Cynthia Simison: 'Summer Spectacle' at Double Edge Theatre in Ashfield brings magic to Western Massachusetts hilltowns

By Cynthia Simison
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This is a scene from the story of Jullanar of the Sea featured in Shahrazad, the Summer Spectacle of 2014 presented by Double Edge Theatre (MARIA BARANOVA)

The hilltowns of Western Massachusetts have always seemed to hold moments of magic for me in the month of August. The Cummington Fair, a delightful reminder of how simple and wonderful life can be. (It runs through Sunday, and you won’t regret a trip up Route 9 to see just how special a country fair can be. Blandford Fair is coming up on Labor Day weekend.)

Wild blueberries at Sussmann’s in West Granville, the sweetness of a pie made with these is incomparable. (The season is over, but mark it on your calendar to visit next July.)

Chesterfield Gorge, where the cool, clear water of the Westfield River always refreshes. (It’s one of many properties of the Trustees of Reservations which bring you close to nature.)

I am almost embarrassed to say I’ve passed by the Double Edge Theatre on Route 116 in Ashfield too many times to count without knowing exactly how wonderful a place it is. (I’ve even assigned and edited a story about the Double Edge “Summer Spectacle,” still never to go see it for myself.)

Just up the road is my favorite breakfast haunt, Elmer’s, with some of the finest corned-beef hash I’ve ever found, even better (forgive me) than my late mother concocted in our family kitchen back in the day, and home-baked AnnaBread that’s delivered daily by bicycle from Anna Fesenden’s kitchen nearby.

On a recent Friday night, Double Edge was my destination, thanks to an invitation from a friend who tried to lasso more than one fellow acquaintance to leave their Greater Springfield roots behind to travel to the high country of Franklin County. We’d have to be “willing to take a risk,” he had cautioned us all in the invite. “It will be a surprising and amazing evening. Guaranteed.”

Any reservations I had about making the long and winding ride up Route 116 from Deerfield after a tiring work day disappeared at the door. Two hours later, I was agog, truly. I couldn’t wait to get in the door back home to dash off an email
to a friend about what I’d just experienced, writing, “OMG OMG OMG!”

You haven’t seen spectacular until you see this spectacle where nature meets art, where a community has been built over the course of the past 20 years and where artists share their talents as members of an internationally-recognized theater company founded in Boston more than 30 years ago by Stacy Klein, the woman who remains its artistic director.

This summer, the Double Edge company includes members ranging in age from 23 to 73; they come from across the country and around the world to a more than 100-acre former dairy farm where a performance space arose out of what was once a dung-filled barn (there’s no other way to describe it, and they’ve got pictures to prove it.). As co-founder Carroll Durand explained to me, the transformation from barn to theater made perfect sense to those who envisioned it two decades ago – the barn had the same dimensions of the city-based space where they once perfected their performances.

I could try to describe in these few words how each act of this season’s Double Edge spectacle, “Shahrazad, A Tale of Love and Magic,” transported the audience. To experience it yourself is where the magic comes in. The small child behind me during a scene set in a garden where the fragrance of the flowering phlox and other aromas of a late summer’s night enveloped us wasn’t the only one with too many questions about how they created their magical experience. I just kept mine to myself until the post-performance meet-and-greet, and the child’s awe didn’t bother me in the least.

We audience members strolled along with the performing artists through outdoor and indoor sets where genies dropped from the trees and beautiful nymphs plied through a babbling brook. The grand finale was presented in a natural amphitheater with a reflecting pool which would be difficult to duplicate in any Broadway theater.

This season’s performances of the “Summer Spectacle” wrap up this weekend and are sold out (they’re limited to a maximum of about 90 people but there’s a waiting list for last-minute tickets). Do not despair! This is something you will want to put on your list NOW for next summer.

Double Edge isn’t just about the summer, though; the company has training programs over the winter and spring, and the company takes its shows on the road as well (“The Grand Parade,” for instance, will be performed in Keene, N.H., in February, New Orleans (Durand’s hometown) in March and at the Paramount Center in Boston in late April and early May.)

What’s in store for next summer? It’s a work in progress so to speak, but I, for one, will be checking in (doubleedgetheatre.org) regularly so I won’t miss it. Magic is a good thing to come by.

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