

PERFORMING

At The Unicorn, "Dance Nation" Captures the Chaos (and Heartbreak) of Youth

Liz Cook • December 10, 2021



As Amina, Jess Andrews stands alone. (Cynthia Levin)

play about a competitive dance troupe, can be vicious, sure. At times, they don vampire fangs and hiss at the audience. But they’re also vulnerable in all the ways children are. The Unicorn and UMKC Theatre’s co-production, directed by Heidi Van, is a potent reminder that teenagers have far more to fear from us.

The play follows young dancers at a studio in Liverpool, Ohio, where Dance Teacher Pat (Darrington Clark) rules with an iron ballet hand. The students preen or wilt in Pat’s gaze, each desperate for a solo in the troupe’s latest competition number inspired by “the spirit of Gandhi.” The two top contenders are Zuzu (Jaeda LaVonne Smith) and Amina (Jess Andrews), best friends and bitter rivals. Both actors’ performances tinge the relationship with desperation and longing: even as they jockey for position in the studio, their bodies keep bumping clumsily into one another, betraying their need for connection.

It would be easy to villainize Amina, the most talented dancer in the troupe and Pat’s clear favorite. But Andrews has a strong read on the way women are socialized to deny their ambitions and shrink from the spotlight to make others feel more at ease. Her Amina is gentle, sweet, self-effacing to a fault—and it doesn’t matter. “I feel like I hurt people just by existing,” she says.

The production has a deep bench of incredible performances that reminded me just how much we lost when the pandemic shut down live theater (and what we would lose if theaters close again). Clark lends complexity and grace to Pat, a ruthless teacher whose tactics border on abusive. Dee Jimenez gives a rough-edged Brando quality to Luke, a straight man who amplifies the humor of everyone around him. And

masturbation, circumcision, and the magical power of a sugar rush.

If there's a solo to award in this troupe, though, it should go to Jenise Cook as Ashlee, a casual dancer with dreams of becoming a surgeon. Although Ashlee is a smaller role, Cook makes an outsized impression with a raw, powerful monologue that perfectly captures the twinned insecurity and megalomania of a teenager who has just become aware of her power but not yet internalized the world's attempts to restrain it.

Van crystallizes these performances with a smart staging attuned to power imbalances and the revelatory quality of simple gestures. In one of the most affecting scenes, she transforms the set into a triptych that highlights the interior lives of the dancers. While Amina haltingly explores her sexuality at one end of the stage, Sofia rides a tidal wave of grief over her first period at the other; in between them, Connie (Fatima Wardak) plays with toy animals while wearing an enviable horse poncho (costume designer Kestrel Jurkiewicz-Miles deserves kudos for both the poncho and for thoughtfully dressing a range of body types).

Scenic designer Gabby Roney nudges the actors into more creative blocking with a deeply angled set. Geometric accents on the wall (trimmed in LEDs) give the dance studio a delirious, '80s mall energy, while enormous mirrored panels on wheels whisk in from the wings to create the show's other interiors (I suspect those mirrors are a lighting designer's nightmare, but Austin VanWinkle doesn't flinch—or blind the audience).

“Dance Nation” may have a familiar conflict at its core, but Barron's script is full of fresh and unexpected twists. It's also deeply weird: the dancers shout about their genitals, wear literal fangs, or monologue about what it

ways kids channel emotions when they don’t know what to do with them.

If the script stumbles, it does so in a series of flash forwards that serve as a sort of splintered epilogue for each dancer. Most of these glimpses into the characters’ adult lives feel extraneous; a few come off as cheesy. The contrast of an adult actor playing a child is enough to drive home the precarious precipice of teendom. We can sense, even at 13, the weight of the lives they’ll go on to live.

Early in the play, Zuzu’s mother (played by Brittany DeAnn Welch), tries to convince Pat to go easy on Zuzu.

“She’s only a child,” she says.

“Yes, well, children live in the world,” Pat replies.

“Dance Nation” isn’t a perfect show. It’s a show that lives in the world. It’s messy, weird, and chaotic—just like teenagers, just like life.

“Dance Nation” runs at the Unicorn Theatre (Levin Stage) through December 19. For more information, visit unicorntheatre.org

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