

# ‘We The People’’: Double Edge’s summer performance will ask the audience to think about how the phrase applies to each of them

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Small audience groups will be led throughout the property in an attempt to make the experience a little more intimate. Actors rehearse above. Courtesy Bill Huges

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“We The People” will be performed by Double Edge Theatre on its farm in Ashfield. The above photo was taken during its recent townwide performance. Courtesy Robin Logan

- “We The People” runs for three weeks, beginning July 19. Courtesy Jeffrey Lewis

Three little words — “We the people” — form the underpinning of what will be an unusual summer spectacle for Double Edge Theatre this season.

Not that Double Edge — which collaborated with the entire community last month for a two-day Ashfield Town Spectacle and has created bold, landscape-scale and immersive productions inspired by *The Odyssey*, “A Thousand and One Nights” and the “grand parade” of Chagall’s works — is known for the usual.

Yes, this summer’s down-on-the-farm performance runs for only three weeks, beginning July 19, after previews on July 14 and 15, since the production is sandwiched tightly between the June spectacle and preparing for an October performance at Los Angeles (Calif.) Theater Center and a March premiere at Peak Performance of “Leonora and Alejandro: La Maga y El Maestro.”

And as usual, it’s already sold out, according to Double Edge’s website.

But unlike past productions of “Shahrazad” and “The Odyssey,” which were based on epic works, or last season’s original Latin American “Cada Luna Azul,” audiences can expect “We the People” to be more contemplative, with theater’s 105-acre farm — once home to the fledgling nation’s peppermint industry — playing a leading role.

Research for June’s town spectacle, which included a re-enacted town meeting, oral histories of former townspeople

buried in Plain Cemetery and historical characters coming alive along Main Street, may have contributed to the inspiration for “We the People.”

Yet, its roots run deeper.

Actor Jennifer Johnson, who is part of the 12-member company that will be joined by at least as many students and interns in the performance, said that not until reflecting on a phrase that seems “beautiful, but unreal” did she realize, “It gives everyone the feeling they’re included, when they’re definitely not included.”

Even when “We the People” was coined as the opening image in the Constitution’s preamble, “It wasn’t necessarily meant to include everyone.”

Taking that phrase away from its popularly accepted or politicized notion, the Double Edge spectacle asks the audience — as it’s led around the farm to areas visitors don’t often get to explore — to think about how we apply the idea of “We the People” to ourselves. How do we engage with the idea of representation, of personal accountability or participation?

“What does it really mean?” Johnson asks. “It’s really taken for granted. But on closer reflection, it’s sort of stunning.”

Double Edge Artistic Director Stacy Klein adds, “We’re really taking all the different things that we think make up the words ‘We the People’ and exploring them.”

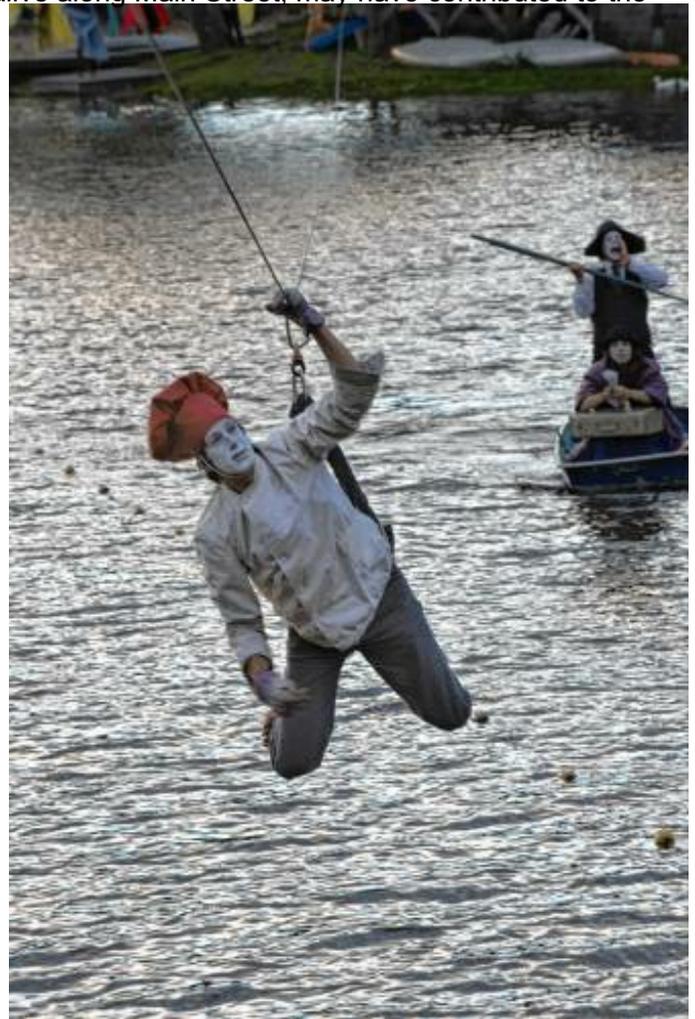
Those elements include the farm’s working landscape, the natural world, the imagination and the important historical movements in the history of Massachusetts that have moved the nation forward over time. Among the historical “beacons” shining in this spectacle are Henry David Thoreau, women’s rights advocate Lucy Stone and Ashfield’s own Lydia Hall, who in 1855 became what’s believed to be the first woman elected to public office.

