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Recalling When Entertainment Joined Education



Justin Bernhaut

Normandy Raven Sherwood, right, in “Chautauqua!”

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From an early age, many students think that education and entertainment are natural enemies. In “Chautauqua!,” a jaunty, stimulating new experiment that tests out an old form, the National Theater of the United States of America tries to show otherwise.

Chautauqua was one of the great American popular educational movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Starting modestly on a campsite in western New York State as an effort to train Sunday school teachers, it expanded into a national phenomenon. The movement brought lectures by the great speakers, preachers and thinkers of the day (William Jennings Bryan was one of the hottest tickets) to the expanding middle class, along with folk music, historical costume drama and dance, all under a circus tent.

“Our purpose is not to re-enact or memorialize this historical movement so much as it is to reinvent it,” says the M.C., Dick Pricey (James P. Stanley). Indeed, this downtown

troupe, which refreshingly commits to its subject without poking fun, manages to stick to the contours of this obsolete form while also explaining with good humor its demise. Given the dense, lively script by Mr. Stanley and Normandy Raven Sherwood, the evening is unapologetically erudite, surprisingly theatrical and packed full of interesting facts.

Did you know that most pistol duels ended with no deaths? Or that the East Village once had the largest German population in the world outside of Germany? In one of the show's better monologues, a wild-haired, obsessive Tarleton Sloacum (Ean Sheehy) gives a short history of maps that tracks how commercial interests changed the form from something fanciful and imaginative to increasingly rigid and rational. You might say the opposite process is being performed in this show.

There is a special guest at every performance, which, on the night I attended, was Mark Russell, the founder of P.S. 122 and its former longtime artistic director. Mr. Russell gave a well-designed, at times moving account of the early days of the theater. (Future speakers include the downtown auteur Richard Maxwell and the novelist [Jonathan Lethem](#).)

If the evening has an organizing theme, it's the dichotomy between high and low culture, explored in a long account delivered by the M.C. about the evolution of art from an aristocratic pastime to mass-produced amusements. As radio and talking pictures took hold of the public consciousness, the show argues, locally based entertainments like Chautauqua suffered.

For most of the performance the distinctions between high (historical re-enactment of the Hamilton-Burr duel) and low (bawdy comedy) are clear. But the lectures eventually build into a flashy Broadway dance number, with more than a dozen leaping young performers, that segues into an elegant two-person modern movement piece.

Does the number belong to rarefied art or debased commerce? By the end of this illuminating show, the question itself seems entirely wrong — another lesson learned.