Stagestruck: A Spectacle in Springfield, Rural meets urban as Double Edge Theatre comes to town

By Chris Rohmann

I usually find Double Edge Theatre on their home turf — at The Farm in rural Ashfield — where they live and work and, every summer, perform a “traveling spectacle” that takes audiences on an episodic journey around the spread. But last week I encountered company members in inner-city Springfield, rehearsing for a show that will have two free performances this weekend in the sylvan confines of the city’s Forest Park.

Titled simply The Springfield Spectacle, it’s a streamlined version of last summer’s Cada Luna Azul/Once a Blue Moon, a made-up folk tale about a remote, timeless South American village whose culture, traditions and very existence are threatened by the arrival of a Northern entrepreneur determined to dam its river and suck profit from its waters. In a series of alternately poignant and comic vignettes, we meet the compañeros — loving, marrying, squabbling and then fighting to survive as the waters rise.

Last week’s rehearsal was held outdoors in Emily Bill Park, a small grassy plain down the street from the Conservatory of the Arts, a two-year-old magnet school with an arts-infused curriculum. Two dozen of its students, from grades 9–11, are participating in this version of Cada Luna, part of the company’s ongoing collaboration with the Springfield public schools. The project is also partnered with the Community Music School of Springfield and is presented by City Mosaic.

The choice of this school for the project, and this park for the rehearsal, is fitting. The neighborhood is largely Latino, as is much of the student cast. Some of them attended a three-day intensive training session in Ashfield this summer, working with the company on the musical and acrobatic skills they will perform in the show.

On this rehearsal day, those students served as peer leaders, assisting company members in the varied activities. They were watched by a small gathering of locals, seated on folding chairs, who had come into the park to see what was going on and stayed to enjoy the event.

A circle of singers, led by musical director John Peitso, practiced the close harmony of “Adios Pueblito de Iruya,” the Argentinian folksong that ends the show. A parade of young people strode across the grass on lofty stilts under the guidance of Hannah Jarrell. Others swung on bungee cords from the trees edging the park. Four girls joined Double Edge’s co-artistic director, Carlos Uriona, wielding long poles that stood in for the giant puppets they’ll be manipulating in the performance.
Company member Milena Dabova explained that the students will be integrated into the scenes as the performance traverses the park, supporting the adult performers and adding to the spectacle. She herself will be at the center of a group of student dancers. I was struck by the teens’ seriousness of purpose — all of them engaged and focused, obviously excited about being stretched into new capacities.

I watched as Blessyd Cotto, a 10th grader at the Conservatory, scaled a ladder set against the side of a large spreading tree at the edge of the park, snapped a pair of thick bungees onto the harness circling her waist, and swung out below an overhanging limb to grasp the two billowing strands of yellow silk fabric hanging from it. As she bobbed on the bungees, Cariel Klein called out encouragement and instructions.

“Slowly climb up the tree with your feet until you’re upside down. Good! Now wrap your legs around the silk … then let one leg go out to the side … and the other leg … now let everything go.” And the novice aerialist swayed freely, heels over head.

When she alighted, I asked her about the experience. “It’s really cool being in the air, to be free with my arms and my body and knowing I’m secure,” she told me. “I feel like a ballerina.”

As his puppet team stacked their poles and joined Dabova’s group of dancers, Uriona, an Argentine by birth and street performer by training, explained that the Forest Park performances will have “the same story line as at The Farm, but not as much of it.” It’s really about the experience, he said — for the audience as well as the students. “It will be more evocative than narrative, with a combination of visuals, acrobatics, songs, dances and puppets, and the scenes will happen sporadically, at given moments.” He reached for the right word to describe the performance: a pageant, yes, a spectacle, but above all, “a celebration.”

As we chatted, a large, friendly-faced man in a *Viva Puerto Rico* t-shirt left the audience of neighbors and approached us. He told Uriona, in Spanish, that he is a drummer and would like to join in. With an apologetic shrug, Uriona explained that the program is only for “los niños” — the kids.

When the man turned away, Uriona told me this wasn’t the first time he’s had such a request at these public rehearsals. “I’ve already met several musicians, and five parkour athletes — they all wanted to be part of this. If we had a little more time, this gentleman who just came up to us, I would include him. It is the recreation of the spirit of folk art.”

As I was leaving, the rehearsal ended with a spontaneous parade across the grass, dancers leading musicians leading stilt-walkers leading puppeteers, all of them singing.

*The Springfield Spectacle* is Sept. 23 and 24, and begins at the Forest Park Carriage House at 7 p.m. It is free and open to the public.

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