

## Chautauqua!

Gyda Arber · February 25, 2009

With the sound of crickets chirping in the distance, and pitchers of beer being passed through the audience, *Chautauqua!* begins with Richard "Dick" Pricey (James P. Stanley) wheeled in on a lectern by a put-upon stage manager. Stanley welcomes us and provides a history of the Chautauqua movement, a lecture series that toured in tents throughout the U.S. from the late 1800s through the Great Depression. This lecture is far from boring—Stanley's charisma is assisted by a hysterically funny Power Point presentation. The show itself is structured like a traditional Chautauqua, with a series of lectures, songs, dance numbers, and other entertainments, including a duel enactment and a puppet show.

The show devolves, much like the Chautauqua movement itself, as we learn, into more base entertainment. An avant-garde dance number passes first into a Broadway-style production number, with nearly two dozen dancers filling the stage, and then, inevitably, to a burlesque, with Stanley himself stripping down for our entertainment pleasure.

The set designer (uncredited) has created a beautiful set—a small turn-of-the-century style stage sits in the center of the space, then breaks apart for the finale. Director/sound designer Yehuda Duenyas has created a soundscape of crickets and other outdoor noises to make us feel that we're truly in a Chautauqua tent of the past. Normandy Raven Sherwood has created some beautiful costumes that perfectly evoke the feel of the Chautauqua movement.

The performance is at its best with Stanley at the helm—some of the other numbers are very funny, but others feel a bit thrown together at times. But what is amazing about the show is how much educational material is presented in a fun and entertaining evening. Not only do we learn about the history of Chautauquas, but there's also a lecture on the East Village, the early history of NYC, the proper way to duel, including details on the famous Burr/Hamilton duel, a history of maps, and the development of culture. All of this information is presented in a most entertaining manner, with help from the very charming ensemble. The result leaves us wanting more Chautauquas, and luckily we now have this incredibly fun one from NTUSA.

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