Magic lifts Double Edge summer spectacle skyward

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You're surrounded by 75 other people, walking along a path under darkening summer evening skies, engrossed in not only the rural landscape enveloping you, but also wondrous illusions of people in trees, of brightly colored South American houses with tin roofs, and of pulsing music everywhere.

Musicians suddenly surround you — accordions, drums, guitars. Spontaneously, the plaza erupts in wild dancing, you too, are dancing without a care.

This is the magic of “Cada Luna Azul,” the “Once in a Blue Moon” summer spectacle of Ashfield's Double Edge Theatre, which runs from July 20 through Aug. 22 Wednesdays through Sundays, with previews July 15 through 17.

That magic becomes palpable, with an ensemble cast of 30 that suggests 300 because the actors, musicians and dancers are seemingly everywhere around Double Edge's sprawling grounds — yes, that includes in the trees — and because the audience becomes part of the Argentine village and its surroundings.

“Cada Luna Azul” was first presented last summer in Ashfield for sell-out audiences totaling about 2,000 — and again recently in Boston’s Jamaica Plain section.

There are plans for a production in Springfield’s Forest Park in September.

Although the theater piece is inspired by written texts, including Isabel Allende's “Stories of Eva Luna” and Alejandro Jodorowsky's “Where the Bird Sings Best,” the script by Double Edge co-Artistic Director Matthew Glassman draws heavily from the experiences of his counterpart, Carlos Uriona, who plays the central character.

Before emigrating to this country in 1995, Uriona founded the award-winning puppet theatre Diablomundo, named one of the “Top Ten Most Important Argentine Theatres of the 20th century” by the Association of Argentinean Critics. He also co-created and performed in more than 15 original works and adaptations with the company, which toured internationally. He also organized groups of self-managed actors and artist cooperatives to combat repression during Argentina's military dictatorship, which lasted from 1976 to 1982, with defeat of the Falklands War.

Although Argentina’s outdoor communal expression — its Mardi Gras, circus-theater as well as tango and rock 'n’ roll — were banned in the 1970s, Uriona remembers, “We started slowly do things outdoors again, as the military started losing its grip. By the end of the regime, we aggressively assaulted the plaza, reinstituting parades, and circus training, with thousands of people coming” as part of the preparations for asserting the popular will
people and preparing for democracy.

It was Uriona's work organizing groups of self-managed actors and artist cooperatives — including, in 1985, as a founding member of a theater movement trying to decentralize and collaborate with art forms in streets, factories and neighborhoods that led to conception of “Cada Luna Azul,” says Double Edge Founder Stacy Klein.

“We wanted to explore his history and his work in the plazas,” she says, as well as exploring in-depth those street celebrations that are part of people's engagement in Latin American culture along with its political strife.

For Double Edge, which has been creating summer spectacles since 2003 merging theater, movement, music and the open landscape, tapping into Latin America’s popular involvement in celebrations and demonstrations was a natural.

“As we've been doing spectacles, we've been getting closer and closer to the audience,” she says. “In carnival, you're with the audience. We wanted to break the boundaries completely.”

Without giving up its professional standards, and without actually organizing around a political message, Klein says, Double Edge was looking at how people are engaged in communities: “How can we be active spectators? (There) people become engaged when they're outside on the streets. We don't have those traditions, we don't have that music. Everybody's not singing the same song. We wanted to take it further: How are people engaged in the actual process of the work? We didn't want to compromise our art in doing that. We wanted to make sure it was magical,

that people were turned around, that they didn't know where they were. They could really have that experience where they're elevated beyond their daily life.”

Drawn in by the work's magical realism, incorporating elements ranging from magnificent murals and handpainted sets to outlandish acrobatics set against the surreal nighttime darkness, this year's production aims to engage audiences in the spectacle, dancing to Uruguayan candombe, Bolivian saya, and of course Argentine tango rhythms.

“We really want to enliven engagement,” says Klein. “This performance is about everything. It's not like were t making a performance about the coup in Argentina and martial law and Donald Trump. It would be better if we could see that’s just engagement, not something where you have to go and hate the person who doesn’t believe the same thing you believe.”

As the theater company, which moved in 1994 from Boston to the 105-acre former dairy farm, ended its 2009-2014, “Chagall cycle,” with outdoor spectacles like, “The Odyssey” and “The Firebird,” Klein says, “We were thinking, ‘We really need to refocus on how we can

wake people up, bring people together, and instead of hitting people over the head about how bad things are, use celebration to motivate people.’”

At what now seems like a critical point “where hate is getting a lot of attention and it's not really the dominating force,” she says, “We want do something that shows the reality is we are dancing together. We are together, and it’s a very special thing.”

Bringing together artists and craftspeople, around the former dairy farm, and reaching out to the larger community, with performances in the schools, is part of Double Edge’s larger vision, while also using the land to grow food for its performers.

Told through the connecting thread of the memory of Uriona’s character, “Cada Luna Azul” tells stories of the village and the people in it, including those of Uriona … and of our own connections.
Each performance stirs memories for Uriona himself, “the nostalgia, the pain you feel for the place ... There’s a lot of regret for what I haven’t done, what I wanted to do,” he reflects. It’s evocative, too, being steeped each evening in tango, a musical from he resisted at the time as a young person more drawn to rock ’n’ roll, but which now evokes the raw emotional power of its urban popularity.

Yet you don’t need to have lived in Latin America to be carried away by the spectacle, given the production’s “magical realism.”

“It’s seeing the ordinary in a magical way,” explains Klein. “That's pretty much how Carlos sees life, so it was very joyful to finally get that that on stage.”

On the Web: www.doubleedgetheatre.org/once-a-blue-moon

**NOTE**: Many of the dates for this event may be sold out. Check the website for that information and more.