



JAN STURMAN/ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF DOUBLE EDGE THEATRE

# DREAMING IN PLACE

Guest puppeteers Csaba Teszerek and Janko Schneider on The Farm in Ashfield, Mass., during one of Double Edge Theatre's Ex-CHANGE training programs.



For Double Edge and its audiences, an old New England dairy farm is a living theatrical laboratory

BY KEVIN LANDIS

## THE FARM AT 948 CONWAY ROAD

near Ashfield, Mass., has a mysterious air. In most ways, it doesn't stand out from the other defunct farms in the area. It occupies a 103-acre tract of land just south of the town limits of Ashfield (pop. 1,800). On one side of the property is a small pond. A creek defines the southern border. The western edge slopes up into a wooded hillside and the eastern side ends at Route 116. There are several buildings on the property: an old silo, a slate-roofed barn, a well-tended cedar house and a few other ramshackle relics. Cows that occasionally graze on the property are a reminder that the place was once a productive dairy farm, the largest in the Ashfield area. Some of the old buildings on the site are crumbling: the roof of the chicken coop is in disrepair and the bathrooms are musty.

All of that seems normal for a community hit hard by modern economic realities and the decline of the family farm. What you wouldn't imagine, especially when wandering around the property in the wintry off-season, is that this farm houses one of the most remarkable theatre companies in America.

Yet, on closer inspection and with patient senses, one can almost pick up sounds that have become commonplace here over the past 14 or 15 years, thanks to the presence of Double Edge Theatre—the clinking of swords from *The Three Musketeers*; the wail of Don Quixote as he is chased up the hill behind the barn; the droning of an army of drum carriers beating out a solemn tattoo. There is tradition here, a collage of theatrical history that is ever-present and seems to permeate every corner of the farm and the surrounding hills.

Since its beginnings in 1982, Double Edge has built a reputation for long-term imaginative theatrical creation and for valorizing the ideal of *living culture*. For the company, that means attempting to develop a creative process in which the line between community and artist is barely distinguishable. Double Edge has made a conscious effort to integrate its productions into these rustic surroundings, creating a site-specific aesthetic that constantly imbues and “activates” the farm, both in terms of its rich tradition and possibilities for the future. It is no wonder that echoes of the past come alive in the wind that sweeps the hills and in the gurgling of the creek.

The sounds that one hears are not always just a figment of a heightened imagination. Double Edge creates work at a constant pace throughout the year, building a repertoire of images and *études* that can be used later in public performance. In any given season, a visitor might chance upon a parade of performers marching around the pond, or an enormous puppet made of farm junk lumbering around the chicken coop. The farm is constantly alive, in a literal sense, thus giving credence to the company's aesthetic of living culture. Things here are in a perpetual state of creation, or, more appropriately, re-creation. This summer the company is preparing an outdoor roving production based on Marc Chagall's paintings of *The Arabian Nights*. It will perform for much of August. The group will also be running open

work sessions, wherein members of the theatregoing public can participate in the company's unique brand of actor/performance training. This is the essence of Double Edge today; members of the public are invited to come to the farm and add to the fabric of the community, if only for a brief time.

At the center of Double Edge is its 52-year-old artistic director, Stacy Klein. Usually dressed from head to toe in black or shades of gray, Klein is not quick to smile; on first meeting, one might perceive her as dour. But once accustomed to her demeanor, one can see that Klein is a warm and rigorously thoughtful person for whom idealistic goals are more than catchy marketing phrases. The company was her brainchild; she founded it with her friend Carroll Durand at Tufts University, outside of Boston.

As a Ph.D. student concerned about the state of theatre, Klein had acquired a large part of her theatrical education in the late 1970s and early '80s in Poland, learning a commitment to intense

Part of the reason was that, completely inadvertently, Klein and Double Edge had landed in a historically liberal, arts-loving community that in short order thoroughly embraced them and their goals. In the middle of a traditionally conservative part of western Massachusetts, Ashfield and its surrounding villages—which have a pedigree for welcoming outsiders that dates back to Puritan times—contain an unusual number of performers, writers and other artists. One of Double Edge's neighbors, a sculptor who also runs a bed-and-breakfast that caters to the company's out-of-town patrons, told me with mock incredulousness, "I don't know what it is about this place! There has to be something in the water."

