



## Pirouettes and Puberty: The Fierce and Unflinching World of *Dance Nation*•

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**SALT LAKE CITY, UT** Voodoo Theatre Company's *Dance Nation*, written by **Clare Barron**, has an electrifying energy that is both raw and captivating that I admit I was not expecting from a show about teens and dance. The narrative follows a group of thirteen-year-old competitive dancers as they prepare for a national competition, delving into their personal struggles, dreams, and the harsh realities of growing up in the dance world.

The cast features actors of various ages portraying young dancers, which brings remarkable depth to every role. Using actors above the age of twenty to portray teenagers brilliantly underscores the universal nature of the experiences and emotions depicted, reminding the audience that the trials and tribulations of adolescence resonate far beyond those formative years. Each performer embodies their character with raw honesty, capturing the awkwardness, vulnerability, and fierce determination of adolescence.

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The play opens with an energetic group dance number performed by a troupe of pre-teen girls (and one boy). We then follow the characters through their dance practices under the stern guidance of an authoritarian and unyielding dance coach (**Jason Hackney**). Star dancer Amina (**Suni Gigliotti**) frequently secures the dance solos due to her exceptional skill and drive, leaving the rest of the team in her shadow. However, when Zuzu (**Betty Kalunga**) finally nabs a solo, the pressure of competition shifts the dynamics of the group, forcing everyone to face the ensuing consequences.

“They don’t say I’m sensational. They don’t say I take their breath away. They don’t say they could watch me forever. They don’t say they cry when they watch me dance. When they watch Amina dance, they cry.

I know. Because I cry when I watch Amina dance.”

—Zuzu (**Betty Kalunga**)

Playwright Clare Barron aims to [explore ambition and how that intersects with gender](#). The dancers each respond uniquely to the pressures of competition and the relentless criticism from their mothers, all impressively played by **Stacey Jenson** and, of course, Dance Teacher Pat, portrayed by **Jason Hackney**.

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The play is punctuated with unique character monologues where time stands still, and each teen breaks the fourth wall, turning to the audience to narrate their own life. In these monologues, the audience takes a deep dive into the inner thoughts of each character, exploring themes of self-esteem, regret, desire, and imagination. Not only are we allowed into the inner workings of these thirteen-year-old minds, but each monologue offers a glimpse into the future life of that teen; sometimes, the illumination is heart-breaking, and other times, it is liberating (especially coming from what is supposed to be a thirteen-year-old.)

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In the most powerful monologues of the night, Ashlee, portrayed brilliantly by **Dee-Dee Darby-Duffin**, embraces her beauty and intellect, rejecting the typical humble denials of her good qualities.

Here's the other thing  
I'm really frickin' smart.  
I am smarter than most people I meet  
I'm probably smarter than you  
And not just liberal arts bullshit  
I'm good at math!  
Ashlee (**Dee-Dee Darby-Duffin**)

It was empowering to witness Ashlee (**Darby-Duffin**) transform from teen to Queen in her monologue to declare, "That's what I've got inside this tiny f\*\*\*\*\* body of mine, and I don't have to deny it. I don't have to disown it, I don't have to be ashamed of it, I can shout it from the rooftops!" Finally liberated, Ashlee asks herself twice, "What am I going to do with all this power?" She answers, "I don't know."

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Other monologues like Luke's (portrayed by **Darrin Burnett**) showcase spot-on acting and exquisite writing as we are given a glimpse into Luke's tragic and lonely future. In Maeve's monologue (**Laura Elise Chapman**), we learn that Maeve can fly or float, but that one day Maeve will forget (in a nod to *Peter Pan*):

It sort of washes over me. Like sleep, says Maeve calmly of her out-of-body experiences, And I'm like: Uh-oh. I'm about to fly again! And one day I'll forget that I ever used to fly! Somehow, along the way, I forgot about it. It was the coolest thing I ever did. And I forgot it.  
Maeve (**Laura Elise Chapman**)

Writer **Sarah Holdren** of *Vulture Magazine* says of this moment, [Almost all of Barron's characters step in and out of themselves like this, shifting seamlessly from the perspective of girls waiting for their lives to start to women, wondering what else they might have lost along the way.](#) What these girls (and one boy) have in common is not that they are amazing dancers but the shared experience and trauma of adolescence. These teens are growing up together in a ruthless world losing and gaining parts of themselves along the way, and we the audience are along for the ride that is puberty.

