Editorial: Double Edge redefines meaning of ‘community theater’

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Anyone who has ever seen one of the dynamic, fantastical productions by Double Edge Theatre can tell you that it’s a world-class theatrical experience.

That should be no surprise. The company has performed internationally, including in Norway and Russia. At its home in Ashfield, audiences eager to be transported into magical worlds, often filled with dream-like imagery, move about the farm that is home to its annual performances. The property itself provides multiple stages and settings for wonder.

Use of the land around the farmhouse and barns on Conway Road is a key part of what makes a Double Edge show so special. So, it should come as no surprise that the company takes a great interest in the well-being of Ashfield and the folks they call their neighbors.

At the beginning of June, Double Edge presented its Ashfield Town Spectacle and Culture Fair, a two-day event that drew thousands to witness — and more importantly, to participate in — a show involving dancing, music, a mock “town meeting,” poetry and art. Then there was the parade around the town itself.

Foundation co-director Stacy Klein called it “an investigation of the intersection of art, culture and democracy. ... Grown directly from the theater’s questions about the roots of identity, (it) extends the search to include the whole community through a kaleidoscope of history, art and spectacle.”

Obviously, community means a great deal to the performers and the company as a whole.

Earlier this month, the theater received recognition from the National Endowment for the Arts and from ArtPlace America’s 2017 National Creative Placemaking Fund. The NEA grant, for $50,000, has the organization working with Ashfield to analyze the town’s past growth patterns in relation to the arts and to chart a path forward. Known as “creative placemaking,” it is a strategy to use the power of the arts, culture and creativity to serve community interests, while driving change and growth in a way that builds character and a quality of place.

“We are proud of our work, our community, and now this incredible recognition,” Klein said.

Besides generating revenue for hospitality service, Co-artistic Director Matthew Glassman says the
group wants to know if the theater’s presence has affected real estate values, retail or construction in town, and if it has improved the quality of life.

Ultimately, it is in the theater’s best interest for Ashfield to thrive if it is to ensure it has a viable home, and this grant is a smart way to find out what impact the theater and the town have on each other.

Double Edge is also a finalist for a grant from ArtPlace America, the money from which would pay for the ensemble to work with local partners to transform unused farm buildings and land into public spaces for art, agriculture and conversation.

The company and the town have had a successful symbiotic relationship since the troupe moved from Boston in 1994. Given how both continue to find ways to benefit each other through the exploration of art and improving the quality of life for everyone, we see a long and fruitful future as Double Edge and Ashfield redefine the meaning of community theater.