All about the last century

by Lisa Traiger Arts Correspondent
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Stepping into Arena Stage's Cradle, its experimental theater space, viewers will be struck next week by the accumulation of stuff filling the intimate playing space: a wooden wheelbarrow, a dressmaker's mannequin, an old typewriter, wooden crates, pots, pans, beat-up trunks, and assorted flotsam and jetsam. This material culture of the 20th century serves as a touchstone and taking-off point in Double Edge Theatre's embrace of the 20th century, from the birth of silent movies, the automobile and the jazz age to the Holocaust, Hiroshima and the era of protests - civil rights, anti-war, free love through political polarization of the late 20th century.

The Grand Parade takes a sweeping panoramic view of the political, social and cultural events of this most American of centuries in a condensed but intense 70 minutes. Double Edge, based on a farm in Ashfield, a rural town in western Massachusetts, is a collaborative theatrical venture, founded by Baltimore native Stacy Klein. The performers work for months, sometimes years, in a barn to build theater with a decidedly physical component.

For Grand Parade, Klein and her company of six performers drew inspiration from the Russian-Jewish painter Marc Chagall and his painting of the same name, which depicts a circus of characters: an acrobat in a red tutu, a cow-headed man, a rooster, a violinist and assorted other vividly hued individuals in a circus-like setting. Double Edge actor Matthew Glassman sees Chagall woven throughout the piece as an example of what he calls radical Judaism. "Chagall and other important artists and writers," he said last week, "illuminate the question of where myths and mythology belong in the Jewish tradition. ... It's the integration of mysticism and the imagination and audacious expression and folk culture."

Glassman said these elements have become alienated from dominant Judaism in the U.S. In The Grand Parade, Glassman, like all the performers, plays multiple characters in a tableau vivant of historic events spanning 100 significant years. Throughout, he said, he sees, "a continual question about escape, whether it's Houdini as escape artist or ... it's Groucho Marx escaping through the power of his bold humor. Escape for me is a thread that's ongoing and somehow for me it's a Jewish thread."

Raised in a small rural Massachusetts town, Glassman spent one high school summer on a kibbutz in Israel and another year volunteering in an orphanage in Chile. "One of the things that drew me to Double Edge was a combination of both a Jewish and a Latino sensibility or identification, something about both those cultures and many of their similarities was really interesting to me,"
providing a lot of opportunities for artistic and intellectual dialogues." The other was the deeply collaborative methods the actors, designers, composers and directors use to create their productions.

For Klein, all of Double Edge's work contains a Jewish thread. "But I don't think it might be overt," she said. "I certainly hope it's universal. I don't see how I could do something that wasn't a Jewish approach. It's really in my blood in a very important way." Klein was first drawn to Chagall in the late 1980s, while the company was working on The Song Trilogy, three productions that covered a thousand years of European Jewish history and culture starting with a mourner's prayer, a Kaddish, for pre-World War II Eastern European Jewry. The Grand Parade, her latest work, is the fourth in a quartet of pieces also using Chagall as artistic muse.

Born in Baltimore and raised in its suburbs - Randallstown and Pikesville - Klein noted that her family was not very Jewishly connected. "We went to Har Sinai [but] my mother kind of stopped going because my father wouldn't go with her," she recalled, noting that her grandmother wanted to distance herself from Russia, her birthplace, to become completely American.

As a young adult Klein watched many of her peers explore Eastern religions and meditative spiritual paths. "I was very interested and I wanted to find out more ... but I realized I didn't know anything about my own culture, so I couldn't move to another one before I knew something about mine," Klein said. Her personal path included studying Judaism, Kabbalah, Talmudic texts and creating "some kind of Jewish life."

After a stint in Israel in the mid-1970s, Klein found a more attractive theatrical environment in Poland. And since the late '70s Klein has traveled to Poland nearly every year to study and work, influencing her approach to what she calls devised theater - works made in a collaborative environment. She founded Double Edge in 1982.

While Double Edge is not a Jewish theater, and Glassman is its only Jewish performer, its works in subtle and definitive ways ask Jewish questions and deal with social justice issues that emanate with an inherently Jewish voice. Glassman says the work touches on the creativity and the destruction in the 20th century, "I think it's important that we're trying to strike the balance between both the inventiveness of the century and the wars. They seem to represent the two sides of progress and humanity. In our research phase, you couldn't help being overwhelmed by the Holocaust, Hiroshima and later in the century wars in many places throughout the world. So it became really important for us to allow ourselves to wander through the landscape of death at times."

"The hues and the overtones of the piece and the stories that emerge," Glassman said, "in a piece like this that has so many potential story lines are like a broken glass being put back together."

The Grand Parade is onstage Feb. 6-10 at Arena Stage in the District. Tickets, at $40, are available by calling 202-488-3300 or at www.arenastage.org.