

Opinionist: *Chautauqua*



Justin Bernhaut

The National Theater of the United States of America [[NTUSA](#)] is not an official, federally-sanctioned performance troupe, but that's a trivial detail. This mischievous gang of innovators represents some of the best attributes of downtown "experimental" theater, and in the eight or nine years since their first production—a neo-vaudevillian romp staged in the tiny basement of a Times Square deli—they've come to earn their tongue-in-cheek title. That Obama's stimulus package doesn't allocate more financing for their endeavors is an outrage!

But they're making do. Last year they charmed New York with their immersive, bawdy staging of [Moliere's Don Juan](#); their ebullient new production [at PS 122](#), *Chautauqua!*, also makes a virtue of modest means. As is often the case, the smaller the budget, the bigger the magic. Their inspiration here is [the Chautauqua Circuit](#), a wildly popular lecture circuit that flourished across America from 1874 to the Great Depression, using family-friendly entertainment and enlightened discourse to educate rural residents on science, art, culture and progressive politics.



The evening is hosted by pedantic emcee Dick Pricey, a beanpole with piercing eyes and slicked-back hair, and staged just like a turn-of-the-century big tent Chautauqua, but with one crucial difference: free [Sixpoint beer](#). The design, replete with the sound of humming cicadas and hand-sewn curtains, sets just the right tone of remote,

homespun Americana. Among the episodic presentations is a loopy lecture demonstrating what maps reveal about the consciousness of an era; a delirious puppet show about the savageries of the food chain; a spectacular traditional Cossack dance; a hypnotically funny rumination on some forgotten battle by a wizened, wheelchair-bound war veteran (my favorite part); and many more secrets and surprises sure to delight civilized attendees of all ages.

There are a couple missteps along the way – for one thing, a potentially amusing demonstration of "hobo symbology" is hobbled by deadly pacing – but from the get-go the troupe's idiosyncratic enthusiasm proves irresistible. And what makes *Chautauqua!* doubly effective is NTUSA's knack for balancing irony with sincerity; while winking at the audience from behind their atavistic affectations, they're also clearly fascinated by the Chautauqua Circuit's impact on American culture in the era before mass entertainment, when folks from all over would gather under a big tent for entertainment *and* edification.

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