Double Edge Theatre’s *The Grand Parade* at the Contemporary Arts Center

By Will Coviello
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Photo by Maria Baranova

*The Grand Parade*
7:30 p.m. Saturday-Sunday
Contemporary Arts Center, 900 Camp St., [www.cacno.org](http://www.cacno.org)

With aerialists flying on ribbons and swinging on riggings and stark imagery of war and the Great Depression, Double Edge Theatre’s *The Grand Parade (of the 20th Century)* is a spectacle, but it was inspired by the group’s production of Homer’s *Odyssey*. The company wanted to create a mythology for our times based on epic historical events of the 20th century, which had had a decade to set when the company began work on the piece in 2010. The group soon learned that the 20th century already seemed like ancient history to some.

"People tend to forget history so quickly," says company founder and Artistic Director Stacy Klein. "We brought the show to Russia in 2011. They said, 'You always see (the Cold War) from your perspective.' They thought that was over. And then the next year, problems in Ukraine began."

The work takes its name from a 1979 painting by the Russian-born Jewish artist Marc Chagall (1887-1985). The artwork features an array of circus performers, musicians and a chicken-headed figure, who inspired a character in the show.

"We started working on it with Chagall," Klein says. "He lived his life as an exile and an immigrant. And he lived for most of the 20th century. ... Half of his work is about wars, and the other half is violin players, circuses and creative types."

The hour-long piece revisits landmark events such as the 1929 stock market crash and the beginning of the space race. Historical figures range from President Franklin D. Roosevelt to Laika, the mutt that became the first dog in space. It features traditional folk dance and music, and it's also a vigorous
theater piece with circus-style aerial feats and clownlike physical humor. Video projections of famous newsreel footage provide most of the words in the show.

*Grand Parade* runs Saturday and Sunday in the Contemporary Arts Center's (CAC) warehouse space, concluding Double Edge Theatre’s weeklong visit to New Orleans, during which it also will perform for local students and work with local theater company Mondo Bizarro. (A preview performance of *The Grand Parade* is part of the CAC’s SweetArts fundraising gala on Friday.)

Double Edge is a laboratory theater based on a 105-acre farm in the western Massachusetts town of Ashfield. Its artists and directors generate and develop shows over time as a company (as opposed to a lone writer crafting a script and a company beginning rehearsals once lines are memorized). When it travels with productions, Double Edge often incorporates local participants or elements. The New Orleans shows feature local jazz vocalist Mykia Jovan.

Besides developing shows as a group of artists, actors and composers, Double Edge lives in a somewhat communal fashion. Participants live on the farm, and some artists do farm work. The group sells produce as one means of support, and it barter with the local community, exchanging theater productions and programming for goods. Klein wants the theater and farm to support the local economy, and drawing tourists to see productions is part of that, she says. The company also hosts free monthly training days, in which anyone can participate and work with the artists.

"It's about creativity and your body," Klein says. "You could be 80 years old and do open training. You can fly a bit and work with some objects. It's elevating — you're learning to re-engage your imagination like you're a kid again."

Double Edge Theatre was started in Boston in 1982. Communal living wasn't part of the vision until the group moved to the farm in 1994 and improvised its business and artistic models. It hasn't been for everyone, and some artists decided they preferred urban environments, but the approach addresses common concerns for theater artists. It solves the issue of theater professionals finding affordable housing. It also enables the long development process for shows as artists live together in a system organized around the creative process and performing.

With many prior shows, Double Edge mostly performed abroad, especially in Eastern Europe. With *The Grand Parade*, it's touring more heavily in the U.S. because of the subject matter.

In New Orleans, the company will do workshops that are open to the public and work with Mondo Bizarro. Both groups are part of The Training Consortium, which is designed to help devised-theater companies collaborate.

CAC Performing Arts Curator Raelle Myrick-Hodges scheduled two devised-theater companies in the current season: Double Edge and Austin, Texas' Rude Mechanicals, which presented immersive theater experience *Now Now Oh Now* at the CAC during the New Orleans Fringe Festival in November 2014. The scheduling is a response to local work that builds on a type of theater being created by groups including Mondo Bizarro and ArtSpot Productions in shows such as *Loup Garou* and *Cry You One*.

For one Double Edge company member, this is a return to New Orleans. Joanna Caplan performed her one-woman show *Total Verruckt!* — about a Jewish immigrant at Westerbork, a Dutch refugee camp for Jews who fled Nazi Germany — at the 2014 New Orleans Fringe Festival, an event that has attracted devised theater artists to the city as a performance venue and place to create stage work.