Big 'spectacle' planned in Ashfield

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ASHFIELD - People from Ashfield and beyond soon will be creating a spectacle in town. Double Edge Theatre will present the Ashfield Town Spectacle and Culture Fair June 3 and 4 in indoor and outdoor venues throughout the center of Ashfield, its home of 23 years.

There will be large- and small-scale performances, art exhibitions, historical and cultural presentations, concerts and participatory and presentational dance all culminating in a large parade/procession down Main Street to a spectacular finale at Ashfield Lake. Citizen artists will be dancing, singing, flying, speaking, painting and acting.

Performances and events are being created by the Double Edge Ensemble and by local artists and arts organizations, farmers, historians, youth, schools, churches and restaurants.

"The community of Ashfield is extremely active and really likes to come out for things," said Stacy Klein, founder and artistic director of Double Edge Theatre. "Our participatory direct democracy engages all members of the community. There is a high attendance rate at town meeting and many cultural events throughout the year, even in the winter."

According to Matthew J. Glassman, ensemble/co-artistic director for Double Edge Theatre, the town hall meeting models participation by the citizens who live where it takes place. "It models a space where people of all sensibilities, livelihoods and politics gather to find common ground," he commented. "Yes, it can be messy, and it can take longer than most want. But in Ashfield, it catalyzes a sense of ownership in the actual evolution of life in the town."

In Ashfield, there is great reverence for the direct democracy practice people have. "From this, as a core, social capital is brewed and fermented," Glassman said. "It intoxicates people not just to care about what happens but to take part. And not just in town meeting. There are over 100 volunteer positions in the functioning of the town in a place with a population of approximately 1,700."

For culture in general, town meeting models encounter versus isolation. "What is modeled is discourse and exchange. What is modeled is a sense of potential based on the goodwill and imagination of the community," he said. "When culture is an engine for optimism and possibilities, great things happen!"
The story of Ashfield is one of sanctuary and freedom, Klein noted. The first settler of Ashfield was Heber Honestman, a freed slave given a land tract by his former owner. "New ideas and dissenting ideas have found their homes in Ashfield, Mother Ann -- founder of the [Shakers] -- was allowed to preach in our town when kicked out of other places, the first two elected women in the United States were from Ashfield, elected to the school board (even before suffrage), people leading immigration causes lived in Ashfield and worked on immigration post World War II, and the list goes on until today," she said. "This does not even mention the history before the settlers of first nations tribes, including the Mohicans and the Nitmuc. Boldness is not limited to politics: We have a huge amount of inventors and artists and writers living in this town."

Spectacle participants have been excited to go to rehearsals, help with the organizing, share local history and learn about the history of the town and surrounding areas.

"After the [presidential] election, we realized that it was very, very important to include the question of what identity is and what democracy is, in terms of how art and culture and democracy intersect in that they all require participation," Klein said. "Seeing that many people did not participate in the election, we realized that it was similar to culture, where people think it's something to watch but not participate in, or they stay at home. So when we started inviting people to participate, it was amazing to see not only our community but people from all over the region wanted to be involved. It's thrilling that at the local and regional level anything is possible."

The event is a direct outgrowth of Double Edge's roots in the question of identity. "What we are doing is inviting our community to join us in this search," Klein said. "The performance will not take place in a theatre--the territories of our town will be the stage map--and the ensemble are not the sole creators and performers."

The town-wide collaboration is free and open to the public and will run from 1 to 9 p.m. both days. Spectators may wander from venue to venue with a map and schedule provided.

For more information go to doubleedgetheatre.org, call 413-628-0277 or email office@doubleedgetheatre.org.