Double Edge Theatre prepares for tour across U.S. and overseas

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Photos by David Weiland and Kim Chin-Gibbons
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Double Edge Theatre is gearing up to leave Ashfield and the hilltowns — temporarily — as theater members bring their shows on tour across the United States and overseas.

“The tour will travel around the (United States) before heading to Europe for a two-city tour,” said Jennifer Johnson, co-artistic director for the theater company.

Before 16 of the theater company’s members hit the road, a performance of “Leonora & Alejandro: La Maga y el Maestro” (one of three touring shows, the others being “SUGA” and “Leonora’s World”), will be held at Double Edge Theatre in Ashfield on Feb. 14 and 15.

According to Johnson, the performances for the shows “Leonora & Alejandro” and “SUGA” will be on tour across the U.S. for March and early April.

“All performances are being done in cooperation with other producing parties,” Johnson said. “In Detroit, for example, we will be partnering with a fine arts museum.”

Adam Bright, an actor and executive producer for the shows, said the three different performances highlight the theater company’s growth and diversity. Bright worked to arrange most of the stops on the tour, he said.

Many of the locations are new homes to Double Edge alumni, who have invited them to their new communities. Bright also said they will conduct theater training programs with other theater companies and universities while on tour.

Bright said touring members will take part in a tech residency at Arts Emerson in Boston at the end of February.

Schedule

While on tour, “Leonora & Alejandro” will perform at the Revolutions Festival in Albuquerque, N.M., March 11 and 12; at Musco Arts Center at Chapman University in Orange, Calif., March 18; and at the Hinterland’s Assemblage in Detroit, April 2 to 5.

“SUGA,” which premiered in November, will be shown at the CRASHBOX in Austin, Texas, March 4 to 6.

The tour will then travel overseas. “Leonora’s World” will be shown at Leeds Arts University in the United Kingdom on June 10.

“Leonora & Alejandro” will perform again at the Porsgrunn International Theater Festival in Porsgrunn, Norway on June 19 and 20.
In addition to being co-artistic director, Johnson plays Leonora Carrington in “Leonora & Alejandro.” The play, she said, was inspired in part by the filmmaker and artist Alejandro Jodorowsky. Jodorowsky, 90, is still producing work.

Following the results of the 2016 presidential election, Director Stacy Klein was inspired to create a lead role for a woman in the play.

“It felt we were missing a woman’s voice,” Johnson said. “We looked for a visual artist for inspiration and found Leonora Carrington.”

According to Johnson, Jodorowsky and Carrington coincidentally share some history. Carrington, a British-born painter, spent most of her life in Mexico City. She was one of the last surviving participants in the Surrealist art movement of the 1930s. At one point, Jodorowsky sought her out in Mexico City and spent a year studying under her.

“That connection changed everything. It added a whole new element to the play,” Johnson said. “Interestingly, there is writing from him about her, but none from her about him.”

Carrington was a “wild child,” born to an aristocratic family, Johnson said. She and Klein slowly learned about Carrington’s life through her paintings and writings. They discovered she had been admitted to an asylum by her own family and underwent brutal treatments.

Now, the play is a way to help the world discover Carrington and her work “as a brilliant artist and person,” Johnson said. The play is filled with surreal, magical performances and revels in not only the melding between the two artists but also their spiritual tug of war.

“The performance is kind of a creation of Carrington’s world,” Bright said. “Drawings, paintings and writings are brought to life. All of the text comes from her writings. It’s imagining the meeting of these two incredible people.”

“Leonora & Alejandro” was performed in New York this summer and was named in the 2019 New York Times Critic’s Picks shows of the year.

“As far as her encounter with Jodorowsky unfolded, the magic, mystery and humanity we have portrayed is certainly to be found in both Carrington’s and Jodorowsky’s work, yet the way it is painted and imagined is without a doubt mine and the ensemble’s own invention,” Klein said on the theater company’s website.
One of the latest productions from Double Edge Theatre is “SUGA.” This 40-minute solo performance was conceived, created and performed by Travis Coe, an associate ensemble artist with the theater company. While Coe said he is able to find parts of himself in all of his performances, even as a hyena in “Leonora & Alejandro,” but his production of “SUGA” is especially close to his heart. Coe, 25, said he began working on this production in 2016 as he explored his Afro-Caribbean and Latinx history.

“I noticed that a lot of the work at Double Edge is related to exploring identity,” Coe said. “I went into a deep search of my ancestry.”

He said his father is a first-generation American from Nicaragua, who grew up in Brazil. His mother is Puerto Rican. In conducting his research, Coe sought answers to questions of his own identity, connection to different cultures and his creative drive. He referred to the generational oppression from slavery that has carried through time and culture, and “now sits in generations.”

“How do I change that for myself and for my future family?” Coe asked.

As a “caretaker of a museum of memory” in “SUGA,” Coe reveals and remixes aspects of himself as queer, black, Latino and American, to find the path to sing, run and fly toward freedom. The play is an investigation of this freedom and the bonds — personal, artistic, societal and political — one must break through to achieve it.

“SUGA became centered around this question about finding freedom in my daily life,” Coe said. “What are the rituals or acts that one does to garner that sense of self each day?”

Everyone can play a part in changing the world if they look inside themselves and find the strength to overcome hardships, according to Coe. After countless weeks analyzing himself while creating “SUGA,” Coe said he hit a point of exhaustion. Fortunately, he received continued support from Klein and others.

“To be 22 years old at the time and have the encouragement from people you look up to was very impactful, so I kept going,” Coe said. “When you don’t know if you can go any further — that moment is where ‘SUGA’ takes place. It’s the moment where you rise or you fall, and I want to rise with grace, beauty and force.”

Coe’s performances balance intimacy and a strong physicality throughout the solo performance, as he lifts a metal bed frame, flies on wires and dances as a way to express the versatile aspects of his life. Thanks to the show, Coe said he has the tools to maintain a strong sense of identity moving forward and attributes this to the work done at Double Edge.

According to Coe, the concept of building a strong sense of self is woven into most of the theater company’s work. He said “Leonora & Alejandro” tells the story of a woman who has experienced trauma but creates new worlds to find healing.
“Leonora’s World”

Carrington’s work is at the center of another production, “Leonora’s World.” The production is described as a “living art spectacle” that sprawls over its production space, inviting audiences to journey through Carrington’s mysterious, magical and whimsical paintings.

“Saturated in the colors of fall, a golden field becomes a winding labyrinth, a wheel of fortune spins the waters of the stream, and luminous characters wander through hidden interiors in the landscape,” reads Double Edge’s website.

The performance is versatile and will be held in notable different locations. According to Bright, the performance will be held on stage in front of a thousand seats while in California and inside of a former warehouse building while in Detroit.

“(The play’s) sprawling features will be shown in indoor and outdoor spaces in the U.K.,” Bright said. “It’s a diverse set of places, theaters and communities that we are working with.”

Bright and the other touring members are looking forward to their time on the road, he said. They have toured in the past, but in the last couple of years as they spent time focusing on work within the local community. Bright recalled the last time the company traveled to Washington D.C., when fans, friends and family nearly filled up an airplane to fly down and see the show.

“After touring, the already close group is even tighter, for better or for worse,” Bright said, jokingly.

Double Edge Theatre, an artist-run organization, was founded in Boston in 1982 by Stacy Klein as a feminist ensemble and laboratory of actors’ creative process. In 1994, Double Edge moved from Boston to a 105-acre former dairy farm in rural Ashfield to create a sustainable artistic home. Today, the Farm, as it’s called, is a base for the ensemble’s international touring and community spectacles, with year-round theater training, performance exchange and conversations.