Review: ‘The Grand Parade’ Romps Through the 20th Century

By ALEXIS SOLOSKI  FEB. 7, 2016 NEW YORK TIMES
Jeremy Louise Eaton in “The Grand Parade (of the 20th Century).” Credit: Maria Baranova

MONTCLAIR, N.J. — Hey, it’s Kaiser Wilhelm and the influenza pandemic! Also, the Russian Revolution, the Charleston and Harry Houdini. This cavalcade of figures and emblems constitutes just a few minutes of Double Edge Theater’s “The Grand Parade (of the 20th Century),” a highly imagistic and somewhat cryptic sprint through 100 years of popular and political culture, offered by Peak Performances at Montclair State University here.

Paintings by Marc Chagall, including the piece that gives the performance its title, are a stated influence, and so in the opening moments the stage of the Alexander Kasser Theater is littered with brides, roosters, fiddlers and several trapeze artists. With occasional changes of costumes and masks, members of the six-member cast, supported by five live musicians, race through the events of an eventful century.

With less than a minute per year, there’s much incorporated, but also much eliminated. The logic of inclusion and exclusion can feel somewhat arbitrary. The suffragists are here, but not the Stonewall Uprising. The Vietnam War, but not the Korean one. The AIDS crisis, but not the discovery of penicillin. The focus is largely white, male and Western, though the group clearly has a feeling for revolution and protest.

What’s less apparent is what Double Edge Theater wants to achieve with this pageant of incident. The actors, who created the piece with the designer and director Stacy Klein, evidently have a deep and personal commitment to the action, but a particular take on the content is more difficult to discern. There seems to be some suggestion that culture oscillates between decadence and atrocity, between celebration and mourning, yet even this is less than obvious. The pile-on of uninflected reference and event can make the piece seem the theatrical equivalent of “We Didn’t Start the Fire.” (David Bowie is included, by the way, while Billy Joel is not, which is probably for the best.)

Still, the nearly wordless acting is of a high order and Ms. Klein ensures that each episode flows fluently into the next. There can be a sameness to the visual landscape — all those skirts and trapezes — but individual images are quietly astounding. The music, composed by Alexander Bakshi, undulates between crescendo and quiet in compelling fashion, a soundtrack to an epoch that already feels both immediate and far away.