‘We The People’: Double Edge Theatre examines history, land use and citizenship in revamped play

Left: Amanda Miller as “The Songbird” in Double Edge Theatre’s summer production, “We The People.” Photo by David Weiland

Right: Carlos Uriona, in foreground, as Guiseppe the Cobbler, and Jennifer Johnson as Lucy Stone, in Double Edge Theatre’s “We The People.” Photo by David Weiland

Left: Jennifer Johnson as 19th-century suffragist Lucy Stone in Double Edge Theatre’s “We The People.” Photo by David Weiland

Right: Adam Bright portrays Samuel Nightingale, a mysterious 18th-century Ashfield resident, in “We The People.” Photo by David Weiland
For years, Ashfield’s Double Edge Theatre has been presenting bright, colorful performances on its 105-acre property — large ensemble pieces that blend music, choreography, intense physical movement and dreamlike storytelling, and which also invite audience participation.

Driving those mostly outdoor spectacles have been storylines built from a variety of sources — the
artwork of Marc Chagall, Latin American literature, ancient Greek legends — designed to transport the audience to distant or magical lands.

But “We The People,” the theater group’s current production, centers the story right at home, invoking real-life historical figures from Ashfield and western Massachusetts, while also asking questions about what it means to be part of a community — or to be shut out of one.

From Henry S. Ranney, who in the 1800s farmed the same land Double Edge now calls home, to W.E.B. Du Bois, the seminal African-American scholar and civil rights activist from Great Barrington, to suffragist Lucy Stone, the first woman from Massachusetts to earn a college degree, “We The People” offers a wealth of rich characters in an unconventional, imaginative setting.

Last Wednesday night, after a couple preview shows July 13 and 14, Double Edge unveiled the new production beneath clear skies, a half moon and surprisingly cool temperatures after a stretch of hot, humid weather, as well as torrential rain just a day earlier.

“We really lucked out that opening night was tonight,” ensemble member Adam Bright, a character in the play as well as its co-producer, joked after the performance.

“We The People” actually debuted last year at Double Edge, but the production has been substantially reworked with the addition of new characters, the further development of others, and changes to the storyline, music and general theme.

“I’d say it’s about 70 percent different,” said Matthew Glassman, a co-artistic director of Double Edge and a character and contributing writer to the performance. “We had more time to develop it this year.”

As with all Double Edge presentations, the audience follows the performers across the theater company’s grounds, visiting different parts of what’s still a working farm that have been modified as mini stage sets, like a “farmhouse” adjacent to a chicken coop and goat pen. The one indoor scene takes place in the company’s main barn.

However, the 80-member audience initially is separated into three groups, each of which follows one of three principal characters — Ranney, Stone, and the fictional character Giuseppe the Cobbler — in turn before joining together for the play’s last main scenes.

Throughout the show, wandering musicians on accordion, mandolin and banjo play an integral role, providing a backing track of old-timey folk music to underline the play’s theme, like an ode to Daniel Shays, the Pelham farmer who in the 1780s led a revolt by western Massachusetts farmers against what they saw as ruinous, unfair taxes.

And dancers, choral singers and stilt walkers add to the pageantry, either moving across the landscape a bit in the distance or, in the case of the singers, suddenly lifting their voices from behind a screen of trees to add a new dimension to a scene, with audience members invited to sing along. Particularly prominent is Amanda Bird in the role of “The Songbird”: Her ethereal vocals can linger like a poetic refrain.

Who are the ‘people’?

Broadly speaking, “We The People” is a meditation on the importance of living close to the land, about dreams and memory, and the struggle to build and preserve the bonds of community. It’s also about the barriers many Americans have faced to be a full part of a community.

As Jennifer Johnson, playing Lucy Stone, intones at one point, “We the people — which people?”

Stone, born on a West Brookfield farm in 1818, became one of the most prominent voices in the U.S. in the 19th century for women’s rights; she was also a committed abolitionist, a writer and a notable speaker. Johnson relays part of Stone’s story by describing growing up one of nine children who, along with their weary mother, were ruled by their iron-fisted father.

“He drank, and we were at his mercy,” she says. But all of that made her determined to get an education, live independently and work to improve women’s rights. “I will not be silent today!” Johnson says at one point, smacking a table with a fist for emphasis.

Perhaps the play’s most intriguing character is W.E.B. Du Bois, played by Travis Coe, who embodies Du Bois as a young man about to attend Harvard College (Du Bois would later became the...
first African-American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard). Coe makes Du Bois a real physical presence as well, whether swinging from the rafters of the barn or zip-lining between trees.

He also represents one of Du Bois’ key causes — Pan Africanism — by envisioning himself part of a story of a white king fighting a black knight, drawing a sword at one point to lead imaginary forces into battle against white domination of the black race. Victory, he hopes, will give him the ability to fly.

Glassman, as Hanney, presents the early-to-mid-19th-century Ashfield farmer as something of a philosopher, describing how his family introduced mint plants to the area to make peppermint oil, or musing about the close connection he and others in Ashfield have to the land, both for sustenance and spiritual grounding. “Who will be here in 100 years?” he wonders.

Bright, the production’s co-producer, also plays a character with a close bond to the land. Samuel Nightingale lived in Ashfield in the 1700s and evidently was known as “The Wizard of Bellus Road” for his eccentricities, including carrying a large staff. Bright plays him as a hermit emerging from thick brush to walk barefoot in a stream and proclaim: “The water is my friend, the soil is my friend.” He also channels a bit of Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman.

The fictional Giuseppe the Cobbler, played by Double Edge co-artistic director Carlos Uriona, was added to the performance this year, Glassman says, as a response to the immigration policies of the Trump administration — a reminder that the U.S. was built on immigration. Giuseppe, who’s of Italian-Argentine descent, stands in for a significant Italian population that settled in and around Pittsfield in the late 19th-to-early-20th century, Glassman notes, and for the Latino community that later grew up in western Massachusetts.

Uriona, as Giuseppe, is also a bit of a philosopher, or a philosophical raconteur, as he shows a box of shoes to the audience. “[People] ask me to give them life again,” he says. Indeed, as Giuseppe sees it, shoes become a metaphor for the journeys people take in their lives and the footprints they leave on the land for others to follow.

All of these characters come together toward the end of the production, in the barn and at the pond at the western side of Double Edge’s property, in scenes that merge movement, music and words to create an emotional tapestry that’s at the heart of Double Edge’s mission — theater as a full-on, immersive experience that’s as much about the heart as it is about the mind.

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“We The People” runs Wednesday through Sunday from now through August 19. Performances take place rain or shine at 8 p.m. For tickets, visit doubleedgetheatre.org.