

# The Double Edge Theater's Project To 'Rematriate Land'



*April M. Short*

03-19-2024 ~ *Meet a theater group that left the city to reimagine a local economy.*

The economic realities in the U.S. [do not generally support](#) working-class artists and culture bearers—an issue that has only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a March 2021 [report](#) titled “[Solidarity Not Charity](#): Arts and Culture Grantmaking in the Solidarity Economy,” 63 percent of creatives in the U.S. were “fully unemployed” as of December 2020 and one-third of museums said they would not open after the pandemic. The report was commissioned and released by [Grantmakers in the Arts](#) to encourage investors to fund arts and culture more broadly.

Perhaps because there are seldom mainstream systems of support for artists in the U.S., they are often the ones responsible for envisioning equitable ways of living and being. It is artists who often create alternatives to the existing economic models, spearheading many of the [mutual aid efforts](#) that have helped communities survive challenging times (this became especially visible during the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic), coming up with housing solutions like community-owned land trusts and [co-ops](#), and offering the means to [relocalize supply chains](#). As the Solidarity Not Charity report details, artists are building what is often called the [solidarity economy](#) or [local peace economy](#).

The [Double Edge Theatre](#), a cultural cooperative and ensemble collective in Ashfield, Massachusetts, offers an example of how artists have successfully reimaged the economy and created networks of mutual support. The company was founded in Boston in 1982, but by the end of the 1980s, gentrification and rising costs in the city made it difficult for the group to enact its creative visions, according to [Carlos Uriona](#), an actor and the theater's cultural strategist. This economic pressure became the catalyst for a unique model leading to a community-supported economy that has become a successful haven for the arts for decades.

As the theater's mission statement [notes](#), their "... [v]ision is to prioritize imagination in times of creative, emotional, spiritual, and political uncertainty."

The theater has been repatriating 105 acres of farmland for the purpose of promoting culture—or as Uriona puts it, they have been "rematrating" the land, as the theater was initially founded and largely led by women.

"By the early 1990s, [the theater members] were looking for an alternative model," he says, noting that at the time he was not yet part of the theater, as he arrived in 1996 from Argentina after being offered residency. "They [Double Edge Theatre] wanted to create a model where they could rehearse and produce work, but at the same time invest in long-term research projects and deeper work," Uriona says. "They also wanted to be able to collaborate intensively with foreign countries, and a lot of those countries were on the other side of the iron curtain during those days—[like] Eastern Europe and Central Europe—they also wanted to work with people in South America. In Boston, at the time, the idea of bringing people like me on board for a residency, and housing them, was nearly impossible."

The group searched for an alternative space outside the city, and in 1994 they found the farm where they currently reside: 105 acres of land in rural Massachusetts. The farm is classified as Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) land and the company purchased it as a collective, with the understanding that they could not develop the land into condos or use it for other purposes. Instead, they would have to farm, live, and work in the farmhouse and farm buildings.

While most of the members of the theater were relatively urbanized, they decided

to take a leap of faith and learn how to farm—with the intention of building a community where actors could dedicate themselves to the theater full time and stay with projects for a long term without outside strains. Rather than having to take a second job to fund housing and living expenses, at the farm, one “day job” for the members of the theater became farming, where they produced their own food, and eventually, took up other necessary projects like carpentry. They also worked on administrative duties at the theater, including marketing and writing grants.

For a few years, the group juggled both locations: Boston and Ashfield, but in 1997 they made the choice to commit fully to the farm, which Uriona says felt like a significant risk at the time.

“We decided to move the group completely [to Ashfield] knowing it was a risk,” he says. “Everybody was telling us, ‘You’re probably not going to be able to make a theater work out there and you’re not going to be able to fund it; you’re sinking money into something that is not going to work.’”

When the theater bought the farm, small farms were already under significant strain in the post-Nixon era, which saw an increasingly industrialized Big Ag takeover, and the economic realities of small-scale farming were bleak. It was clear that the farm would not produce enough to fund the members of the group.

Meanwhile, the surrounding town, made up of many small farmers, was undergoing a reconversion as conventional small-scale farming was becoming unsustainable. The neighboring farms also started moving into boutique farming models, which were oriented toward specialized organic produce. Some became bed-and-breakfasts (many of which are now Airbnbs, and some are alternative teaching organizations).

“[Surrounding farms] stopped farming in the way they had been doing and a new system started,” he said. “At the same time, people were starting to get jobs on the internet.”

With all of these factors at play, the group knew it needed to develop its own economic model. They knew they wanted to create something that was not just based on producing theater and delivering theater.

“We didn’t want to subject our creation and our research to the entertainment

industry; we wanted to remain an art group,” Uriona says. “One of my strong suits is outreach and developing a cultivation of people—not just the cultivation of plants and animals, and stuff like that. So, that allowed me to reach out to a lot of farmers here [Ashfield] and gain their trust and their cooperation.”

Little by little, the group developed a strong connection with the surrounding town and became intricately connected with the developing businesses as farms restructured.

The group also started to bring students in from all over the world for residencies and it was not too long before a mini tourism industry started to flourish around the theater.

“At the same time, our performances became more and more developed and were really well received,” he says. “We got a lot of national and international attention, to the point that today we [are sometimes] sold out before we’ve opened the box office, because of the number of people who are supportive of and involved in the theater, which I would say by now is around 10,000.”