As a show about dance, the choreography is central to the play's thematic core and is often physically demanding and emotionally charged. Dance serves as a powerful metaphor for the characters' inner lives, their aspirations, and the pressures they face. The dance sequences themselves are varied and thoughtful, choreographed by **Sammee Jackman**; each contributes to the flow of the narrative, balancing the mood of the show, bringing levity when we need it, and sometimes solemnity. Jackman succeeds at reflecting the competitive and often cutthroat nature of their world while reminding the audience that these are teenagers. These moments on stage are where the play truly comes alive, juxtaposing the beauty of dance with the harshness of their reality.

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*Dance Nation* is not without its challenges; Barron's script, while refreshingly candid, sometimes teeters on the edge of chaos, risking a loss of narrative coherence. The rapid shifts between humor and pathos can teeter on the side of jarring, leaving the audience in a constant state of emotional whiplash. While this mirrors the unpredictable nature of adolescence, it occasionally disrupts the flow of the story. However, the raw emotion from each monologue is a unique element and is so well-executed by Director **Ali Lente**, Assistant Director **Jack Cobabe**, and Stage Manager **Patrick Kibbie**.

The play's unapologetically explicit exploration of young girls' sexuality and the brutal honesty with which it portrays their thoughts and fears might be uncomfortable for some audiences. However, this unflinching portrayal is also one of the play's greatest strengths, daring to confront subjects that are often glossed over or sanitized in theatre. Barron's fearless writing forces the audience to confront the raw and often messy reality of growing up, challenging societal taboos, and sparking important conversations.

The direction by **Ali Lente** skillfully navigates the complex emotional landscape of the play, balancing the chaotic energy with moments of introspection and vulnerability. The minimalist set design effectively places the focus on the characters and their interactions, while the strategic use of lighting, designed by **Tay Rushton**, accentuates the emotional highs and lows of the narrative. Finally, the sound design by **Grace Heinz** is seamless, constantly transitioning between dance numbers and background music beyond. This is a show with a lot of music for a play, and each piece adds so much depth and emotion to every scene.

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In sum, *Dance Nation* is a powerful and provocative piece of theatre that demands attention. It is a visceral journey through the lives of young dancers, filled with moments of intense beauty and stark realism. Despite its occasional unevenness, the play succeeds in capturing the tumultuous experience of adolescence with a boldness and honesty that is both refreshing and unsettling. *Dance Nation* is a must-see for those willing to embrace its raw intensity and confront the uncomfortable truths it so unflinchingly presents.

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**Voodoo Theatre Company** presents

Dance Nation by Clare Barron

Directed by Ali Lente

Trolley Square, Alliance Theater ([@alliancetheaterslc](#))

Somewhere in America, an army of pre-teen competitive dancers plot to take over the world. And if their new routine is good enough, they'll claw their way to the top at Nationals in Tampa Bay. It is a play about ambition, growing up, and how to find our souls in the heat of it all.

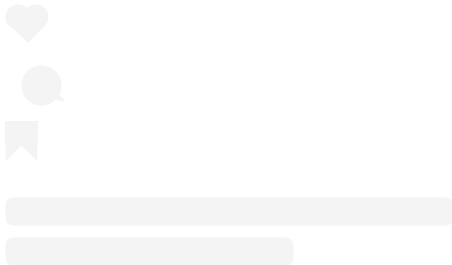
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4. Clare Barron
5. Dance Nation

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7. Dee-Dee Darby-Duffin
8. Grace Heinz
9. Jack Cobabe
10. Jason Hackney
11. Keola Kinghorn
12. Laura Elise Chapman
13. Patrick Kibbie
14. Review
15. Rhetorical Review
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23. Theatre Review

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