StageStruck: Main Street
Parade – A 20th-century
travelogue comes back home

By Chris Rohmann –
Oct 27, 2015

Double Edge Theatre may call their Ashfield farmstead home, but they are a world-class, and world-traveling, company. In addition to their annual farm-spanning summer spectacle and small-scale shows in their barn-theater, for the past couple of years they’ve been touring what is perhaps their most extravagant production, all the while revising and refocusing it. Now they’re bringing it back to home territory in an ambitious collaboration with the Springfield public schools.

*The Grand Parade* was premiered at Washington, DC’s Arena Stage in spring 2013, and has gone on to performances in Russia, Norway and numerous U.S. cities. It’s a kaleidoscopic tour of the past century’s highs and lows – the company calls it “a work of memory, memorial, and celebration … a dreamlike rush of juxtapositions” – from silent movies to space odysseys, World War I to Vietnam, disco to AIDS. Rooted in Double Edge’s distinctive movement-theater style, the piece is framed as a circus and inspired by visionary artist Marc Chagall’s fanciful images, including his trademark flying people and animals.

In this whirling historical travelogue, the ten performers are almost constantly in motion, airborne as often as not, swinging from trapeze and silk, accompanied by giant puppets and framed by still and moving archival images. There’s also plenty of sound, from specially composed music and songs from diverse cultures, to archival radio and TV clips and sound effects delivered both vocally and with homemade percussion.

In the course of their travels, says Stacy Klein, founder of the 33-year-old troupe, “we developed a way to include audiences on a local level. In each location we used the video projections to weave local events and places into the performance.” Locally significant events included the school busing controversy in Boston, Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and the suffragette movement in Norway, the first country where women won the right to vote.
The tours also fostered outreach into local communities, Klein says. Free performances for schools, with students invited onto the stage afterward to explore the set and “create their own memories,” have become a key element of the residencies.

“Sharing this work with young people feels especially gratifying and vital to us all,” says co-artistic director Matthew Glassman, “particularly those in school systems that have little to no access to theater and the arts, notably in cities in economic transition. There is something about the historical content and soaring aesthetic of this performance in particular which makes this dialogue especially exciting.”

This week begins what Double Edge hopes will be a multi-year relationship with Springfield audiences and schools, underwritten with help from “leaders in the business community who share our passion for the vision of this project,” according to Glassman. The fledgling program connects free high school performances to a classroom curriculum on 20th-century history and culture linked to the show, along with training workshops in the company’s unique brand of physical theater.

This week’s shows take place at CityStage in downtown Springfield, two of them open to the public. Glassman envisions this residency creating “a vibrant, creative channel” between the hilltown troupe and its urban neighbors.

Public performances of The Grand Parade are Oct. 29 & 30, 7:30 p.m., at CityStage, 1 Columbus Center, Springfield, $25-$30, (413) 788-7033, doubleedgetheatre.org.