‘Grand Parade’ crams decades of history into a single, entertaining hour

By: JAY LUSTIG
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You can’t really tell the story of the 20th story in an hour-long theatrical piece. But you can do what Double Edge Theatre has ingeniously done in “The Grand Parade” create something that evokes the ebb and flow of the world’s recent and not-so-recent past.

There’s no plot, per se, in “Grand Parade,” which the Ashfield, Mass.-based theater company is presenting at the Kasser Theater at Montclair State University through Feb. 7, as part of the Peak Performances series. But there is music and dance, and videos and acrobatics and vibrant images, many of which are derived from the paintings of Marc Chagall. It’s a work that pulses with life, whether depicting the horrors of the century’s wars or the silliness of its diversions.

It’s impossible not to make connections, or think about the pendulum going back and forth: From the excesses of the Roaring ’20s nightmares (depicted with dancing Flappers) to the Great Depression that followed, for instance, or from World War II to the relative sedateness of the ’50s (expressed through cozy domestic scenes and corny commercials).

Six actors stay in near-constant motion, creating the illusion of a much bigger cast. Indeed, there was often so much going on that it was impossible to catch every little detail. But I think that was part of the point: This is a big-picture view of the 20th century. You can’t stay with any one character or image for too long. You just have to relax and watch it all flow by.

Musically, the piece touches on ragtime and big band jazz and the British Invasion and punk-rock, among other game-changing developments. Actors don cow and pig heads, swing in a trapeze or fly via other elevated contraptions, to help create an atmosphere of dreamlike surrealism. A car is built; a television shows up inside a home. There are references to Hitler and Edison and Martin Luther King Jr.; Einstein and the Keystone Cops; fall-out shelters and the exercise craze of the 1980s; Harry Houdini and disco; the Russian Revolution and AIDS. The mood can go from
somber to buoyant in moments, then switch back again.

“The Grand Parade” is ultimately a work that can’t really be described in words. You just have to see it. And I recommend that you do.

Remaining performances will take place at 7:30 p.m. Feb. 5, 8 p.m. Feb. 6 and 3 p.m. Feb. 7. There will also be a two-hour workshop at which attendees can learn about the company’s creative process and training method at noon Feb. 6.