The marketplace in the Sahara Desert was buzzing. Merchants dressed in long, flowing cloaks shouted over one another to attract customers to their stand. A cool breeze carried with it the sound of stringed instruments.

Suddenly, commotion. A thief danced through the crowd with others in pursuit. A king, standing in disguise by the side of a road, watched a story of deception unfold in two homes across the path.

And Ashfield residents and visitors were right in the middle of it all — spectators of a preview screening of “Shahrazad,” the latest of Double Edge Theatre’s summer spectacles, held on its 105-acre Ashfield farm.

After two previews last week, “Shahrazad” opened Wednesday and several of its production dates have already sold out. The spectacle, in which about 25 actors will perform every Wednesday through Sunday night until Aug. 19, tells the tale of Shahrazad, who uses her storytelling skills to beguile a tyrannical king into putting off his plans to behead her.

The narrative jumps from present to past, from main narrative to stories within a story. Audience
members walk together between locations on the farm and have front-row seats as the action shifts from a river to a garden to inside the king’s palace.

And just like a movie, the story seemingly has no visual limits — a genie pops out of a golden lamp, characters ride on a flying horse and tree climbers hang from high branches while swallowing fire.

Double Edge has performed 10 other spectacles over the past 11 summers, but “Shahrazad” is bigger than them all, said founder and artistic director Stacy Klein. It took over 50 people to plan and produce the costumes, sets and rigging, she said, and that doesn’t even count a number of volunteers who came for a few hours or for a day to help. Most of that work occurred over the past two weeks.

“You’re in the moment thinking, ‘What am I doing? This may be a crazy idea,’” said Klein, who received a Doris Duke Artist Award this year. “But the crazier it gets, the more people seem to want to be involved with it.”

Klein began creating the story in March in collaboration with the company’s ensemble actors as well as Brian Fairley, music director and dramaturg, and Adam Bright, technical/facilities director. Milena Dabova worked with visiting expert Emma Jasper to create the choreography.

Matthew Glassman, the company’s executive director who plays The King in “Shahrazad,” said that the actors all work together to create both their characters and the world they live in.

“It's a very spiritual world. It’s a mystical world,” said the 37-year-old. “We try to make a dialogue with the outside spaces. We work physically in them, we swing from the trees.”

Jeremy Louise Eaton, 30, who plays Shahrazad and is the company’s student programs
associate, said that the actors have worked about 10 to 12 hours each day in the months and weeks leading up to the performance. When they’re not training in acting, dance or music, they’re digging ditches, rigging tents or painting.

“The days are all about work and that’s how we love it,” she said. “In my imagination, in the summer, I always (see an) aerial view of the farm and it just looks like one of those ant colonies and they’re sculpting something out of the sand.”

Creating ‘Shahrazad’

Set in the Sahara Desert, “Shahrazad” incorporates stories from the ancient text “One Thousand and One Nights.” In order to survive each day with The King, Shahrazad must tell him story after story, which build on each other and pique his interest.

Along the way, the audience is introduced to a king who becomes a bird, a prince who rides a flying horse, a genie who grants a fisherman three wishes and a water princess who does not speak to her lover. Shahrazad’s father, vizier to The King (played by ensemble leader and actor Carlos Uriona), tells stories and poetry of his own throughout the evening.

Fairley researched source material from all over the Middle East and North Africa. Most songs, chants and instrumental pieces are traditional songs or modified arrangements. Stringed and woodwind instruments play a major part in the show, but the harmonies being sung are just as powerful, often driving the mood just as a musical score does in a cinematic scene.

“We try to have it interact with the landscape. You might start hearing (a song) from far away and then get closer and it transforms,” said the 30-year-old. “Or it might lead you from one place to another. Or maybe each part of the farm has its own musical language.”

To create the dance choreography, Dabova looked for the common movements in dance styles across the Middle East and North Africa. The 29-year-old then worked with Jasper to create the choreography. Actors glide in and out of scenes, gracefully flying by each other and sometimes moving the scene’s props with them.

The narrative takes place as dusk turns to night and set lights allow shadows to dance along with the characters. The scenes are so meticulously constructed that when a moth flew among the actors it seemed, for a brief moment, that this was a scripted action.

Double Edge company members first explored the Arabian Nights stories four summers ago, but revisited it again this year, focusing especially on the relationship between Shahrazad and
The King.

After taking on “The Odyssey” the last two years, Klein wanted to create a production that was more female-centric.

“Shahrazad and her sister and all of the women in the harem (are) trying to do something ... (to) basically change the world but also show that relationships can grow and change and heal,” she said.

Founded by Klein in Boston in 1982, Double Edge purchased and moved to the Ashfield farm 12 years later.

Located off of Route 116, the farm provides housing for 15 full-time ensemble members, resident artists and apprentices and up to 30 students and guests. It includes two performance and rehearsal spaces, a pavilion, swimming pond and vegetable garden.

This summer marks a hiatus for Double Edge’s ongoing production of “The Grand Parade of the 20th century,” which depicts major historical events from the last century in epic theatrical style. The ensemble has performed the show in Washington, D.C., and Moscow and has an upcoming show in October at Trinity College in Connecticut.

This summer’s spectacle will be shown to about 2,500 people. The remaining tickets will be sold on a first-come, first-served basis. Shows start at 8 p.m. and are rain or shine. Tickets are $30 for adults, $27.50 for students and seniors and $25 for children. Discounts are available for families, large groups and Ashfield residents.

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