



*Austen Blog*  
*...one lump of snark or two?*

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## **Reader Review: Cheer From Chawton**

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### ***Review by Erin***

“[Cheer From Chawton](#)” is a one-woman, one-act show by Karen Eterovich about the life and work of Jane Austen. The play takes place at Chawton Great House in December of 1815; the Austen clan has gathered to put on their own production of *Pride and Prejudice*, with Jane as Mrs. Bennet/Narrator. Once onstage, however, the authoress is unhappy to discover that her family has laid a trap—instead of performing P&P, Aunt Jane is going to answer some questions about her life.

It’s a fun premise, allowing for a few instances of “audience participation” throughout the show, but it’s mostly, as Ms. Eterovich herself puts it, “stand-up with Jane.” And yes, it is incredibly witty and entertaining. Karen Eterovich portrays Jane Austen with boundless reserves of energy, humor, and heart. There is nothing flat or one-dimensional about her performance—she swings effortlessly from teasing her brother to musing about the limitations of life as a woman in the nineteenth century, wrapping it up with one of those sharp, witty remarks from the letters. I will willingly give the highest compliment I can think of: Karen Eterovich does credit to Jane Austen over the course of her hour onstage.

There are three pre-arranged “family members” planted in the front row of the audience, and because I am involved in the theatre department and emailed one of my professors the moment I found out the show was coming to Hanover, I was lucky enough to get to be Fanny Knight. This means I got to see the show twice—once at the tech rehearsal and once on the actual performance night—and it definitely held up to two viewings. It also means that I got to meet Ms. Eterovich, and she could not have been kinder. Even though we “Austens” only had a handful of lines each, she made sure we understood the character backgrounds, how we were related to Jane and each other, and where the relationships stood at that particular moment in time. She was excited when she found out I was a Janeite, and we were able to talk a little Jane before and

after the show (and she was very gracious as I got all shy and tried not to sound too stupid in front of the woman who, for a living, has toured all over the US and England pretending to be Jane Austen; I mean, how cool is that job?) Ms. Eterovich was also good enough to give a period comedy workshop for some of the theatre students the morning before the show, in which she stressed the value of good and thorough research, something that shows in her production.

The show centers around excerpts from a variety of Jane Austen’s works, naturally beginning with the one everyone is familiar with: *Pride and Prejudice*. The rest of the performance, though, highlights some of the lesser known writings—*Northanger Abbey*, “Henry and Eliza” (one of my favorite pieces of *Juvenilia*, executed with perfect silliness), *Lady Susan* (delightfully vicious), and the letters from 1796 relating to Tom Lefroy. Ms. Eterovich makes the interesting choice to read the “my tears flow as I write at the melancholy idea” letter in a completely straightforward manner, no mockery and all sadness. It’s a choice, though, that allows her to demonstrate a greater dramatic range and touch on the topic of romance without going over the top.

The best part of the show was realizing that I was in a whole room full of people who were laughing at something Jane Austen had written. There was a little girl across the aisle from me who was cracking up at “Henry and Eliza;” this was probably her first exposure to Jane Austen. There were a few JASNA members, professors, and Janeites there, but a large number of the audience got the experience that night of realizing that there is more to Jane Austen than they had realized. Several of the questions in the Q&A afterward were variations on, “Was Jane Austen really that lively?” It was fantastic. If you ever have the opportunity to see “Cheer from Chawton,” do not miss it.

*Future dates for Cheer From Chawton can be found on the [Love Arm’d Productions website](#). –Ed.*