100 years of war, art, politics and pop in ‘The Grand Parade’

With the 20th century 15 years behind us, artists have begun ruminating on the events of that 100-year span. Headquartered on a former dairy farm in rural Ashfield, Massachusetts, one such group, Double Edge Theatre, makes its artistic commentary in a touring show called “The Grand Parade,” debutting locally at the Contemporary Arts Center this weekend.

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Saturday, March 21 and Sunday, March 22
WHERE: Freeport McMoRan Theater, Contemporary Arts Center, 900 Camp St., New Orleans
TICKETS: $35 general admission
INFO: (504) 528-3800. Website http://cacno.org/grandparade

Inspired by the works of artist Marc Chagall, “The Grand Parade” remembers wars, presidents, pop stars and politics through performance, music and video.

Audience members will relive such milestones as FDR’s “Fireside Chats,” the horrors of World War II, the Kennedy assassinations and the Cold War.

On the lighter side, the company’s ensemble also features escape artist Harry Houdini, the zany antics of the Marx Brothers and more.

The show premiered in Boston in 2012.

According to a mission statement by Double Edge founder and artistic director, Stacy Klein, “‘The Grand Parade’ is about individual and collective experience of a period of history in which people developed knowledge that produced both great development and massive destruction.”

“One of my favorite comments about the show came from a high school student,” Klein said. “This particular student said she had studied the history of the United States and especially World War II, but she never knew how it actually felt until she saw our performance. I think that speaks to
something we’re trying to do, which is to engage memory and history in a way that people will come out thinking about how they could use that information to transform their own circumstance or today’s circumstances.”

Klein, who founded the company in Boston in 1982, explained that the production moves through the century chronologically. Sharing in the co-creation credits for “The Grand Parade” are the production’s six ensemble cast members, Carlos Uriona, Matthew Glassman, Hayley Brown, Jeremy Louise Eaton, Adam Bright and Milena Dabova. Live musicians accompany the performance.

The musical score was written by Russian composer Alexander Bakshi, with musical and vocal direction by his wife Lyudmila.

Dabova, a Bulgarian native who doubles as the company’s marketing director, performs, among her roles, those of Harpo Marx and Laika, the Russian “space dog” launched aboard Sputnik 2 in 1957.

“In the performance we all shift as the times shift between the characters we play,” Dabova said. “Some of the characters are well-known and some are just the everyday people of that decade, not necessarily historical figures.”

Expounding on the production’s connection with the works of Chagall, Dabova said, “We have taken inspiration in crafting the scenes themselves to, in many ways, embody his aesthetic. We, ourselves, are often those paintings or we strive to be that.”

A number of Chagall’s best-known paintings depict people suspended in the air, as if flying or floating. Others depict animals playing musical instruments and masses of people fleeing. These themes are incorporated into “The Grand Parade” through the use of masks and performers suspended on wires, Dabova and Klein said.

“The Grand Parade” will be staged in the CAC Warehouse. The first show, on Friday, is a private showing in conjunction with CAC’s SweetArts 2015 fundraiser. The Saturday and Sunday performances are open to the public.