‘Leonora and Alejandro’ takes Double Edge ‘as far as possible’

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In the beginning, “Leonora and Alejandro,” the new Double Edge Theatre production that comes to the Ashfield stage for two weekends starting Friday, was supposed to be about film director and writer Alejandro Jodorowsky.

But then, Double Edge Co-Artistic Director Stacy Klein met Leonora Carrington, the long-overlooked Mexican surrealist artist who Klein said is too often remembered as painter Max Ernst’s lover, but was also a sculptor, painter and writer.

The theater company at 948 Conway Road will offer indoor performances Nov. 9 through 11 and Nov. 16 through 18 of “Leonora and Alejandro: La Maga y El Maestro,” which had its premiere last March at Peak Performances in Monclair, N.J. All shows are at 7:30 p.m.

The New York Times wrote in its review of the show that “the border between reality and dream, conscious and unconscious, was porous” for the two surreal artists, and “it feels like a peek into an expansive world, a hallucinatory, symbol-heavy tour of Carrington’s mind.”

Klein, who conceived of and directed the piece, said the work of British-born Carrington — who died in 2011 at age 94 — “is more than inspiring to me, and maybe also vindicating. Her ability to see the struggles and oppression she faced as a woman and then transforming it into art is mind-blowing, especially now, when I feel women in general are endangered. The fact that she faced unbelievable hardships and continued for nearly 95 years to transform them into incredibly moving, profound and healing works of art and works of feminism is a beacon to me.”

Following the 2016 presidential election, while Klein was researching Jodorowsky’s writings, she decided “I could not make any more performances without a woman as a central figure.”

In searching for a woman she might imagine as having a dialogue with Jodorowsky — who was best known for his 1970 “El Topo” and 1973 “The Holy Mountain” — she decided to build the play around Carrington. But it wasn’t until Double Edge was writing the play for Peak Performances that she learned that the two artists had worked together.

“This was going to be an imaginative dialogue,” Klein said, “but then it turned out to be true, which made it even more interesting.
“I can’t tell you how many women came up to us in March and said they’d never seen a woman mentor depicted on the stage before, or had never seen a woman’s magic depicted on the stage,” Klein said. “In our times, when women are feeling extremely vulnerable, that’s pretty important, and it certainly was for me and for our company — and not just the women in our company.”

The indoor performance is based on a dialogue between Jodorowsky (played by Carlos Uriona) — the son of a wife-abusing father, told by a Zen master to seek mentoring from a woman because he didn’t deal well with women — and Carrington (Jennifer Johnson), whom he sought out to teach him as an artist.

She advises, “You’re trying to intellectualize something desperately, and you are wasting your time. Use your feelings. There is no other way, no alternative way.”

Carrington had a romantic relationship with German surrealist Ernst. After he was arrested by the Nazis, she suffered a nervous breakdown and was sent to an insane asylum, later moving to New York and finally Mexico.

Jodorowsky, according to Klein, “said he always thought of women as just sexual partners until he met her. … I focused on the fact she taught him about going as far as possible in art with whatever you’re doing.”

Yet, Carrington is an example of a brilliant artist whose career was limited by her gender, with her work little-known outside of limited circles until her death, Klein said.

“She had been making art for 75 years and was part of the explosive energy of the surreal movement. Even the surrealists said she was one of greatest artists, yet when people wrote about the surrealists, they didn’t include her or would write her as a minor thing,” Klein said. “Several surrealists said women like her weren’t artists, they were muses. If you looked for anything until recently, the first thing it says is she was Max Ernst’s lover … She was more prolific than any of them.”

At a symposium last winter, Klein said, “We dove deeply into Leonora’s writings about her time in the asylum, and uncovered an artist who refused to capitulate herself to the torture she experienced in receiving regular injections of Cardiazol and being told to control herself. Rather than stop creating, a short time after she chronicled these experiences, she transformed them into a magic realism story called ‘The Hearing Trumpet.’ This depicted old wise women locked into an asylum, who, rather than giving up, go in search of a mystical journey to the Arctic.

Ten years later, Carrington also wrote “The Stone Door,” which Klein said delved into the unknown “with a courage that fully captured my lifelong search.”

“Having lived in Leonora’s world for these many months, I have learned that with each step I take in my art and my life, I must garner my own courage to survive, to speak (usually through art), to continue creating, to form creative partnerships, and to dare to confront the unknown and to share this with those who see my work,” she added.

Double Edge is looking at presenting performances of “Leonora and Alejandro” in Detroit, Mich., and in Norway, and is interested in working with museums and other “less traditional” places to present the work.