Double Edge Theatre presents ‘We the People’

A performance of last year’s Ashfield Town Spectacle, put on by Double Edge Theatre. This year’s performance of “We the People” grew out of the “Ashfield Town Spectacle.” Contributed photo/Greg Ruth

By RICHIE DAVIS
Recorder Staff
Published: 6/20/2018 5:50:09 PM

It’s hard to think of Double Edge Theatre being any more imaginative, but its second season of the summer spectacle of “We the People,” from July 18 to Aug. 19, will be just that.

The performance, which grew out of last year’s “Ashfield Town Spectacle,” built around real-life historical characters, asks the audience — as it’s led around the farm — to think about how we apply the idea of “We the People” to ourselves. How do we engage with the idea of representation, of personal accountability or participation?

“What does it really mean?” actor Jennifer Johnson asked. “It’s really taken for granted. But on closer reflection, it’s sort of stunning.”

Double Edge Artistic Director Stacy Klein added, “We’re really taking all the different things that we think make up the words ‘We the People’ and exploring them.”

Those elements include the farm’s working landscape, the natural world, the imagination and the important historical movements in the history of Massachusetts that have moved the nation forward over time. Among the historical “beacons” shining in this spectacle are Henry David Thoreau, women’s rights advocate Lucy Stone and Ashfield’s own Lydia Hall, who in 1855 became what’s believed to be the first woman elected to public office.

As audience and cast come together, through a magical merging of time and space, historical characters like Stone and Thoreau and those Ashfield participants in Shays’ Rebellion are all there.

“We’re talking about people we think really have contributed to those words,” Klein said. “This is the performance we’re creating now, focused on our desire and recognition that we need, as a society, to reconsider those three words. Particularly in this time.”

Actor Matthew Glassman explains that the new production moves the examination from the overall “social commons” through time — this summer’s production is focused on an agrarian understanding, “where everyone helps everyone else out, where there’s an openness.”

Still looking at “the importance of the individual as an agent of change in history,” it will also look at the significance of the local history of farming as an important component “of identity, of free thought and radical political expression, as central to this sense of place and survival.”

Stone’s poetry will also be portrayed as part of the abolitionist’s story, just as it really was in the life of the 19th-century suffragist.

The theater company was greatly affected by “the magic, mystery and spirit” of Leonora Carrington, the British-born founding member of Mexico’s women’s liberation movement, who was also a
surrealist painter who was put in a mental asylum in Spain during the Spanish Civil War, but fled to Mexico at the start of the Holocaust.

“She was considered one of leaders of the surrealist movement, but wasn’t written about because she was a woman, and they didn’t think women should be anything but muses,” Klein said. “In her work, she delved in the magic and the mystery of life, particularly in relation to women — and how that could lead your work in life. It wasn’t through protest, but through her art that she created this movement.”

In creating this summer’s production, she adds, Carrington’s example “allowed us to see what these people were doing in their lives, who were known for this fight or that fight, but those extremely imaginative contributions fortified them for their other work.”

As part of the transformation of “We the People,” Double Edge also refers to Carrington’s use of animals in her work, so that actor Amanda Miller plays the role of a singing bird that helps guide the audience.

It also adds the character of an Argentinian immigrant who arrived in the early 20th-century and worked as a cobbler, and it adds some of the fantastical elements of the landscape for which Double Edge is well known in its other outdoor spectacles. And like some of those spectacles — such as “Shahrazad” or “Cada Luna Azul” — it encourages more participation by audience members who want to sing and/or dance along, in this case to “Northern Harmony” hymns and American folk songs that are incorporated into the production.

The evolution of the theater work’s characters to be more than one-dimensional revolutionary icons in that way is like the evolution of the production, which itself is affected by the audience, Klein said.

Although “We the People” is a timely exploration rooted in who we are as a democracy, she emphasizes, “Who we are as a democracy is not only the people who forge ahead in politics and work on the environment, for example. But there are many ways of participation. And imagination needs to be seen as a vital way of participating. If not, we lose our ability to see anew and see all-inclusively.”

Not only will there be more opportunities this year for local audiences to experience this spectacle, thanks to a longer season that’s preceded by previews on July 13 and 14, but Double Edge plans to present a fall production this year as well, as it begins an indoor-outdoor tour of “Leonora and Alejandro: La Maga y El Maestro.”

“We thought it will be really beautiful to do in the fall, on the land, because Leonora Carrington was so connected to the land,” Klein said.

Double Edge plans to work with collaborators in three communities — including Springfield, as well as in Wisconsin and North Carolina — on productions of “We The People” that will incorporate the historical and cultural influences of those areas.

As it tries to move beyond contemporary political conversations about what those three little words “We the People” mean, Klein said, the spectacle offers a chance to think through their meaning “to us as artists, as creators, as people who are on the land, as people who are contributing to the land. Looking at those people who are caretaking the land, and historically how people have contributed to the creation of those words and our democracy, should be important to us.”

Performances will be held rain or shine at 8 p.m. on Wednesdays through Sundays, July 18 through Aug. 19.

Senior reporter Richie Davis has worked at the Greenfield Recorder for more than 35 years. He can be reached at: rdavis@recorder.com or 413-772-0261, ext. 269.