



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

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[REVIEW: Innocent Diversions at Theater Ten Ten](#)

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One of the things that bothered us about *Becoming Jane* was that it was so relentlessly dark and gloomy and depressing, seemingly as though the Austens were poor Dickensian characters with joyless lives. Jane Austen's letters always gave us an impression of her family life as fun and boisterous, occasionally annoying (as are all families), but mostly close and loving; we would have liked less canoodling with roguish Irish boxers and more witty Austen repartée, though we know that's asking a lot of Hollywood. Imagine, then, our enjoyment in [Innocent Diversions](#), which was like spending 90 minutes or so with the Austens and some sympathetic friends, putting on a little evening entertainment for their family's viewing pleasure.

The "diversion" is fast-paced and fun; the Austens are paying a Christmas visit at Manydown Park, home of the Bigg-Withers, and several of the group—Jane, her father, her sister, their niece Fanny, their brother Frank, their friends Elizabeth Heathcote (née Bigg), Catherine and Alethea Bigg (don't call them "the Bigg Sisters!"), their brother Harris, Martha Lloyd, and Madame Lefroy—perform selections from Jane Austen's juvenilia, including some of the silly plays (like "The Mystery") and recitals of poems and short pieces such as "The Beautifull Cassandra." Underlying these fluffy bits of amusing nonsense is a story arc of Jane Austen, on the cusp of published authordom (her book *Susan* has just been accepted for publication!) and the romantic torch carried by a certain gentleman of the party. The whole thing comes off rather like the Austen Family Variety Show, with one act following upon another in quick succession, the cast changing roles and throwing themselves into it with a spirit of hearty good fellowship.

Karen Eterovich, who originated the role in the first staging of *Innocent Diversions* in 1998, portrays Jane

Austen as we have always imagined her: wise and witty, intelligent and self-aware; she knows that the pieces being presented are strictly meant for entertainment of a sympathetic audience. After one of the pieces, she says gamely, “That was...that was...what *was* that?” But at the same time she has a quiet self-confidence about her work, and giddily reports her first publication, and gently turns down Harris Bigg-Wither’s romantic advances. Jane knows she has other things to do with her life, and while she’s grateful for family support, she doesn’t need anyone else to validate her choices.

The rest of the cast is also very good, with an excellent feeling for the time period and an obvious pleasure with the work. Though it’s a very small theater, the cast and production is completely professional and runs like a well-oiled clock. One of the conceits of the piece is that the “audience” is, well, the audience; the actors often break the “fourth wall” and speak directly to us. It’s not as precious as it might sound; one truly feels wrapped up into this world, sitting quietly in the beautifully furnished Manydown drawing room and enjoying an evening amusement—indeed, an innocent diversion—among friends, friends who understand your jokes and will laugh with you as you laugh with them.

There is still time to catch this sweet, funny little play in its current run, and we think Janeites will be glad that they did. Innocent Diversions runs through December 16 at [Theater Ten Ten](#) in New York, and tickets are a very affordable \$20.