Of course, widespread support was not immediate, and some members of the community admit that they were suspicious at first of a "city" group purchasing the big farm at the entrance to the town. But with time, the success and cohesion did come. The farm allowed for a rebirth of Double Edge and helped Klein re-envision possibilities for her troupe. Klein says, "For us it is growing culture. We wanted to use the land to do just that...to see what it meant." On a practical level, it meant that the company would continue to have farm



This page, from left, Sarah Cormier and Matthew Glassman in *The Illustrious Return of Don Quixote*; artistic director Stacy Klein, with actor/producing director Carlos Uriona.

physical training and textless performance under the guidance of Jerzy Grotowski, Tadeusz Kantor and Rena Mirecka (Grotowski's lead actress and Klein's primary mentor). She returned to the U.S. feeling that the Eastern European techniques she had learned to see as essential had not yet translated sufficiently to the American stage. American actors were "soft," and their work rarely moved her or her colleagues. Directors, she noticed, refused to push actors to achieve any level of artistic *transcendence*, to use the language of her Eastern European teachers. Drama was flat. What might theatre be in America, Klein wondered, if it moved beyond traditional capitalist practice—even traditional avant-garde practice—even found a soul in the individual communities that it might serve?

A farm theatre and a community like Ashfield would seem conducive to Klein's developing aesthetic, but the company she formed struggled and endured in Boston for nearly 14 years before finding a suitable locale in which to put its ideals into practice. It was in 1994 that Klein discovered and bought the Fitzvale Farm, as it was then known, and relocated her theatre as far as she could afford to from the urban sameness that she found so counterproductive. After the move, a remarkable thing happened. The company began to thrive like never before.

animals and would grow as much of their food supplies as they could. Company members would take jobs within the community and get to know the residents. More generally, the property would be transformed from a no-longer-viable commercial dairy farm into a place of ritual, where the artistic and spiritual needs of the community would be played out in dramatic form as neighbors came together for discussion and artist/community interplay. The actual performances, while important, would not be the group's ultimate goal or its sole output. The farm's traditions and its spiritual presence would become an artistic muse and would imbue its performance spaces with living connections to the past.

Today, Double Edge performances are faithfully and repeatedly attended by community members, galas are catered by a local café, and homes and artist retreats are open to patrons making the trek to Ashfield from Boston, New York and beyond. Klein, it would seem, has accomplished exactly what she wanted to.

**IN AMERICA, A NATION THAT PRIDES** itself on its open space and westward growth, one might posit that a rural aesthetic and theatrical experimentation located away from urban centers would have enormous cachet and romantic



draw. Theatres based on this rural model might thrive if only because they hearken back to simpler times, characterized by patient growth and small-community ideals. Double Edge has tapped into that American impulse and thus been at the forefront of a mini-resurgence of community-based experimental theatre. But “mini” is indeed the operative modifier. For the past three decades, give or take a few years, ensembles such as the Roadside Theater of Virginia, the Touchstone Theatre and the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble of Pennsylvania, and Dell’Arte International in California have practiced varying brands of rural, community-centered theatre—and there are, at most, a handful of others. Double Edge, however, can be distinguished from these other groups by the deliberate eclecticism of its artistic process, its use of local and international sources, and its intense focus on the physical elements of its immediate surroundings.

The first influence for Klein, and thus for Double Edge, was the Grotowski-style training that is often referred to as the

This page, from left, Carlos Uriona and actor/associate director Matthew Glassman, with ensemble, in *The Illustrious Return of Don Quixote*; Uriona, founding company member Carroll Durand and Glassman in *Republic of Dreams*.



with infectious laughter. But on stage he can become an animal; his focus and intensity vividly illustrate the importance of the physical strain and corporeal engagement of the training that has become his province.

“The training for us is endless,” Uriona notes in his thick Argentinian accent. “It is like our language—it’s the way we talk to each other. And it is turbulent. The idea is to go beyond whatever limit the person thinks they have physically. But also it turns into a mental limit.” It is that turbulence that the audience can see in Uriona’s eyes and hear in his voice as he lets out a lion-roar during a performance in the small confines of the barn—spectators gaze at him, riveted.

