

REVIEW

From Paperboy To Legend

By Caren Beilin

There's more Ben Franklin kitsch than there are matches in this great city of ours. I venture that education can become a form of kitsch, too—and learning about the jolly whiz kid come inventor of years past has become, after a whirlwind year of Benergy, a little stale. There are only so many kites we can fly, and so many mini-shocks we can dole to our children, before the whole thing becomes moot to boot...but never mind.

Sebastienne Mundheim's awesomely cool, multi-media, dance, puppet, educational theatre event, *Currently Franklin: The Story of a Paperboy*, changes the whole playing field. It is willfully new. With the use of a series of pale tan, curiously folding props, sheets of white paper, old-school projectors, three energetic dancers (Karin Bookbinder, Kate Carr, and Aaron Mumaw), a puppeteer (Charlie Delmarcelle), narration, a glass bowl full of water, sound design by the incomparable James Sugg of Pig Iron Theatre Company, and buckets and buckets of light, this production outshines, so to speak, the colonial-Santa squads.

Currently Franklin is delightful for the same reason Ben Franklin is famous. It's inventive.

Oversized print shop letter blocks become waves in upturned dancers' legs, as Ben Franklin sails in a straw contraption to France, while the glass bowl full of water sloshes back and forth across the projector. White rags are washed in blue water made out of light. The white rags become newspapers, with projected-on text. The newspapers are aprons; the aprons are England! And there's never been a more sensual print shop.

The narration, written and performed by Sebastienne Mundheim, is well-written—playful, and accessible. As Mundheim weaves her tale, we learn that our hero "smiles to himself"—in fact, one of his favorite things to do is "smile to himself." Ben Franklin relishes private moments, private thoughts, private excitements and joys. But we live in a time that discourages the privacy of a child. We strap children with cell phones, and we mass market at them—we try to figure out what they like and what they think and what they want. The value of an inward emotional and intellectual life is emphasized here, which, alone, makes *Currently Franklin* precious.

This production would inspire a future artist as much as it would a future scientist/inventor/politico. A parent, and even a hipster, will enjoy. The use of metaphor and dance are as present as the explanation of Franklin's life and inventions. It provides a new take on Franklin, while also providing a new take on educational theatre. The current set-up at West Philly's Rotunda is a temporary affair, but look for this production in our schools and museums in the future—and what's more, if you're an educator, book it!

"Currently Franklin The Story Of A Paper Boy" runs through November 22nd at The Rotunda, Tickets are \$8 - \$10. For more information call The Annenberg Center Box Office at 215-898-3900, or visit the Rotunda website at www.foundationarts.org