American Grand Parade at the Golden Mask festival – theatre takes up farm creativity

Director Stacy Klein and designer Carol Durand founded Double Edge Theatre in Boston in 1982. Fifteen years later the company moved to a small town in Massachusetts called Ashfield, bought a farm from a local resident and started a life in a farm theatre commune (it has been not so long since company members have started to get paid).

At first the locals were suspicious of the strange farmers but got to like them in time after some have tried free trainings, and others have helped out with the daily routine of the farm. The company is international and the style is a bit of everything – some can sing, play the violin, work on trapeze or do tap-dancing, and any show is a mixture of these artistic ingredients.

It was at the farm where the shows the UnPOSSESSED (based on Don Quixote), the Master and Margarita, the Republic of Dreams based on Bruno Schulz, and the Disappearance based on a short novel by Ilan Stavans were born. Moscow has seen the company’s last production, The Grand Parade inspired by Marc Chagall’s work with a music score by Alexander Bakshi.

The Americans ventured nothing less than telling the 20th century history in an hour. Perhaps this is how some aliens would see the Earth receiving accelerated footage from their satellites. It is a film about weird creatures dancing twist and Charleston, engaging in massacres, and then after having recovered from the horrors and healed the sorrows, go dancing again.

Documentary historical newsreel is projected on a brick wall: World War I, World War II, Hitler’s and Nelson Mandela’s speeches, the Great Depression with Franklin Roosevelt proclaiming a bank holiday, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the space flight, Bill Clinton’s address - and the Americans even considered it a 20th century milestone too, Yeltsin shaking hands with a quiet (or even scared?) successor.

However, the global history is merely a background, blurred projections on the wall. Life itself consists of small private stories, details. In order for a rocket to reach the Moon first the smart Laika should have died from overheating (an actress in a dog mask will jerk and freeze on the trapeze). It is no surprise that the theatre felt a need for Marc Chagall with his flying brides (almost half the time the actors spend in the air soaring on trapezes and bunjees) and animated animals (masks of roosters, cows, dogs). A cow is more important than Roosevelt, like a flying soul in love is more important than a flight in outer space. In chase of grand achievements and conquest man has lost the idyll (Chagall knew its taste and grief over the loss of it) and can only have dreams about it, like the one in the finale.

The production is only a part of the process which the director Stacy Klein calls “living culture”. It is easy to imagine it – rehearsals, milking cows, trainings with locals, tours to a neighbor state (or a neighbor continent), harvesting crops, harvesting elements for a new show – there it is, Massachusetts eco-theatrical cycle.