ASHFIELD — Those familiar with the local arts scene don’t need to be told how Double Edge Theatre’s dramatic innovations have rippled through the region, inspiring new heights in school drama productions, whenever Double Edge ensemble members have coached the school drama groups. Double Edge has also brought international visiting artists to Ashfield and filled its theater/farm with both drama students and audiences that travel with the performers, as scenes move from indoors to outdoors in their productions.

Now Double Edge Theatre is also receiving recognition from the National Endowment for the Arts and from ArtPlace America’s 2017 National Creative Placemaking Fund.

First, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has approved a $50,000 grant for Double Edge to work with the town of Ashfield to analyze past growth patterns in what’s called “creative placemaking” and to chart a path forward.

Creative placemaking is a community strategy to use the power of the arts, culture and creativity to serve community interests, while driving change and growth in a way that builds character and quality of place.

“Creative placemaking is a new, slightly foreign phrase to me,” said Founder/Artistic Director Stacy Klein. “Our mission has been about creating great art and creating what I call, a living culture. … It’s all about participation. Culture must root and blossom, like a flowering tree. And when it does, all sorts of things happen. We are proud of our work, our community, and now this incredible recognition.”

As part of the NEA “Our Town”-approved project, Double Edge will hire an outside arts consultant to conduct a detailed impact study determine Double Edge’s social and economic impact on Ashfield — and Ashfield’s impact on Double Edge.

Co-artistic Director Matthew Glassman says that Double Edge brings visitors to town, who dine there and or stay overnight in area lodgings. Besides
generating revenue for hospitality services, the group wants to know how has Double Edge’s presence affected real estate values, retail, or construction in town? Has it improved the quality of life, or added vibrancy to the town? Ultimately, Double Edge wants to use the study in its design for final renovations and to ensure the theatre ensemble is sustainable in years to come.

“This has been a community in transition, as farms folded, and rural communities are shifting,” said Glassman. “And Ashfield has a distinctive sense of place that Double Edge has really benefited from.”

Last month, for instance, Double Edge’s “living culture” theatrical production, called the Ashfield Town Spectacle, was a weekend-long, townwide theatrical event that focused on American democracy. It involved two years of planning, Glassman said. Besides actors, many non-actor residents played themselves or historic figures from the town’s past. For instance, a fictional annual town meeting was run by the real town moderator, with real-life past and present selectmen taking part.

Double Edge Theatre was founded in Boston in 1982 by Klein, then moved to a 105-acre, former dairy farm in Ashfield, in 1994. Today, the farm has become a center for performance art, international touring and artist collaboration, year-round theater training, and an indoor-outdoor theater performing space. Two additional properties have been added to the Double Edge landscape: an adjacent parcel to its Conway Road theatre is where design and visual arts work is done. Another property, in the town center, is used as an artists’ residence.

The NEA-funded study will point out the key factors for past success and how to incorporate them into an ongoing strategy for sustainable art and cultural activities. Double Edge will use those findings to create the final design of its farm center.

ArtPlace America
Double Edge is one of 70 finalists — out of 987 applicants — for ArtPlace America’s 2017 National Creative Placemaking Fund. If awarded a grant from this program, Double Edge will use it for a project called “Collective Imaginings,” in which the ensemble will work with its local partners to transform unused farm buildings and land into public spaces for art, agriculture and conversation.

“We applied (for the grant) to help finish renovations on pre-existing buildings,” said Glassman.

The ArtPlace grant would be part of the ensemble’s five-year Harvest Campaign, to finish its facilities and ensure the ensemble’s sustainability.