue. As Charles McHarry from the *New York Daily News* pointed out, “To speak lines there must be lines” (369).

And, in general, reviews of the play seemed to lay the blame at James’s feet—or at least at those of his adapters. A reviewer of the early Boston performances complained that Carter had “followed the novel’s narrative closely, without penetrating to the heart of the matter. In adhering to the line and even the lines of Henry James, Mr. Carter has missed the light and life” (qtd. in Lobenthal 463). The New York reviewers, while mixed as to their final assessments of *Eugenia*, sounded a consistent note: Tallulah was fabulous; the play—not so much. Walter Kerr in the *New York Tribune* gave a vivid picture of the performance:

There can be no question whatever that Miss Tallulah Bankhead is an irresistible force, but in “Eugenia” she has flatly, finally and irrevocably met an immovable object.

Lord, how that girl shoves! She’s working at it before her parasol, feathers, and trailing chocolate traveling gown have quite surged into view. While various costumed and supporting players stand expectantly beneath Oliver Smith’s lightly soaring trees, a long low, lilting laugh enters from the wings, directly followed by our heroine. (368)

The review by McHarry in the *New York Daily News* was captioned “Tallulah Shines in a Weak Play” and “Tallulah Bankhead Handicapped”:

Beautifully costumed and at her vocal best, Tallulah Bankhead opened in “Eugenia” at the Ambassador Theatre last night. Unfortunately, Miss Bankhead was handicapped. Her right paw was bandaged as the result of overly enthusiastic gesturing in Philadelphia, and she was further burdened by a ream of the flattest lines in recent theatrical history. (369)

McHarry speculates that: “Perhaps it is impossible to adapt James into successful stage entertainment today, except as a curiosity piece” and goes

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on to deplore what he calls the play's "James Touch": "how about this exchange?" he asks: "'You are so irritating,' Tallulah scolds her brother. 'I think you mean that you are irritated,' is the rejoinder" (369). The lines are straight out of *The Europeans* (8).

As the reviews make clear, the play was a decided flop, having only twelve Broadway performances. On 4 February 1957, Wilson notified the cast:

Dear Everybody Concerned with the
EUGENIA Company:

I want to explain the appended notice and try to apologize for it. It is a step that I deeply regret having to take, but since the play opened in New Haven, it has consistently lost money, even on operating charges, and as the current advance in New York is virtually non-existent, [the co-producer] Mr. Coleman and I feel that the time has come when we must close.

We are deeply grateful for your hard work, talent, and cooperation, sometimes under rather difficult circumstances, and we can assure you all that when, if and as there is a new one, you will certainly be the first to be called.

In a 19 March letter to investors from Wilson explains what he sees as at least some of the reasons for the play's very short run:

I want to apologize for not writing before about the debacle of "Eugenia," but I was so ill that I left the morning after the closing to stay with my sister in Bermuda, to try and recuperate from the whole disastrous experience.

It seems as if bad luck dogged us from the start. Tallulah fell and broke four ribs the day before rehearsals started, so we had to work on the rest of the company for two weeks before she put in an appearance, as she was in Lenox Hill Hospital. In Philadelphia, as you probably know,

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she broke her hand and I was forced to close the second week there and return the money. At that time I was prepared to close the show, at least until she could regain her general health, but she insisted on going on. Then, even after we opened in New York, she was taken ill again and was forced to miss, after, let's face it, rather equivocal reviews, the first matinée. So, all in all, it was a disaster.

Concealed in this description of the production's woes were considerable—shall we say—non-medical problems with the star. Bankhead did break her hand when, with an overly dramatic gesture, she hit a stage wall during a performance. But the matter of her other injuries and “general health” stemmed from her prodigious consumption of drugs and alcohol. She warred with the playwright, director, and script doctor. James says of his Baroness that “she [...] first and last, received a great deal of admiration” (*The Europeans* 55). Bankhead's Eugenia, first and last, received a great deal of *attention* and did so, it must be admitted, despite the script. At the finale, Tallulah, splendidly costumed, ascended a staircase. “Where will you go?” asks Felix. Pausing at the top, Eugenia announces, with, as the stage directions tell us, “a great show of bravado, “I shall wander all over the world—in a mackintosh.” It's hard to imagine a flatter closing line.

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