Shahrazad is the latest in Double Edge’s summer spectacles, and with this piece, director and designer Stacy Klein has found the perfect balance between story and visuals.

Shahrazad, A Tale of Love and Magic, staged by Double Edge Theatre at The Farm, Ashfield, MA through Aug. 24.

The production begins in King Shahrayar’s harem, underneath a vividly painted open-air tent, where a group of women busy themselves working, dancing and singing evocative music arranged by John Peitso. The bitter king (Matthew Glassman) soon arrives with his vizier (Carlos Uriona) to select a wife he will promptly execute tomorrow to insure she will not have a chance to betray him. Shahrazad (Jeremy Louise Eaton) volunteers to be his bride, securing her survival by spinning adventurous tales that capture her husband’s imagination.

Just as the tales of the Arabian Nights are wonderfully varied, so are the selections script writers Matthew Glassman and Jennifer Johnson have made. As soon as the life-and-death stakes have been established, we quickly meet a magician and his Ebony Horse, a jeweler and his comically faithless wife, a sea princess, Aladdin and his magic lamp, and the Hoopoe, a gorgeous bird who reappears in nearly every scene, to other-worldly effect. With these five stories as a frame, we travel from within the harem tent to the busy marketplace, from a river full of sea nymphs and trees full of genies released from Aladdin’s magic lamp. We wander into a garden and witness a magnificent...
battle between a prince and a magician, step inside an enchanted castle and then off to a mirror-like lake for a truly jaw-dropping finale.

Along the way, we are not only treated to fire jugglers, soaring sorceresses and genies that appear to hover in mid-air, we also see Shahrazad’s gently persistent efforts to mend her king’s broken heart. The script writers, in addition to selecting stories whose themes serve the purpose of the evening, have also drawn on the Biblical text of the Song of Songs, the ancient Persian poem The Conference of the Birds, and quotations from the 12th century Sufi poet Rumi to amplify and illuminate the emotional and thematic threads that link the stories to Shahrazad’s healing efforts.

What is most striking about the production are the extraordinary scenic elements that include nearly invisible aerial equipment, exquisite spot lighting that reveals both intimate moments and sweeping battleground vistas, as well as painted backdrops and simple, suggestive set pieces that bring us right into the visionary world of the play.

The Double Edge ensemble features a core of a dozen performers who take on the primary roles, but the production feels rich in nuance and character with another dozen performers who sing, play instruments, dance, guard, threaten, swim in the sea, and populate the marketplace and harem. Tadea Klein and Amanda Miller’s costume designs are distinctive and effective, clearly identifying people and magical creatures with simple details.

But even as we feast on the visual delights, the richness of this Shahrazad comes from the seamless integration of those visual pyrotechnics with the poetic beauty of the storytelling. These characters are so believably rooted in their world that they remind us that stories are as essential as the bread we hungrily devour. The place for stories, says our narrator, “is the warm climate of the heart,” where our thirst is slaked by our own imagination. Double Edge’s immersive production touches our emotions, our imaginations and our intellect as it offers a new interpretation of these ageless morality tales.

Terry Byrne has been writing about the arts for nearly two decades. She has an MFA in Playwriting from Boston University and is a Resident Scholar at Brandeis University’s Women’s Studies Research Center.