Members of Ashfield’s Double Edge Theatre rehearse for “Once a Blue Moon,” which opens with previews July 24.
Recorder/Paul Franz

Story by Chris Curtis
Photos by Paul Franz
Wednesday, July 8, 2015
(Published in print: Thursday, July 9, 2015)

Sleight of hand, aerial routines, walking houses, fountains and waterwheels, puppets that turn into costumes and all the farm for a stage; if there’s a stop to pull out, Double Edge Theatre does. Then, it makes it dance. On stilts. Walk in on rehearsal at the company’s Ashfield home base — a former dairy farm now half outdoor stage and half working pasture — and there is a woman up a tree, a man standing on a barn roof and half a dozen people on stilts in a setting of fields, streams, new and old agricultural buildings, gardens and sculpture. The setting couldn’t possibly need further embellishment, but in June it wasn’t anywhere near ready for the summer season.

Why work so hard, surely they could get away with less? Founder and Artistic Director Stacy Klein only seems a little offended by the question.

“It’s not like we’re interested in ... easy is not our goal; our goal is actually the opposite, to see how we can go all the way with our potential and offer
Klein and co-director Matthew Glassman were a little glassy-eyed on the visit in question, having returned four days previously from a five-week stay in Norway, where they put on an outdoor show in a coastal fortress. Glassman calls it epic. Passing descriptions include gods falling from the battlements.

The company is primarily designed to tour and Klein said the plan when they began the move from Boston to Ashfield in 1994 was to establish a base for touring. The 105-acres of field, barns and stalls instead became a base and a summer stage as the company settled into the community.

They bring in about 2,000 spectators in the course of the five-week summer season, with performances five nights a week and they consistently sell out. The overflow is such that they now run the summer show for a second year after the premier.

There’s no room for more than one showing in a day because the changing light is part of the scenery.

This year’s spectacle, “Once a Blue Moon” or “Cada Luna Azul,” begins in light and ends in darkness as the audience follows the cast from the courtyard at 8 p.m. through the gardens and indoors to the old dairy barn as night falls.

Stops along the way include a concrete patio that was once a silo floor and a livestock barn now topped with a railing for actors. Co-artistic director and lead actor Carlos Uriona was up there on a recent visit, cutting an incongruous figure in formal attire as he practiced with cast members below.

The barn once held pigs for a production of “The Odyssey.” The pigs provided an excellent effect, Glassman said, running out in costume to present the transformation of the human crew into pigs. Unfortunately, he said the pigs also proved divisive when it came time to eat them. They no longer keep swine.

“Once a Blue Moon” is an original performance based on the work of authors of the South American
magical realist school, particularly Chilean-American writer Isabele Allende, and Uriona’s theater work in his native Argentina.

Uriona’s character will be the protagonist, revisiting a childhood home that survives partly in his character’s vividly embellished memories.

The play is set in Argentina circa 1930, the date of the first in a series of military coups to rock the new democracy.

“The story really is the village in a way ... we’re seeing the village through the lens of this central character, but out of that emerges all of these almost like smaller shorter stories that belong to different characters, different narrators in each location,” Glassman said.

And there will be music. “There’s a strong component of South American style mardi-gras ... the music and the rhythm and the dances are really integral to the storytelling,” Glassman said.

Klein compares the story’s inner reality to a story told by one of those gregarious relatives who tend to embellish stories with each retelling.

“This is more like you go to the fullest lengths of your dream world with how you’re embellishing your story,” Klien said. “Somebody’s talking about selling flowers and then the person becomes a flower pot ... it’s just on a simple level, whatever you can dream up is what you become. And then sometimes the imagination is like that out of necessity ... we’re dealing with Argentina in particular and some of the harsher realities of that political situation.”

Harsher realities are the domain of puppets. When theater has called for soldiers in the past, they have sent ranks of puppets advancing across the pasture.

This year’s script wasn’t finished in June and nor were the puppets, but Michal Kuriata was on the job in the workshop he built for the company before returning to Poland to study sculpture three or four years ago. Kuriata returned to the workshop while the company was away in Norway and began designing puppets. He has sculpted animal skulls
out of durable resin to serve as both puppet heads and masks. As he conceives them, the puppets will second as costumes; their heads will become masks and their clothing will be expandable to fit their handlers. How exactly that transformation will fit into the play remains to be improvised. “It’s a little bit the opposite of a normal theater,” Klein said.

Imagination allows the company to tour, flexibility keeps it solvent. Everyone wears multiple hats and the farm also grows food for about 50 people for the summer.

“The model is pretty unique, but it’s rare to be able to support the work of an ensemble,” Glassman said. The local component includes visual artists, craftspeople, a metal fabricator and a stone mason.

Double Edge calls on every available visual and auditory art form, from song and dance to mosaic and landscape architecture, again, not because they necessarily have to.

“People supposedly use only a small percentage of their brains anymore, so maybe their computer works harder than their brain does, I’m not interested in that, I’m interested in the opposite, let’s dig down deeply and use every single part of myself that I can and be the most and the best I can,” Klein said.

Show notes
The show begins in late July, with previews July 24-26 and performances running Wednesdays-Sundays July 29 through Aug. 23, details and tickets at www.doubleedgetheatre.org/blue-moon.html. Tickets are $35, with discounts for Ashfield residents, students, seniors and children. The show is wheelchair accessible and child friendly. The third performance, July 31, falls on the titular blue moon.

Staff reporter Chris Curtis started at The Recorder in 2011. He covers health and human services. He can be reached at ccurtis@recorder.com or 413-772-0261, ext. 257.

Staff photographer Paul Franz has worked for The Recorder since 1988. He can be reached at pfranz@recorder.com or 413-772-0261, ext. 266. His website is www.franzphoto.com.