Double Edge creates Ashfield Center stage for town to rediscover itself

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ASHFIELD — The play’s the thing, or will be, in this hilltown. The entire community of 1,700 is being invited, along with the rest of the world, to jump into a grand exploration and celebration of an entire community’s very identity.

It may be hard to imagine, but then again, this is Ashfield, home to the ambitious and eclectic Double Edge Theatre, as well as other theater companies, musicians, writers, farmers, carpenters and a host of other thinkers and doers.

When Double Edge presents its Ashfield Town Spectacle and Culture Fair on June 3 and 4, hundreds of adults and children from here and neighboring hilltowns will take part in an extravaganza unlike anything anyone can recall before.

The spectacle is grand-scale, immersive theater, which more directly involves the audience and all their senses than traditional theater, by putting everyone in the environment of the show itself, and giving everyone choices in how they’re going to experience it.

Everyone who comes to the 1 to 9 p.m. event either day — about 2,000 are expected over the course of the weekend — can get into the act in one way or another: dancing, listening to music, poetry and prose readings, participating in a mock “town meeting,” listening to oral histories in Plain Cemetery, taking in one of several art exhibits, watching tae kwon do, parading and experiencing Ashfield life in a whole new light.

“It’s an attempt, really, to get people into it, to nourish the civic spirit in town and expand it, even beyond what it is now,” said Smith College historian and longtime resident Donald Robinson, paraphrasing from a conversation with one of the theater’s co-artistic directors. “I think it’s quite extraordinary. You’d have a hard time finding another community where this kind of stuff goes on at this level.”

Historical figures from Ashfield and surrounding towns will come alive in the form of about 35 costumed characters, including novelist Edith

It’s hardly unusual for area towns to have special celebrations — such as Conway’s coming 250th anniversary this June, old home days and annual fall festivals — like the one held right here.

But next month’s spectacle goes deeper, to what Double Edge founding co-artistic director Stacy Klein, who moved what was a 12-year-old, Boston-based theater company to town in 1994, calls “An investigation of the intersection of art, culture and democracy. … Grown directly from the theatre’s questions about the roots of identity, (it) extends this search to include the whole community through a kaleidoscope of history, art, and spectacle.”

Open to everyone from anywhere, and all free, it will be a place to “participate and create a living culture,” she says, standing in the Double Edge barn in front of a 10-foot-by-8-foot, hand-drawn map of the town center used to plot the two-day extravaganza that will itself be the inspiration for this year’s summer spectacle by the company, “We the People.”

She points on the map to each of the major public locations in the village, enumerating events, from musical performances by Bob Markey and Mountain River Taiko and readings of works by and of Ashfield writers, a Tibetan dance performance, an homage to Ashfield agriculture on the Town Common, a “Ballad of Shays Rebellion” to honor the 40 Ashfielders who took part in that revolt, and all of the heroic acts that followed, from the Abolitionist movement and Underground Railroad to resistance of the natural gas pipeline that had been planned to run through town to townspeople affirming democracy through their actions today.

Among the other attractions will be an immigrants parade, a tribute to Ashfield women, including Maritta Patrick and Lydia Hall, believed to be the nation’s first two women elected to public office, as well as a performance based on artist Alexander Calder’s circus sculptures.

“They will fill up Ashfield with their activities,” said Klein, who expects about 25 Double Edge cast members to take part, along with members of The Hinterlands theater ensemble from Detroit, Mondo Bizarro theater company from New Orleans and other Double Edge alumni from years past. … about 200 performers in all.

The musical, theater and dance performances, and exhibits by artists and schoolchildren will spill also onto participants’ front porches, in the Gloriosa & Co. barn and the Ashfield Lake House.

“It will be like the life of the entire town — the entire past, present … and hopefully, we’ll have some future aspect to this as well,” Klein says.

And in characteristic Double Edge fashion, people who think they’re part of the audience will
spontaneously find themselves among participants in the activities. And therein will lie some of the magic.

Rather than an event to attend as spectators, Klein says, “I hope it’s more of a sharing of everybody’s imagination. Which is the point of doing this: to open it up. It’s not that Double Edge can do this imaginative thing, but that anybody can create, anybody can be involved. And it’s free.”

Carlos Uriona, who took part in interactive public performances in Argentina as part of the resistance to that country’s repressive regime in the ’70s, said he finds working on the Ashfield spectacle fascinating.

“I feel, to some extent, it took us 20 years to get here to this project,” he adds. “It’s challenging and very difficult, but ... I like exploring that moment where spectator and performer approach a boundary that dissolves between them. “This is going to have many moments when the audience is like, you’re in, or you can stand and watch, or by standing and watching, you’re not just a spectator; you’re also performing.”

The planned activities, like the mock town meeting that will raise core issues, have structure “that is porous inside,” says Uriona.

‘A unique participation’
This spectacle “is for Ashfield, for the hilltowns, for western Mass.,” says Klein. “It’s about the unique kind of participation we have around the hilltowns — a direct democracy. We think that’s related to why we have so many people who have not only invented things, but also have done brave things, forward-thinking things.”

Center stage in this theater company’s thinking is that the direct democracy of New England Town Meeting enhances overall participation in public life, which in itself inspires creativity and bold action.

“We’re trying to explore the intersection between those things, and also to examine why we have so much culture and arts this region. It’s totally disproportionate from anything you see elsewhere,” says Klein. “That’s amazing. We have four theaters in Ashfield, and all this music. We have so much, and it’s true for all the surrounding area. This is really to look at and celebrate this history, and these possibilities that happen when you do have participation. Even if you do have disagreement, which is what town meeting is all about, you have a voice. You have to work together to make things happen.”

