

Fuse Theater Review: Double Edge's "Once a Blue Moon" — Water Worlds

Est. 2007
The Arts Fuse
Boston's online arts magazine
Powered by 60 expert writers + critics

By Ian Thal

Published August 17, 2015

What sets Double Edge Theatre apart from other troupes is that it has always forged an intimate link between the world of physical theater and the world of literature and ideas.



Once a Blue Moon (Cada Luna Azul). Conceived by Stacy Klein with Carlos Uriona & Matthew Glassman. Devised by the Double Edge Theatre Ensemble. Text by Matthew Glassman and Jennifer Johnson. Directed by Stacy Klein. Presented by Double Edge Theatre in association with Charlestown Working Theater, at Double Edge Theatre in Ashfield, MA, through August 23.

A scene featuring Jeremy Louise Eaton from the Double Edge Theatre production of "Once a Blue Moon." Photo: Maria Baranova.

It's early evening and the sun has not yet dropped below the horizon. Audience members settle into their chairs in a courtyard surrounded by the structures on Double Edge Theatre's farm in Ashfield, Massachusetts. From here, they are soon transported to a mythical Latin American town square. Folk-surreal murals (by Hayley Wood) evoke the properly magical realist mood. A trio of musicians clad in black suits and hats — playing accordion, guitar, and fiddle — sing slow, minor-key ballads. A stranger (Carlos Uriona), similarly dressed, haggard, carrying a worn leather suitcase, sits down at the table of an outdoor café; with an espresso cup in hand, he explains that after many years abroad he is finally home. Home is the village of Agua Santa (literally "Holy Water"), and the stranger is in a philosophical mood. He cites fragment 402a in the writings of the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus: "You cannot step into the same river twice." He is haunted by the thought that he is no longer the same man as he was before. Now that he has returned to Agua Santa and its fabled waters he may no longer

belong there. He continues to muse on the ancient Ephesian's thoughts, wondering if it was the same place before the village came to be, or will be the same place when in some distant future the rain forests reclaim the land.

Water is Once a Blue Moon's central metaphor. Water is seen as the flux between being and not-being, between identity and difference. Water is envisioned as a source of life and destruction; as a medium in which one travels; as a contributor to wealth and power; as time, in the sense that water, when contained in a vessel, takes a shape, becomes memory. These images are not just conveyed through the poetically rich text composed by Matthew Glassman and Jennifer Johnson, but in the stream and pond that play prominent roles in this outdoor spectacle. The visual fantasia may delight the senses, but they also elevate the commonplace surroundings into the realm of myth.

Many troupes are well known for their use of theatrical pageantry — particularly the virtuoso displays created by companies who identify under the banner of “nouveau cirque” (of which Cirque du Soleil is only the best known). What sets Double Edge Theatre apart from other troupes is that it has always forged an intimate link between the world of physical theater and the world of literature and ideas. The company usually takes its inspiration from works of European literature, but with *Once a Blue Moon*, Double Edge Theatre looks to Latin America; the playbill cites such esteemed South American writers as Isabel Allende, Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges (and his longstanding fascination with ancient Greek philosophy), Alejandro Jodorowski, and Pablo Neruda, as well as the Mexican Octavio Paz.

Agua Santa's residents include Riyad (Matthew Glassman), a slightly hunchedbacked immigrant peddler who sells miscellaneous wares from a wagon; Zuluma (Joanna Caplan), his bride from an arranged marriage in the old-country; La Señora (Jennifer Johnson), the proprietor of the local brothel and cabaret; Luna (Milena Dabova), a young woman who, like the plucky Columбина of the *commedia dell'arte*, has left an even smaller village looking for work and, as she scrubs floors, dreams of a finer, more uplifting life; Elvira (Jeremy Louise Eaton), an elegant woman who, always preparing for death, sleeps in her own coffin; and an English industrialist (Adam Bright) who aims to divert the course of the river and harness its power. A large supporting cast fills out the rest of the population.

One of the most important characters is *Agua Santa* itself, with Double Edge's farm playing the part. From scene to scene the audience is given a guided tour of the intricacies of the village. Brightly painted, corrugated steel homes (designed by Michal Kuriata) populated by comic characters effectively evoke the La Boca neighborhood of Buenos Aires. The rooms of La Señora's are open for us to peer through their fourth walls, as her guests bathe, dance, and carouse. A dam (represented by an extraordinary three-tiered set designed by Jeff Bird) looms above a pond on the edge of the woods. Residents of *Agua Santa* float

downstream, or paddle across the water's surface. Audience members find themselves invited to the wedding of Riyad the peddler and Zuluma, and may even be drawn into the dance.