Uriona’s skills underscore the company’s enduring dedication to cross-national and cross-cultural as well as local traditions. Indeed, Klein also trained with (and wrote her dissertation about) Eugenio Barba of Denmark’s Odin Teatret, and is close friends with Wlodzimierz Staniewski of the rural, commune-like Gardzienice theatre company of Poland. But attempting to define Double Edge is frustrating for Klein—she has made her resistance to any link to her former teachers, mentors and forebears clear. “I am hesitant about labeling,” she will tell you. “People have called us a kibbutz, for example. I think there are a lot of historical models, and so I wouldn’t so narrowly define myself.” Nevertheless, the ideas of kibbutz theatre and associations with commune-like artistic communities continue to follow Double Edge.

As Klein and Uriona approach their mid-fifties, they say

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Laboratory aesthetic. At the farm, that includes concentrated physical training of the actors that often mirrors Grotowski’s *plastiques*, or bodily isolation exercises. That can mean long runs in the woods around the farm with actors actively concentrating on their connection to other bodies, to the night air, to their controlled breathing. Actors may plunge into the pond for swims or gather in the Pavilion, a rough-hewn open space, for tae kwon do exercises. Part of the point is to take actors to a level of exhaustion and bodily connection so that they might free themselves to imagine, create and *do* without being encumbered by the racing mind. The Laboratory style also assumes that work is never-ending, and Klein has transferred that ideal of long-term development to Double Edge. A performance is never done and is never the same twice.

Beyond the Grotowskian influence, Klein and Double Edge have looked to Argentinean theatre forms, Jewish theatre and the Women’s Movement as defining pillars of their experimental aesthetic, in part because of the year-to-year makeup of

they have decided to back off a bit from their day-to-day obligations to the company (though their personalities indicate that releasing control might be impossible). They have already begun to transfer artistic control to Matthew Glassman, a comely 32-year-old actor and administrator with floppy brown hair and a toothy grin. In performance, Glassman often plays the earnest idealist to Uriona's raging tornado. Administratively, Glassman has initiated and updated aggressive electronic outreach, ensuring that the Double Edge community extends far beyond Ashfield's town limits. But his efforts attempt to maintain that rural aesthetic even as his e-mail messages disseminate the idea of living culture to patrons around the world.

Beyond Klein, Uriona and Glassman, the ensemble is made up mainly of younger actors dedicated to the idealistic goals that Double Edge has set out. An exception is co-founder Carroll Durand, who recently rejoined the group after a hiatus of four or five years. Now, at age 68, she is often the most physically active character on stage, able to command attention as compellingly as any Broadway diva. All told, the group ranges in age from the late teens to approaching 70—and all seem equally committed to the company and the community it serves.

**SUMMER SPECTACLE PERFORMANCES** have become a staple of the Double Edge season, and it is perhaps here that the group's artistic essence most fully comes to life.

Every summer for the past eight years, Double Edge has opened the farm to spectators who may roam around the property to witness developing performances. Having spent the winter months working on such dark and brooding pieces as *The Song Trilogy*—a critically acclaimed series of performances that lasted 10 years and dealt with the Holocaust and the Jewish Diaspora—Klein recognized the need to connect in a new way with local audiences and to return to fun and enjoyment. What better strategy than a festival of theatre where families and friends picnic and witness classic stories told in spectacular form—pyrotechnics and all?

The Summer Spectacles developed out of such Double Edge internship programs as Ex-CHANGE, a summer intensive of



From top, Carlos Uriona and Matthew Glassman in *Republic of Dreams*.

physical-theatre training with students from South America, and a similar trade-off with Poland's Gardzienice. In 2002 the Ex-CHANGE interns helped develop a short production of *The Saragossa Manuscripts*, which became one of Klein's favorite pieces—describing it, she sounds like someone who has just discovered the magic of theatre for the first time: “We had a pirate scene over the pond with pirates swinging in on a zip line, jumping on the boat, attacking, falling in the water, throwing fire arrows. It was really incredible!” Like Klein, the community embraced the Summer Spectacle, and the next year Double Edge produced *Don Quixote*, followed by Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* in 2004. In the years that followed, the company created *Republic of Dreams*, about the life of Holocaust-era artist Bruno Schulz; *The Three Musketeers*; *The Magician of Avalon*; and *The Illustrious Return of Don Quixote*. *The Arabian Nights* premieres this month.