Robinson, who literally wrote the book, “Town Meeting: Practicing Democracy in Rural New England,” has been among those — including farmers, Historical Society members, selectmen,
moderators, teachers and others — who have been meeting with Double Edge in recent months.

He said that the theater’s bold undertaking is beyond simply a celebration of democracy.

It’s an “extraordinary civic spirit” that Robinson, who has researched public participation and insists he’s not simply being an Ashfield booster, is uncommon: “In Ashfield, 250 different individuals participate on one commission or committee or board or another, and as a percentage of the adult voting-age population, that’s incredibly high. To have comparable numbers, you’d have to have hundreds of thousands of people in Boston doing it. So it seems to me there is a tremendous amount of civic engagement which simply comes because people are so deeply interested on a sustained basis, on kind of building the town.”

The town’s civic participation level, which dates back to the Colonial period, when the Baptists in town went before King George III’s Privy Council to protest taxation by the Congregationalists and won, is accompanied by contention. He says it “comes up, heaven knows, fairly frequently, and sometimes gets pretty ugly, where we’re at each other’s throats. … It is a kind of drama and liturgy, both.”

Town Moderator Buz Eisenberg, who recently watched Klein and other theater personnel participate in the annual meeting, and will play a role — along with the town’s three selectmen — in the spectacle’s mock meeting, said, “What Double Edge is doing is celebrating a sense of community, and not just highlighting its role, but putting a spotlight on what a great community Ashfield is, in all of its different contours. With the spectacle, they’re integrating themselves into our everyday life in a way that’s really positive, healthy and celebratory. Everyone I know is really excited about this spectacle, and I think it’s just wonderful.”

Eisenberg said, “They’re really expanding their tentacles right into roots of Ashfield. I think universally its regarded as fantastic. I haven’t heard anybody say anything other than ‘That’s so cool!’”

‘Culture and democracy together’
The 35-year-old theater company specializes in visceral productions emphasizing intense movement, physicality, poetry and music over a static script. It’s best known in this area for grand summer spectacles incorporating the former dairy-farm landscape of its home base and immerses sell-out audiences into productions as they move from scene to scene along with actors and musicians.

Double Edge began conceptualizing the Ashfield Spectacle long before November’s election, says Klein, as a way of bringing its participatory theater style a half-mile down the road into the village.

“We said, ‘Let’s do a community spectacle about getting people to participate, like we do on the farm every summer, but we want to bring it into the center of Ashfield so people can really participate. We had no idea it would turn into this large thing, but I think it has, as a result of the huge disagreements and controversies in the election. It’s super important that we talk in this country about
participation now, about how culture and
democracy work together.”

Klein adds, “My thinking is that authenticity and imagination is directly related to the idea of freedom, without which we can’t have creativity.”

This July and August’s “We the People” on-the-farm spectacle, will follow the lead of the June event and also focuses on the intersection of art, culture, and democracy, asking, the perennial Double Edge question: “What makes up identity?”

Unlike other years, in which the audience has moved as a single mass around the farm, this year’s production will let the audience break into smaller groups, each moving to different sites around the farm for a more intimate, more in-depth exploration of “the hidden secrets that are revealed in the landscape, and in society,” Klein says. “It’s about the nature of freedom, about how land is used, and about refuge, in relation to the history of Ashfield.”

‘Everybody in one place’

Double Edge, which has a national and even an international following, hopes to attract more than 2,000 people to its two-day event Ashfield Spectacle.

Following a choreographed contra dance near the Town Hall featuring historical figures from Ashfield’s past, the day’s events are planned to begin culminating at around 6 p.m. with a grand parade, featuring bands and people on stilts, giant puppets, leading everyone to Ashfield Lake for a “freedom celebration” from 7 to 9 p.m.

There, a zipline will be set up, a performance raft will be launched, canoes form a regatta and trained Sanderson Academy, Mohawk Trail Regional High School and other students will fly from the trees, courtesy of Double Edge’s professional riggers.

As part of its open invitation for people to “invest in building community,” says Klein, the theater company has engaged townspeople as participants, with twice-weekly gatherings at the farm this winter and spring for discussions on topics like immigration, celebrations of women-owned businesses and trainings in wearing stilts and in “flying” using bungee cords and rigging.

“’It’s the most fantastic experience of my whole life,” says Betty Stewart, a 77-year-old Ashfield woman who decided to get in the “flying” harness like her 8- and 13-year-old grandsons have been doing in the Double Edge barn to prepare for the spectacle.

“I never would have believed I’d try something like that, that I would have enjoyed it as much as I do,” Stewart says. “But they just inspired all of this confidence, and they work right with you.”

The spectacle, she adds, “is just pulling in all kinds of people from all different areas of the town and different interests. I can’t imagine being able to do something so huge and draw the whole town into it, but they’re doing it. Because of all the diverse things they’re bringing into it, it’s just involving the whole town. It kind of gives you a connected
feeling because you’re there with your family and we’re all doing this. We’ve had some divisive issues, like any small town, but it seems like this has the capability to draw together diverse groups.”

In the finale, “Everybody will be there, everybody will be in one place,” she says, “but it will be very spacious,” even leaving room to “honor” the great blue heron that she says lives between the Double Edge farm and Ashfield Lake.

“It will be a kind of celebration, a ritual where people can really think while watching something that’s meant to be beautiful and joyful, about what they’ve seen. That’s what I hope will be the gathering together.”

On the Web:
www.doubleedgetheatre.org/ashfield-town-spectacle

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