As audience and cast come together, through the same magical merging of time and space that conveyed at the June spectacle, historical characters like Stone and Thoreau and those Ashfield participants in Shays’ Rebellion are all there.

“We’re talking about people we think really have contributed to those words,” says Klein. “This is the performance we’re creating now, focused on our desire and recognition that we need, as a society to reconsider those three words. Particularly in this time.”

Actor Matthew Glassman explains that the new production moves the examination from the overall “social commons” through time — this summer’s production is focused on an agrarian understanding, “where everyone helps everyone else out, where there’s an openness.”

Still looking at “the importance of the individual as an agent of change in history,” it will also look at the significance of the local history of farming as important component “of identity, of free thought and radical political expression, as central to this sense of place and survival.”



That agricultural history, emphasized in Double's Edge's hay-filled theater barn, combines with the natural surroundings as another aspect of the sense of place, and with "imagination, and what we're thinking of as perhaps magic," Glassman says. "All these things as they live here at the farm historically and in the present, all these things go together: the personal, the historical, the political, the creative and the agrarian ... Those things are really important when we consider the phrase 'we the people.'"

Incorporating "Northern Harmony" shaped-note hymns and American folk songs, the music for this spectacle may be more accessible than the internationally-flavored music of productions past.

Yet there's a complexity involved in this production that makes it all seem more abstract than telling a more archetypal story, he adds, "but it's very earthbound, in a way. I think the experience people have will be very different than what they had in the past."

Although audiences will still likely feel themselves spontaneously drawn into being part of the performance, breaking them into smaller groups to be led by different historical characters to discrete parts of the rolling farm will allow experiences that are more contemplative and more intimate, Glassman and Johnson agree.

This is a farm where Samuel Ranney in around 1812 began raising peppermint from wild plants he took from the South River's banks. He built a steam still to extract the oil, and by 1825, several hundred acres of peppermint were under cultivation in town. Later, Harry Ranney was a founder of the Liberty Party, an abolitionist political party.

In that context, and with some of early farm family members buried right on the land, Glassman said, the hope is for a "really intimate dialogue with nature and the natural surroundings, delving deeply into those possibilities," whether beside the brook or out in the pasture."

"Something we're trying for here," adds Johnson, is the "sense of joy and magic in smaller, intimate moments with nature," as she discovered in recently re-reading Thoreau's "Walden."

"Always during the summer spectacle, there's a kind of a magical feeling when (actors are) ... waiting in the stream for this scene, or hearing the audience coming around. At one point, sitting around on the tower during 'Shahrazad,' every night, I'd see this little family of birds coming together in one of these intimate, beautiful little moments. Trying to convey that and have the audience experience that with us is an unexpected part of this process, where we focus on magnifying those possibilities, for individual audience members to experience in a different way."

With "we the people" as a unifying vision, there's a palpability creativity at play here, nurtured by this open landscape, the history of an agrarian culture and small-town New England's unique participatory democracy, Klein suggests. It's a creativity that she finds lacking in our underlying definition of the larger society.

"When we go to argue about different things, it's a purely practical, materialistic, capitalist way of thinking, rather than a creative way of thinking: 'How do we want our society to look?' Or 'How should these people look?' 'If we don't have these people as part of our democracy, how would it look?'"

Trying to disregard political conversations about what those three little words mean, Klein says, this spectacle offers a chance to think through their meaning "to us as artists, as creators, as people who are on the land, as people who are contributing to the land. Looking at those people who are caretaking the land, and historically how people have contributed to the creation of those words, and our democracy should be important to us."

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