Soldiers who died in the muddy trenches of World War I left newborn children at home. By the time those children turned 50, Neil Armstrong was taking his first steps on the moon. The 20th century was a time of beautiful chaos, awe-inspiring and absurd, marked by utter misery and non-stop miracle-making. How to make sense of it all?

If you’re Double Edge Theatre, the circus-minded performance troupe based in Ashfield, you feed history to your creative subconscious. What comes out is a haunting, whimsical dream.

On Oct. 29 and 30, the company brought their delightfully strange touring show The Grand Parade to CityStage in Springfield, where hundreds of the city’s public school students watched those decades fly by in a whirling, swirling, fast-paced hour of song, dance, clowning, live music, and acrobatics.

The show, directed by Stacy Klein and influenced by the fantastical paintings of Marc Chagall, is less a history lesson than a live-action collage of memory — a madcap attempt to make myth out of recent history. Often gorgeous, occasionally befuddling, and playfully fun throughout, The Grand Parade collects iconic moments and news headlines, then whips them up into a soufflé of great visuals.

Whether you find yourself playing spot-the-reference, caught up in the eerie music and the actors’ wailing, indecipherable speech, or simply impressed by the ensemble’s physical bravado — performers run, jump, flip, and swing from ropes and trapezes — the show offers up a dozen things to see at every glance. The students, giddy and loud at first, were completely absorbed by the end of the first scene.

A waltz morphs into a tap dance, and a quaint dust-up at a theatre in 1906 spills irretrievably into
trench warfare. Two actors dressed as Harpo and Groucho dance while, nearby, the Nazis take over Germany, and a third actor playing Charlie Chaplin, Hitler-ized, rolls by, balancing on a globe.

A few decades later, an actor playing Laika the cosmodog is shot into space while a booming steamship arrives, the Rosenbergs are put to death, *The Honeymooners* blasts from a TV, and the band plays brass while a voiceover of JFK’s Berliner speech airs in the background.

“What the hell is going on?” asked a high school student behind me. Fair enough. Some audience members may see the long string of newsy tableaux as rather rote, or — if they’re young enough — just plain alien.

The most affecting moments, it turns out, are the subtler ones, where the performers play not heroes and villains but unnamed civilians. A suffragette meets a flapper and learns to hold her liquor. A shellshocked villager weeps silently over body parts on a wooden cart. An AIDS-stricken man slowly brushes his teeth while a lover waits, holding flowers.

By the time the Berlin Wall comes down, and we slide into the age of aerobics tapes, Game Boys, and 3D imaging, the crush of dreams is nearly overpowering. But all of a sudden, videos of fireworks ignite the night sky, and the actors are swallowed up into the unknown blackness of 2000.

Double Edge premiered *The Grand Parade* in Washington, D.C., in 2013, but this two-day engagement kicked off what the company hopes will be a new, local, multi-year initiative to engage with Springfield’s youth.

Judging by the clapping, cheering, and whistling at show’s end, the troupe is off to an exhilarating start.

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