Politics lurk on *Santa Agua*'s horizon — but never in the sense of agit-prop theater. Bright's British industrialist may be a smug cigar-chomper, but he is no simplistic villain. In fact, he plays an intriguingly complex role. Yes, he threatens to replace his employees with men who will work twice as hard for half the wages and advocates Buddhist teachings on detachment as a way for locals to cope with the dislocation his projects will incur. But he is not afraid to step into the stream and engage in physical labor, nor does he fear integrating himself into the community of *Agua Santa*. His fervent belief is that his project will benefit the next seven generations of humanity. This story thread, of course, also resonates with state history, particularly the deliberate flooding of four Massachusetts towns to form the Quabbin Reservoir. Elsewhere in the village, revolutionaries are mobilizing against the Britisher's economic exploitation and its inevitable dislocation. But it's not just about doing battle with capitalism and colonialism: When the rebels unfurl their banner, “El Pueblo Unido”, their martial drums clash with the festive syncopations of a wedding procession

Those who have thrilled by Double Edge's performances in conventional theater spaces have had a glimpse of director Stacy Klein's expansive imagination. (My first encounter was a 2007 production of *Republic of Dreams* at the Charlestown Working Theater). But you don't really

know just what she is capable of unless you see Klein working on her home turf. She uses music, sound effects, dialogue, and the movements of actors and puppets to guide the attention and focus of audience members. In some ways, Klein is like a highly skilled filmmaker who uses camera pans and zooms to control what appears on the screen. Of course, in the theater Klein is working in real time, in three-dimensional space. There's no editing room here.

Milena Dabova, Jeremy Louise Eaton, Hayley Brown, Carlos Uriona, and Sarah Cormier in scene from the Double Edge Theatre production of "Once a Blue Moon."

Of course, Klein knows that the human visual cortex remains a far more powerful instrument than Hollywood's most expensive cameras. Each scene proffers a different setting and perspective, generating yet another spatial relationship between audience members and performers. In one episode the director brings the performance indoors, into the ballroom of a long neglected estate house known as "The Palace of the Poor." Here a late-night dance melts into a dream that depicts a deluge — the dam waters flood the town, villagers bobbing in and out of the raging waters. There is no liquid used in the scene: the illusion of the water's depths and the struggles of the Agua Santans as they bob up and down, swimming for safety, is created with the use of lighting and venerable stage technology: fabric, rope, live music, and the actors' bodies. Part of the thrill is seeing (and appreciating) how Double Edge creates these extraordinary effects.

The music direction and arrangements by Mica Farias Gomez, Manuel Uriona, and John Peitso (who can also be seen heard from time to time playing accordion and percussion) immerse the audience in Agua Santa's distinctive folk culture and songs. Whether played by intimate trios, dance bands, or festive processions, the tunes in *Once a Blue Moon* don't make up a conventional score — this is simply the music the villagers listen and dance to. John Pietso's lighting design is well modulated. He takes into account how dusk shifts to nightfall during the performance — a challenging task, given that the dramatic action progresses

from taking place under the sky to under a canopy of trees.

Tickets for *Once a Blue Moon* sold out early in its run, so anyone within driving distance of Western Massachusetts' Pioneer Valley will have to wait until next summer, when Double Edge plans to remount this exhilarating extravaganza. Others, who are unable to plan that far in advance or make the trip, will have to depend on how well Klein and ensemble can reshape the show when it is converted into a touring production for more traditional theatrical venues. Assume that the magic is transferrable — however one gets there, one ought to step at least once into Agua Santa.

Ian Thal is a playwright, performer and theater educator specializing in mime, commedia dell'arte, and puppetry, and has been known to act on Boston area stages from time to time, sometimes with Teatro delle Maschere. His one-act play *The Second Annual Administration Building Takeover* and the *Slumber Party* premieres at Boxfest Detroit later this summer. He has performed his one-man show, *Arlecchino Am Ravenous*, in numerous venues in Massachusetts and Rhode Island. One of his as-of-yet unproduced full-length plays was picketed by a Hamas supporter during a staged reading. He is looking for a home for his latest play, *The Conversos of Venice*, which is a thematic deconstruction of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. Formerly the community editor at *The Jewish Advocate*, he blogs irregularly at the unimaginatively entitled *From The Journals of Ian Thal*, and writes the "Nothing But Trouble" column for *The Clyde Fitch Report*.