Theater Review:
Double Edge Theatre makes a spectacle of itself

Photo by DAVID WEILAND
"Once a Blue Moon," the latest production by Ashfield's Double Edge Theatre, is inspired by Latin American literature, music and art and incorporates stilt walking, acrobatics and dance.

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At Ashfield’s Double Edge Theatre, there’s long been an emphasis on productions that offer a full sensory experience — intensely physical ensemble performances that blend choreography, music, imaginative sets, acrobatics and dreamlike storytelling, all done in multiple settings on the theater’s 105 rural acres. Harold Pinter it is not.

So it seems an ideal fit for the theater to draw on the colorful images and themes of Latin American literature and art, such as the magical realism of authors Isabel Allende and Gabriel García Márquez, for its newest production, “Once a Blue Moon, or “Cada Luna Azul.”

Last week, Double Edge debuted its latest “Summer Spectacle” on a night that, fittingly enough, was bathed in the glow of a nearly full moon (a genuine Blue Moon would take place just two nights later). And like the troupe’s two most recent summer shows — “Shahrazad,” a tale inspired by “The Arabian Nights,” and an adaptation of Homer’s “The Odyssey” — “Once a Blue Moon” gives the Double Edge ensemble a chance to showcase its diverse talents.

Stacy Klein, founder and artistic director of the company, says “Once a Blue Moon” is the group’s biggest production yet, the work of more than 50 people — cast, crew, volunteers — and perhaps the most ambitious artistically and technically. Judging from some of the production’s highlights — stilt walkers, life-size puppets, actors gyrating in harnesses, and a fantastic, Rube Goldberg-esque set piece — she may well be right.

The story, with text written by actor and co-artistic director Matthew Glassman and Jennifer
Johnson, an actor and writer, is a meditation on memory, family and the passage of time, based loosely around a character known as “The Stranger,” an older man who has returned to his birthplace, a South American town called Agua Santa (“Sacred Water”).

Played by co-artistic director Carlos Uriona, who’s originally from Argentina, The Stranger begins his tale with a soliloquy about how he left as a young man to travel (“We are all wanderers,” he says) and has now returned to sort through his memories of people and places and to recall what happened the day he left the town.

Like Double Edge Theatre’s other summer shows, “Once a Blue Moon” takes place mostly outside, as the 80-member audience follows the performers to different settings, including an indoor one in the property’s main building, a repurposed barn. The first scene, set in a courtyard, introduces other central characters, such as Riad, a slightly hunchbacked peddler played by Glassman, as well as a traveling troupe of musicians sporting fiddle, guitar, accordion and drums.

Glassman explains that the script, which is “still evolving” (most of the ensemble had been performing a different piece in Norway for several weeks before returning to Ashfield in June to begin work on “Blue Moon”), is adapted from the works of numerous Latin American authors: Allende, Márquez, Jorge Borges, poets Pablo Neruda and Octavio Paz, and others. Some of their words are used verbatim, but more generally “Once a Blue Moon” draws on the mix of myth and realism found in much of this writing to portray the residents of Agua Santa.

And, Klein adds, the production is a reflection of Uriona’s experience directing an acclaimed puppet theater in Argentina and his own penchant for tall tales.

“Carlos is a great embellisher,” she said with a laugh in a phone call last week.
Thus, the character played by Milena Dabova, a young cleaning woman named Luna, explains her origins when she first appears in the play by explaining that her mother had “dreamed me into reality.” Glassman, as Riad, later tells Luna about his wedding, and the scene is re-enacted with his bride, Zuleman (Joanna Caplan), on stilts.

Plenty of pageantry

Aside from its nonlinear story line, which moves between different time periods and includes an extended dream sequence, “Once a Blue Moon” features plenty of humor and sheer physicality. Adam Bright, playing a character called “The Englishman,” provides a bit of both when he first appears, standing halfway up a tree in one of the outdoor settings and bellowing about how much money he’s made cutting timber in the forests around Agua Santa. He also has ambitious plans to re-engineer the river that runs by the edge of town; he punctuates those pronouncements with maniacal laughs.

Elsewhere, actors alternately float down or slog through a creek on the Double Edge property (it stands in for the river), swing from harnesses suspended from the barn’s ceiling, paddle a small boat around a pond, or vault onto the roof of a former animal shed that serves as a cafe/bordello. Cast members are adept at disappearing, seemingly without trace, from one outdoor setting and suddenly reappearing at the next one — sometimes in a different costume.

The humor comes in different forms, including slapstick sequences, such as when Riad suddenly has a chair yanked from beneath him, and Luna accidentally pulls off the wig of a woman who’s berating her about her cleaning work, revealing her white hair. Johnson, the script’s co-author, has some choice lines in her role as “La Señora,” the bordello’s madame. She decides to hire Luna to do cleaning, noting approvingly that the young woman has “the skin of an armadillo.”

A vital complement to this colorful pageantry and action is the music, a mix of tango, samba, folk and other Latin styles. Two Argentinian musicians, Micaela Farias Gomez and Manuel Uriona, worked with Double Edge to compose the music, which includes instrumental pieces and ensemble singing (in Spanish and English). Klein says the basic idea behind the music was to recreate the sounds and atmosphere of the Carnival season.
There’s plenty of dancing as well, which has been choreographed by Gomez and Dabova, the actress who plays Luna. It all comes to a spicy head in the scene in the barn, where dancing couples (some clutching life-size puppets as partners) swirl across the floor, other actors swing from harnesses, and the music, which begins with just a muted note on an accordion, builds to a crescendo of voice and instruments. Carlos Uriona even steps out of his role as The Stranger for a moment to play the trombone, joining a cornet player and clarinetist.

I won’t give away the ending of “Blue Moon,” but suffice it to say it involves a final reckoning of The Englishman’s plan to harness the power of Agua Santa’s river and features a spectacular set.

As an audience member, you’re always right on the edge of the action at a Double Edge production, and “Once a Blue Moon” is no exception. You walk right next to singers as you pass from an outdoor scene to the one in the barn, and a cast member might invite you to dance at the opening scene in the courtyard after the music starts up.

That kind of immersive experience is what the theater is all about, Klein notes, since it’s an appropriate complement to productions that are very much a team effort, with everyone from student interns, guest artists, volunteer carpenters and designers and ensemble members contributing work and ideas.

“We don’t want to have any barriers between us and the audience,” she said.

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Tickets for this summer’s performances of “Once a Blue Moon” at Double Edge Theatre are sold out, and the waiting list is now full. To be added to the theater’s mailing list for information about ticket purchases for next year’s production of “Once a Blue Moon,” visit www.doubleedgetheatre.org and or call 628-0277.