

Clear Sky, Pure Light History & PR Piece 2016

Clear Sky, Pure Light: an Evening with Henry David Thoreau opened in Thoreau's native Concord in July of 1975 — three months into the nation's Bicentennial celebration. The response was immediate and enthusiastic: Concord critic Rebecca Ruggles acclaimed it as a token of the town's respect for her most famous son, "a thoughtful and dignified production" that seemed less a performance than "an intimate talk." It was, she concluded, "as if Thoreau had come back for a day to tell us a few of the things he thought most important."

A dramatic portrait in two acts, *Clear Sky, Pure Light* earned from its first audiences comparison with Henry Fonda's characterization of lawyer Clarence Darrow and Hal Holbrook's famous *Mark Twain Tonight*. Drawn from *Walden, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, "Civil Disobedience," and lesser-known passages in Thoreau's *Journal* and his personal correspondence, the hour-and-three-quarters one-man show presented Thoreau as a multifaceted individualist. It captured him in light moments as well as serious ones, and was revelatory of the private as well as the public man. Testimonial to its success was the forthright comment of renowned Thoreau biographer Walter Harding, author of *The Days of Henry Thoreau* and *Thoreau, Man of Concord*:

I went to see Clear Sky, Pure Light with a great deal of skepticism. How could anyone recreate satisfactorily for me the Henry Thoreau that I had devoted my lifetime to studying? But within ten minutes of the curtain raising, I had been won over. Here was the Thoreau I knew — standing and talking before me. It was a great evening.

Dr. Harding's conclusion was echoed universally by the Concord audiences — both by lifelong Thoreauvians, and by those whose chief interest lay in the dramatic quality of the piece.

After that first summer run in Concord, and a second in the summer of 1977, *Clear Sky, Pure Light* was warmly received by audiences during an intermittent regional and national tour that lasted until the early 1990s. The show traveled not only around New England, but to locations as far-flung as Charlotte and Columbia in the Carolinas; Pocatello, Idaho; San Francisco; Midland, Texas; Elyria, Ohio; and other cities and towns from the East to the West Coast — including one notable presentation at a national conference on psychological assessments of Thoreau. Over the years, though very rarely performed since that tour, it has been offered to

benefit nonprofit institutions ranging from the old Thoreau Lyceum to the Uganda Food and Peace Project to Greenpeace and the Sierra Club; wherever it has been produced, it has left its audiences moved and thoughtful. An investigation of the relation between Thoreau's philosophy and his character, it is in many respects the substantiation of a literary legend. A measure of its effectiveness is offered in the appraisal of the late Eugene Walker, past President of the Thoreau Society:

Clear Sky, Pure Light achieves the difficult and remarkable goal of wakening from pages of silent print the living Henry Thoreau...A poetic and glowing portrayal that in the span of a short evening reveals why Thoreau's star is of first magnitude.

The May, 2017, performances of the *Clear Sky, Pure Light* for the Walden Woods Project, at the Thoreau Institute during the Thoreau Bicentennial, mark the first time in just over twenty years that Christopher Childs has presented the play in its entirety and with full costume and makeup. Over the years one major change has been made in the script — the insertion of passages from *The Maine Woods* in place of a section on John Brown, a change simultaneously reflecting the actor/creator's commitment to environmental causes and to nonviolent activism — but the piece remains otherwise as it was on its opening night more than forty years ago.