Arrival at Double Edge Theatre in Ashfield is mostly an unguided experience. Players in full character set the scene, carrying out meticulous movements, reading scrolls, and miming careful dances. Audience members wander as aimless as the cows on the sloping hill overlooking the farm, until taking a seat under a tent where players have gathered in scene. We spectators wonder if the spectacle has already begun.

The effect of intermingling viewers and performers emphasizes the interactivity at the heart of the production; it is one of the only performances of its kind in the country. “Shahrazad: A Tale of Love and Magic,” based on the One Thousand and One Nights, officially opens July 24 and runs through August 19th. We were in Ashfield for a preview performance of Double Edge’s 12th Summer Spectacle, which utilizes the lush landscapes of the theater’s 105-acre farm, walking the audience into each tale to create a visceral experience. A field of tall grass is a bustling Persian market, a small stream is transformed into a mystical site complete with water nymphs, and a fire-eating magician sits atop a King’s pleasure garden. A tale within a tale, Shahrazad delivers on its promise to provide a magical evening in Western Massachusetts residents’ backyard.

There is a buzzing, expectant energy from the audience under the tent as 8:00pm rolls around. A scene emerges before our eyes: A few men in Persian costumes sit around a game of backgammon, pantomiming a lively, playful discussion. Across a silk screen several immaculately costumed women silently portray a joyous scene, sharing elegant dances and chasing one another around a glass tea set. Soon the women begin to hum along to the tune played by a trio of musicians at the entrance of the tent. The murmur of conversations among the audience dies down as the men’s voices join with the women’s. The performance doesn’t exactly “start” as much as it gradually comes into focus.

Once the performers ask for the audience’s attention, they don’t lose it for the remainder of the stunning production. The familiar tale of Aladdin and the Genie is refreshed by incorporating subtle choreography in the farm’s freshwater brook; the Queen of Sheba yarn is framed by candlelight in a verdant outdoor garden; and the striking use of acrobatics, veils and excellent lighting create both the comfort and terror of the ocean in a steamy indoor barn. Each feat is rendered with deep emotion by the musicianship and haunting vocal work of the Double Edge performers. Brian Fairley, music director, along with John Pietso, a student of Arabic music, created the arrangements inspired by traditional music from North Africa, Syria and India.

It was the sixth Summer Spectacle for John and Wendy Sinton of Northampton. They make the pilgrimage to Ashfield
each year to experience the surprise and wonder of the performances and haven’t been disappointed yet. Even when it rains. There are plenty who travel further to take in the marriage of place and performance. Brooklyn resident Sarah Alden said she had read great things about Double Edge, and decided she had to check it out.

Double Edge Theater productions are a profoundly collective effort. “With this model, everyone devotes all of their time,” said Andrew Todd, Double Edge apprentice and associate technical director, who plays the role of “the prince.” Each aspect of the performance is cultivated by members of the Ensemble and the Company, from hanging lights to choreography to scene development. “It will change from the first performance to the last … We are just in the beginning of the process,” said Todd. Dialogue might shift, sets will evolve, production details will change — all in an effort to create a richer, more fluid experience for the audience.

The effort has paid off. Summer Spectacle attendance has grown steadily since its inception and the Theatre is now drawing about 80 audience members for each performance. Joanna Caplan, a second year apprentice and performer in the show, believes Double Edge has hit its stride. “It is definitely expanding at this moment. There is a huge increase in attendance in the last few years,” she said. “Shahrazad” is no exception. Tickets for all of this season’s performances are almost sold out.