Leonora Carrington’s Magic Realist Paintings Come Alive at Double Edge Theatre

APRIL 3, 2019
Photos and Article by Greg Cook

“Leonora & Alejandro: La Maga y el Maestro”—presented by Double Edge Theatre at their Farm Center in Ashfield from April 5 to 7 and 12 to 14, 2019—is like an incantation. Though ritual and spectacle, stilters, an aerialist and characters masked like Venetian Carnival, the troupe brings to life Leonora Carrington’s magic realist paintings of a moon-faced giantess, masked figures, mysterious kitchens, glowing eggs, curious beasts, galloping horses, and souls wandering eerie gardens.

The visionary, expressionist show is inspired by Carrington’s art, writings, life and her mentorship of filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky, when they were both in Mexico City in the 1960s.

The New York Times wrote in March 2018, when the show debuted at Montclair State University in New Jersey, that it “feels like a peek into an expansive world—a hallucinatory, symbol-heavy tour of Carrington’s fervid mind.” The subject also inspired Double Edge’s outdoor pageant across the company’s rural property last October.

Jennifer Johnson (left) and Carlos Uriona play the title characters in “Leonora & Alejandro: La Maga y el Maestro,” a rehearsal by Double Edge Theatre at their Farm Center in Ashfield, April 1, 2019. (Greg Cook)
Carrington (1917-2011) was the daughter of a wealthy English textiles magnate. She studied art, met the married German surrealist artist Max Ernst and ran away with him to Paris. There they mingled with Andre Breton, Marcel Duchamp, Paul Eluard and other surrealists. As World War II began devouring Europe, they were living in southern France and making art. Ernst was arrested by the French for being a suspicious German, but was released. When the Nazis invaded, he fled to the United States. Carrington went to Spain, where she had a nervous breakdown and was hospitalized. After her release, she fled to Mexico where she spent much of the rest of her life, befriending the Spanish surrealist painter Remedios Varo, becoming active in the feminist movement, and making curious, mystical, dreamy paintings for decades.

“I am as mysterious to myself as I am to everyone else,” Carrington (played by Jennifer Johnson) says in the show. “Leonora & Alejandro” makes manifest the visions in her paintings. “We have been working in this psycho-physical-imaginative way for close to 37 years. We work a lot with visual arts to make them come alive in a visceral way. We use images as our primary way of storytelling. So I think we were ready to go into this world of magic and conjuring,” Double Edge founder and Artistic Director Stacy Klein says. “To me it’s fundamental that when the spectator is with us it’s not virtual, it’s actual, it’s alive. The experience that’s happening there is what’s happening.”

In the show, Carrington’s father appears and torments her. A psychiatric hospital doctor in a white coat sticks her with a hypodermic needle: “You’re going to have to overcome
your diseased imagination.” Carrington recounts soldiers raping her. A bird accompanies her. A growling creature is born from some amniotic sac. Carrington stirs a caldron and marvels at the cosmos. She says she knows of no religion that does not declare women feeble, useless or “generally inferior to men.”

“To me, it’s about courage, the courage to create in a reality that may not invite creation, the courage to create in different circumstances that you face. And I think Leonora Carrington is inspiring because she took the hardships and traumas of her life and made magic. I think it’s about freedom, the freedom of our souls, our spirit. And I think there’s something healing about people who find that power to go into themselves, particularly women who don’t succumb to circumstances or daily life,” Klein says. “It’s about a very powerful woman who’s mentoring somebody who becomes a very powerful man in his art. … We don’t frequently see women mentors.”

“How do you know it is not I who am dreaming you?” Carrington asks the Jodorowsky character (played by Carlos Uriona) in the play.

“Stop it, Leonora,” Jodorowsky replies.

“You may not believe in magic, but something very strange is happening in this very room,” Carrington replies. “You are disappearing before my very eyes. I can’t even remember your name.”

The show risks presenting Carrington as mentally ill and akin to a witch, staring down malicious stereotypes of women,
endeavoring to resuscitate them, reclaim them. (“Women & Magic,” a discussion of “women’s alchemical, magical and spiritual creation process and how this approach often remains hidden,” is scheduled at the theater for April 14.) “We have forced these powers into the inner hidden realm, and not just hidden because of the intimacy required, but because women are so busy defending themselves against violence that they can’t defend their practice of witchcraft or spirituality or magic,” Klein says. “So what I’m saying and what we’re saying is this is part of the freedom we can imagine. We can use all the faculties we have. We have to have courage to do that that’s all. And look at the world, what’s happened without that imagination.”

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