It is in this work that local specificity and imaginative use and reuse of the farm most clearly highlight the company ideal of living culture. The hood of the old tractor becomes Don Quixote's shield, the broom lying next to the woodpile serves as Sancho's sword, cubicles in the shed become various inns in *The Three Musketeers*' France. Images are built upon images, and the audience/community members are allowed to discover their own meanings in the imaginative illustrations.

The Summer Spectacle performance of Cervantes-based *the UnPOSSESSED*,

for example, begins just outside the Pavilion. An actor playing Cervantes narrates the story, suspended from the rafters of a woodshed. Natural twilight illuminates the performance as the audience is led to the old barn, where the character of the Priest and the Barber can be seen inside performing an antic improvisation of book-throwing as the disoriented Don Quixote (Uriona) wanders on the distant hillside. Soon, Quixote discovers Sancho Panza (Glassman) in the chicken coop on the opposite side of the barn, and from there they set off on their fabled adventure. The audience is ushered from scene to scene by the actors and by Klein, who barks out occasional orders about where to stand and where to look. The contrast between drama and reality is ever-present, and at times character and audience blend into one, just as the farm and Golden Age Spain exist as overlapping realities.

One can never predict what will happen in a performance or the direction that it might take—the actors probably can't, either. In *Republic of Dreams*, a short and potent portrait of Bruno Schulz, Uriona bursts onto the stage in a tutu and leotard. He hoists himself onto a trapeze and flies over the audience, mugging, preening and breathlessly yelling out bits of poetry. Glassman frantically runs around underneath him in a performative mêlée with several other actors. Music blares from above. What exactly is happening here? It doesn't really matter, in fact. Interpretation is often left open, and audience members are encouraged later to give their views, ask questions, offer

criticism—or simply go home with thoughts and images still swirling in their heads.

During last year's summer performance, the audience gathered on the shores of the pond to watch Uriona and Glassman (reprising their roles as Quixote and Panza) swim through a maze of open books floating on the surface of the water. On the top of each book was a single votive candle. The image was arresting: our two heroes, so deeply and emotionally connected, gliding through the water among a field of glowing books as spectators watch breathlessly from the shore. Here, perhaps, is the transcendence Klein wanted so much when she founded Double Edge—a third space, a communal space, that exists somewhere between the actual farm and the imagined world of the play.

Double Edge always ends its performances with a wine and cheese party back in the Pavilion. There, among friends and neighbors, the company members discuss the performance and solicit ideas for the future. What is remarkable is how this seemingly idealistic exercise is actually so essential for

all who attend. The meetings last into the night, and the excitement and dedication to the work is palpable. This year Klein has initiated a program called "Conversations," in which practicing artists, writers and critics from around the country come to Ashfield to discuss art and its implications for modern society. Recently, Rena Mirecka, now 76, visited from Poland and headlined one of the events.

The phrase "republic of dreams" is taken from a story by Schulz that describes pastoral dreaming and creation—the building of a society out of the needs and desires of its inhabitants. At the end of his story, Schulz describes a dreamer/messiah who arrives at a frontier and vivifies the dreams that have always been lingering there in the minds of the people. The idea of a dreamer/leader resonates with the fact that Double Edge and Klein are deeply interdependent. Klein leads a band of happy followers—but it is in the tie to a locale and a community that Double Edge finds its richest implications. "I think the philosophy is about the

relationship to the environment," Glassman offers. "Where the artist *is*—the environment informing the artist and the artist informing the environment as well. So we use everything that is around us."

The combination of the company's questioning of past and future temporality around a specific location and its dogged pursuit of a living culture in the present tense makes Double Edge unlike any other American troupe. It has not died or faded away like so many companies before it. It has brought into being a place where success is not measured by critical approbation or condemnation but by connection to community—and by Stacy Klein's enduring desire to share her republic of dreams. ☒

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