Marc of the Devil: The Grande Parade, Reviewed

Posted by Chris Klimek on Feb. 7, 2013 at 6:36 pm

Maybe you remember “We Didn’t Start the Fire.” The Billy Joel hit recites the historical events and notable personages of the singer’s baby-boom lifespan in sequential order, culminating in a howl of existential anguish circa 1989: “Rock and roller cola wars, I can’t take it any more!” Double Edge Theatre’s hourlong dialogue-free theatrical collage The Grande Parade is more or less the live-on-stage answer to that, albeit with better music: The spare, mournful score, performed live by a quartet of players each handling multiple instruments, is by Alexander Bakshi.

This absorbing, kinetic theatrical collage, which the Massachusetts-based troupe has been workshopping off and on for more than two years in various locales, applies the company’s unorthodox toolbox—trapeze-abetted aerial work, dance, puppetry, audio/video montage—to impressions of the American century’s major movements: Two grinding global wars, Mutually Assured Destruction, television, spaceflight, civil rights, AIDS, and all the other triumphs and horrors that rated a rhyming name-check from the “Uptown Girl” guy a decade before the 20th century skipped across the finish line, ushering in an End of History that was to last approximately nine months.

The piece appears to be exhausting to perform. It begins and ends with vocal wailing from the cast (the program lists only eight actors, but the nonstop activity in every corner of the stage makes the company seem much larger), as though the century’s miseries have made a more specific eulogy futile or impossible or both. What comes in between isn’t all funereal: There is some jovial sampling of the celebratory dexterity of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton; there are elbows-out dance-within-the-dance numbers keyed to the glitz of the Jazz Age and later the sweaty revolt of rock ‘n’ roll. In between, we hear an excerpt from one of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s fireside chats, explaining to bewildered Depression-era citizens why he’d declared a banking holiday. Tens of millions more bodies later, the Russian canine cosmonaut Laika (as played by a girl in a creepy dog mask) is in orbit, in a section that closely recalls a segment from Synetic Theater’s December production of A Trip to the Moon. A treadmill shows up again and again, a prop as unsubtle punctuation: Has all this suffering taken us anywhere?

Some weary patrons may be asking themselves the same question at the end of this busy, dizzy hour, but I was on board with it. The Double Edge camps seems to enjoy more creative overlap between designers and performers than more conventional theater companies do—the credit for “metal apparatus
"design" is awarded to the Double Edge Ensemble, and refers to the rectangular and pyramid-like frames suspended from the ceiling at stage left and right respectively. Players clamber over or inside them as each quick-shifting scene requires. In the center of the stage is a starfish-shaped white curtain, each of its fingers articulated by ropes, that becomes a projection surface. More than an in any show I’ve seen, the set itself feels like a living organism.

Other than to map out the 20th century, The Grand Parade’s other stated inspiration is the artwork of Marc Chagall, who showed up for it 13 years early and checked out in 1985. But aside from a few masks and projections using iconography from his paintings (a rooster head’s, a blue boar), the link between his work and what’s on stage seems to be philosophical rather than overt. That makes sense: This is at least Double Edge’s fourth show derived from his paintings. (They previously offered Chagall-inflected takes on The Odyssey and The Arabian Nights.) He seems like the right muse for them, though. Like him, they want to show you too many things at once. The Grand Parade still has room for more grandeur, but it’s an appropriate requiem for a century that accelerated the pace of life unforgivably.

The Grand Parade, was conceived, designed, and directed by Stacy Klein, continues through Feb. 10.