We all can be heroes: Double Edge Theatre’s “I am the Baron” celebrates the power of storytelling

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Can mythical and outrageous tales — wrestling with 40-foot crocodiles, traveling to the moon and beneath the ocean, visiting an island made of cheese — help us navigate dark times? Or is a retreat into fantasy simply a means of avoiding the complexities of real life?

At Double Edge Theatre, that’s an easy question to answer. In “I am the Baron,” its newest “summer spectacle,” the Ashfield ensemble celebrates the power of storytelling and of the imagination in what may be its most expansive production yet.

“I am the Baron” is based on the 1785 book by German writer Rudolf Erich Raspe, “The Surprising Travels and Adventures of Baron Münchhausen,” a story that in turn was loosely based on the life of an 18th-century German nobleman with a mouthful of a name, Hieronymus Carl Friedrich Freiherr von Münchhausen, a military veteran known for spinning tall tales about his life.

Co-directed by Matthew Glassman and Jeremy Louise Eaton, “I am the Baron” draws both from Raspe’s book and other interpretations of it, such as the 1988 Terry Gilliam film “The Adventures of Baron Munchausen.”
in a production that gives full reign to Double Edge’s trademark mix of music, choreography, pageantry and elaborate and imaginative sets.

“I am the Baron” uses multiple outside sets, shadow and life-size puppets, and screens and intricate lighting in its production. Photo by Kim Chin-Gibbons

And after two summers in which the theater company offered “We the People,” a more narrative-driven play that focused on Ashfield and Massachusetts history, “I am the Baron” represents a return to Double Edge’s earlier productions such as “Once a Blue Moon” and Homer’s “The Odyssey,” in which the storyline serves as a basic framework for creating a fully immersive theatrical experience — one aimed as much at the senses as the head.

“This had been on the horizon for us for a couple of years,” Glassman, a co-artistic director at Double Edge, said after a performance on a clear evening in early August. “It’s something of a return to our earlier work … we really spent a lot of time mapping this out.”

And for Glassman, who co-wrote the new play and has worked in various capacities at Double Edge for nearly two decades, “I am the Baron” is also the first company play in which he hasn’t appeared as an actor. It’s also the first Double Edge production not directed by the ensemble’s founder, Stacy Klein, who is involved in numerous other projects this year.

The company began 37 years ago in Boston and this year is celebrating 25 years in Ashfield. “So there are some significant milestones here,” Glassman noted.

One thing that hasn’t changed is that Double Edge’s work is very much that of an ensemble, in which people perform multiple roles. For instance, Milena Dabova, one of the principal actors of “I am the Baron,” also created the production’s choreography; Adam Bright, another key actor, designed the play’s rigging (multiple characters go airborne, flying along zip lines or dangling from harnesses).

And a key group of musicians — playing guitar, fiddle, accordion, clarinet, percussion and more — provides a varied soundtrack to the production, ranging from jazz and music-hall tunes to folk and a touch of klezmer. Meantime, various singers add a sometimes ethereal touch, with their voices often seeming to materialize from nowhere as the vocalists remain hidden behind trees or high brush.

‘The Great Forgetting’

As in past Double Edge outdoor productions, the audience — roughly 75 people — follows the cast as the actors and musicians move between multiple sets on the 105-acre Ashfield property; some props, such as a curtained wagon that serves as a stage for a troupe of struggling vaudevillian actors, also keep pace with that movement.

Travis Coe, as do a number of the actors in Double Edge Theatre’s “I am the Baron,” plays different characters in the performance; here he’s the Moon Goddess. Photo by Kim Chin-Gibbons 2017

The play opens with the vaudevillians telling the audience of their troubles as they travel a barren land in a time known as The Great Forgetting, in which stories...
are vanishing, the stars are disappearing and the actors wonder if what they do still has any value.

Yet there’s plenty of humor here, too, especially as embodied by Travis Coe, who at first plays a would-be Shakespearean actor — he sports a thick ruff collar, goofy wig and ragged tights — seemingly frustrated to find himself with a bunch of amateurs.

“Our lives are short!” Coe cries in melodramatic tones at one point as he stands on the wagon/stage. The line is supposed to be a cue for music, and when nothing happens, Coe gives the prompt again: “I said ‘Our lives are short!’ ” Then he shouts “Cue the music!”

And Amanda Miller, another vaudevillian, is dressed as a flapper and sings all her lines, like an opera performer who’s wandered onto the wrong set, with the wrong costume.

“Baron von Münchhausen (played by Adam Bright) makes his appearance shortly afterward, telling Coe and the other actors that their vision of life is “lies and balderdash.” There is joy, adventure and community still to be found in the world, he insists, and he invites the troupe to join him on a visit to some of the exotic places he’s journeyed, such as under the sea.

Double Edge has long followed a philosophy of working and living close to the land, and the ensemble’s use of terrain reflects that: The transition to the underwater scene moves downhill, and within that performance area, the undulating movements of dancers and giant puppets — the latter held aloft on wooden poles by two-person teams — ably create a sense of being deep in the ocean.

Meantime, the Baron suddenly appears from behind a screen in a tree, strapped into a harness and sailing above the audience on a zip line. “I can swim!” he shouts as he rhapsodizes about his relationship with various sea creatures.

In other scenes, extravagant, manned puppets of fantastical animals appear, such as a llama-like creature with a neck like a giraffe, and the vaudevillians and other characters perform an impressive tap dance. When the Baron disappears after shooting himself from a cannon, others vow to take up his mantle in keeping stories alive: “I am Baron von Münchhausen” declares Milena Dabova, one of the vaudevillians.

At its heart, notes Glassman, the story is about “not just having a single hero, but about different people taking on that role, still moving forward in difficult times.”

Also on tap are shadow puppets; actors mysteriously disappearing, then suddenly reappearing in the next scene in different costumes; and a scene in Double Edge’s main indoor performance space, a restored barn, that uses movement and light to create a beautiful, dreamlike sequence of traveling to the moon.

We may be facing dark times of our own from climate change, bitter political divisions and economic insecurity. But as Double Edge sees it, theater, community and the power of stories all offer a compelling counter-narrative to that.

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More information on “I am the Baron” is available at doubleedgetheatre.org.