Uriona says that their alumni group comprises about 900 people to date, and it includes people from Beijing, Australia, Indonesia, Europe, South America, India, and beyond.

Individual households and contributors support more than a quarter of the theater’s costs via membership program plus individual and grassroots contributions, the rest of their funding comes from grants, performances, and other programs. The farm was able to become a way of defraying food costs, rather than something the theater relied on to survive. And the theater collaborates with surrounding farms and CSA (community-supported agriculture) programs, in a deeply communal way, Uriona says.

“When we moved to the farm, [it allowed] us to do what we were doing in the city, but with focus—when you’re in the city, it’s everyone on their own, and here, we needed to somehow collectivize our efforts,” he says.

“And this has made much more economic sense. Not financial sense, but economic sense, which then affected the finances in a really major way. For example, let’s say that I’m unemployed because the [theater] season finished. Here [on the farm], instead of trying to get a job as a bartender, I would go and

do some carpentry, which would then serve to house a colleague. My effort is being doubly invested. Even if you look [at it] from a capitalist point of view, it makes sense because then you're paying me for one job, but that job is reinvesting in the whole economy of the theater community."

Uriona notes that over the years, because of their unique setup, the group has been able to "unlearn and learn skills together that were not taught to us in classical theater schools."

Skills like how to organize their business model—from marketing to bookkeeping and working with accountants; to understanding the legal aspects of their work; to insurance; to the building and upkeep of their facilities.

### *Collective Land Ownership*

Uriona says one of the challenges the theater faced was to purchase the property as a collective because banks typically don't give loans to collectives. After searching, they found a local bank that was willing to work with them, and Uriona says the relationship with the bank has been phenomenal and has allowed the collective to own the land as a group.

The theater is actively engaged with the local Indigenous community. The Indigenous [landback effort](#) is a growing movement across the U.S. and around the world to give stewardship rights and access back to local Indigenous peoples, who have lived in communion with the land for thousands of years.

In 2021, the theater entered into a legal landshare agreement to co-steward and co-inhabit the 105 acres of land with their Indigenous partners—[No Loose Braids](#) and the [Ohketeau Cultural Center](#). No Loose Braids "is a Nipmuc-led organization "working to bring Eastern Woodland Tribal communities together in unity," as [described](#) on the organization's website. "No Loose Braids also works to build opportunities for future generations through changing structures of systemic marginalization and exclusion by advocating for Tribal rights and engaging in dialogue in colonial spaces," the website states.

The Nipmuc community created the Ohketeau Cultural Center in one of the barns on the communal land, which is a space for creativity and a safe haven for Indigenous community members. It is [co-founded and co-directed](#) by Larry Spotted Crow Mann, a nationally acclaimed author and a citizen of the Nipmuc Tribe of Massachusetts; and Rhonda Anderson, who is a mother, herbalist,

activist, and silversmith, and whose heritage is Iñupiaq-Athabascan from Alaska.

### *Longevity*

Because the theater is not dependent on box office turnout or constantly producing new shows, it is able to delve into research projects in a way that is more thorough than what other tether models allow for.

“Our performances are not conventional,” Uriona says.

Some of their research spans decades and much of what they explore is markedly avant-garde. In addition to performances, the theater sometimes opens up its experimental research for showings.

“We continue to research on the land, and we continue to research different forms of theater in a way that has longevity,” he says. “It’s been 25 years... longevity in the relationship with research is crucial for us,” he adds. “There is nobody else who is really producing that type of research in this country. Most [other theaters] hire you for four weeks of work that is rehearsal and then four more weeks of performing. We have sustained research for [more than] 12 years. For some pieces that we’re doing, we started doing them in the ‘80s.”

The theater works with circus-esque acrobatics, aerial training, and trapeze and does unconventional work with puppets. Another way the theater is experimental is that it creates shows that are interactive with the surrounding land. Nature, in a way, plays a role in Double Edge Theatre performances. For example, they’ve had Poseidon on a zip line, diving in and out of the water during a performance of the Odyssey.

“We do research on visual arts in combination with theater, so for instance, [Russian-French artist] Marc Chagall has been a constant presence. We started recently with the work of Leonora Carrington, the Mexican-British painter... We research Bruno Schulz, a Jewish-Polish writer—who died during the Holocaust—who did erotica and is somehow the first person who wrote something that is close to magical realism, which later came out of Latin America. We have a whole breadth of Latin American research that has been going on for about 12 years now.”

Uriona says the theater and arts are “indispensable to today’s world in crisis.”

“[The] theater teaches through imagination and story,” he says. “It is also a ceremony and an example of how to address conflicts in a collective way. We gather to see something... And that moment of togetherness encapsulates the kernel of what it means to come together to think about something that elates us, or concerns us, or affects us in whichever way. It is a healing moment to practice this ritual of theater in the community.”

*By April M. Short*

*Author Bio:*

[April M. Short](#) is an editor, journalist, and documentary editor and producer. She is a co-founder of the [Observatory](#), where she is the [Local Peace Economy](#) editor, and she is a writing fellow at the [Independent Media Institute](#). Previously, she was a managing editor at AlterNet as well as an award-winning senior staff writer for [Good Times](#), a weekly newspaper in Santa Cruz, California. Her work has been published with the San Francisco Chronicle, In These Times, LA Yoga, the Conversation, Salon, and many other publications.

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