

Theater on a Farm

By [John Freedman](#)

March 25, 2009



Stacy Klein tells a guest about her work at the Double Edge Theater as the theater's lead actor Carlos Uriona approaches at a trot in the distance. **John Freedman**

I found myself wondering this week what I was doing on a farm in the middle of Western Massachusetts. True, what people in Ashfield, MA, call the Farm is actually a theater bearing the name of [Double Edge](#). But what was I, a Russian theater rat, doing in this tiny town whose population probably doesn't reach the number of people living on my block in Moscow?

The invitation asked if I would participate in a symposium on the relationship between theater journalists and laboratory theaters. I quickly accepted. But the thought soon struck me: What could I contribute to a conversation about laboratory theaters? In the strictest sense, Russia barely knows the word.

For all the influence it has had over the last century, Russian theater hardly has a lock on innovation. Yes, it gave us Stanislavsky and the [Moscow Art Theater](#). Yes, it gave us Meyerhold and the [theatrical avant-garde](#). Yes, it gave us Anton Chekhov and Mikhail

Chekhov, Anton's nephew, who had an enormous impact on dozens of great Hollywood actors in the middle of the 20th century. Yes, it gave us the notion of a repertory theater, a place where a troupe lives, works, fights, creates and sometimes makes up together as a family.

Where it hasn't been strong is in the realm of theater as a laboratory &mdash a closed place of experiments where actors and directors can appear, at least to outsiders, to work almost as a hermetic society. The idea for this reached its best expression in the work of [Jerzy Grotowski](#) in Poland in the 1960s and 70s. Not surprisingly, he called his theater "The Laboratory" when he founded it in 1959.

Probably the only major Russian director who drew sustained inspiration from Grotowski was Anatoly Vasilyev, who founded his School of Dramatic Art in 1989. But Vasilyev was pushed out of his theater by some shady political moves in 2007, more or less bringing to a close the notion of a pure laboratory theater in Russia.

What I soon realized was that while I had been invited to share my experiences at an international forum, what I really was going to Ashfield for was to learn something myself.

And did I ever!



By John Freedman / For MT

A barn that has been renovated to be used as a performance space by the Double Edge Theater.

Stacy Klein, influenced by the work of Grotowski and a disciple of several of Grotowski's closest collaborators, created the Double Edge Theater 27 years ago in the Boston suburb of Allston, MA. This was an experimental troupe that shunned theater-as-entertainment, delved into non-narrative performances, and sought to live in creative isolation while developing its art. After a decade or so, when Stacy felt the pressures of the big city were about to destroy everything she and her troupe had built, she made a radical decision: She bought a 200-year-old, 105-acre farm in the country and moved out amongst the creeks, cows, mice and mountains to start all over again.

At present, Stacy and her actors are at work on a cycle bearing the title "The Garden of Intimacy and Desire." It includes three productions sharing nothing in character or plot but finding common ground in the themes of the human need for idealism, integrity and spiritual

exploration. "The Unpossessed," based on Cervantes' "Don Quixote," premiered in 2004; "Republic of Dreams," inspired by the work of [Bruno Schulz](#), opened in 2007; and "The Disappearance," based on a story by [Ilan Stavans](#) about a Jewish actor in Belgium who fakes his kidnapping as a protest against anti-Semitism, opened last October.

All these pieces, developed over a period of years and transforming as the actors have grown and the times have changed, have attracted international attention. In addition to its travels throughout the United States, Double Edge has gone on tours to Europe and South America. Its troupe includes actors from England and Argentina. The symposium I attended included guests from Germany, Russia and England.

All this has taken shape in a one-horse town with a rich history of political radicalism and fierce independence. This is a place, as Klein pointed out on a tour of the Farm, where the surviving Salem witches were given refuge. The Shakers, driven out of other cities, were allowed to worship here. It was a stop on the Underground Railroad that helped runaway slaves escape the South. In the middle of the 1950s, gays and lesbians moved here to avoid persecution.

"This history must have been the reason you chose to settle here," I commented.

"No," Klein said. "I liked the slate roof on the barn. I knew nothing about the town's radical background. But I've come to realize it was no coincidence that we ended up here."

I cannot imagine a theater more unlike everything I know from my experience in Russia. The intensity at Double Edge is ever-present but low-key. The commitment each member of the troupe makes to his or her work includes plenty of room for generosity of spirit and appears utterly lacking in ego-driven behavior. Stacy is the obvious leader of everything that happens on the Farm, but everybody there, even the short-term interns or apprentices who come from Poland, Bulgaria and the American West to study and train with the troupe, are included in all activities as equals. What a concept!

I have spent the last 20 years singing the praises of Russia's rough-and-tumble theater world. and I have no intention of stopping now. Few things have fascinated and enriched me like Russian theater. But I must take this opportunity to step back and say this: There is something extraordinarily attractive, extraordinarily American about the Double Edge Theater. If I'm lucky, when I get on a plane back to Moscow tomorrow, I'll take a little of this amazing theater back with me.