A Hundred Years in Sixty Minutes

Transcribed from Norwegian

Just to settle it at once: if you have not seen Double Edge’s “The Grand Parade” before, you have never experienced anything like it. So unique is this explosion of dance, mime, music, effects, sound effects and neck-breaking choreography.

Tom Skjeklesæther
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(For the record: this is the first time this critic has used “six stars” for a theatre piece.)

The theatre company, based on a farm outside Boston, USA, has spent some weeks in Halden where they have prepared two pieces of work, the walkabout “The Odyssey” and “Shahrazad” presented with bravour at Fredriksten’s Fortress last weekend, and now they have presented what should turn out to be the definitive knock-out “The Grand Parade.”

This critic has a special fascination for last century’s history, seen through American eyes. It is not without reason that the 1900s are called America’s Century, it is difficult to argue with the fact that through these 100 years the USA has had a remarkable influence on this world’s development, politically, with science, economically, artistically and philosophically. I hasten to declare that this has been for good and for worse.

Double Edge Theatre also put the emphasis on what happened in their own homeland, the USA, and the country’s interference in the two World Wars and the Vietnam War. As such the performance does not shy away from the negative sides of history.

Double Edge’s artistic leader and director Stacy Klein is especially taken by the work of the Russian-Jewish painter Marc Chagall (1887 – 1985) one of the main representatives of the so-called surrealistic movement. Chagall’s fabled animals are particularly present in “The Grand Parade,” together with a flood of people, both known and unknown.

Double Edge Theatre themselves say about the performance: “The Grand Parade” shows big events in the 20th Century in a theatre style inspired by Chagall’s kaleidoscopical vision about (wo)manhood at play, war and rest.

It is, however, in the realization of this vision that the absolute scenic magic occurs. We go through history in a tempo that makes it almost impossible to witness it all through only one performance. So full of details, so physically almost not possible is what we get to see, that one comes out of the performance almost like run-over. Which in no way means that anyone should stay away from experiencing it.

When the actors that has been on stage take applause, it becomes clear that there are only six of them. I would have guessed three to four times more. So many characters each and every one of them gets to perform. That this requires a fitness comparable to top athletes is beyond doubt.

Almost all the times it is a wonder that the actors do not collide with each other or hit each other with the many effects used to visualize this massive story.

We are being led, “shoed” through historical events like the era of the silent movie, the birth of the car, 1st and 2nd World War, the jazz era, prohibition time, the
fight for women’s right to vote, the crack at the end of the twenties, the “escapist” Houdini, depression time, Marx and Albert Einstein brothers, between the wars with Hitler, the extinction of the Jews (only towards the end of this part does the performance slow down a little). The optimism of the fifties, the breakthrough of television, the McCarthy period, the fear of nuclear power, the assassinations of the Kennedy brothers and Martin Luther King, the landing on the moon, the Vietnam War, the disco-era, David Bowie’s “Heroes” strengthen the Reagan époque, the Aids Epidemic, the racial “unrest” both in the sixties and all the way into the time at the end of last century when the genetic code was figured out.

The human experience in this century is cross-visualized between figures that are always on a treadmill and by figures who swing back and forth on trapezes and huge 3-dimensional iron frames.

Behind this rolls an impressive soundtrack, where with contentment we registered our own King Håkon during the 2nd World War. Fragments from newsreels from the radio and a lot of historic speeches. In addition a lot of musical numbers, both recorded and live presentations by the ensemble’s own competent musicians. During a sequence from the early days of television we even got kitchen TV with frying of real eggs.

The sum of all this lifts this 100-year-old history to its own, freestanding, free dancing piece of art. We all know the saying: You must see it to believe it! In this case with “The Grand Parade” I am not sure I believe what I saw. So fantastic is the performance that I do not look away from the possibility that I wake up tomorrow and realize it was a dream of epic dimensions.