

American Girlhood on Stage: *Dance Nation* powerfully portrays what it means to be a girl



Competition, jealousy and uncertainty plague all pre-teen girls, but in few places are they more pronounced than on a competitive dance team. Playwright Clare Barron exploits the tensions teeming within both to craft a visceral and explosive exploration of adolescence in *Dance Nation*, which the Wilbury Theatre Group is presenting (directed by Angela Brazil) in rep with another Barron play, *You Got Older*, to create “a wholly beautiful and brutal portrait of American girlhood.”

If you took the likes of “Bring It On,” “Dance Moms” and *The Vagina Monologues* and put them in a blender, you would probably get something along the lines of *Dance Nation*. A weirdly cultish dance team of six pre-teen girls and one somewhat out-of-place pre-teen boy (Victor Neto as Luke) are fighting tooth and nail to claim victory in a national competition — and not just against other teams, but against each other and the impossibly high expectations placed on them by Dance Teacher Pat (never just Pat, always Dance Teacher Pat, played by the sassy and intense Joe Wilson Jr.) and overzealous parents. Along with the title, they stand to win a place in their Liverpool, Ohio, dance studio’s history, alongside the likes of alumna Sabina, whose name is spoken in a reverential whisper, for she is the one who “made it” and became a professional dancer on Broadway.

In the style of *25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, the young characters are played by adult actors, save for one in this case who is played by an actual 13-year-old: Sophie Ruth Appel, as the sweet, wolf-loving Maeve. But don’t be fooled: Though the characters are young, this one is unbelievably not suitable for young audiences.

With the possibility of catching the notice of talent scouts at nationals, each of the girls are vying for the spotlight through the solo part in the Gandhi-themed number (though none of them actually know who Gandhi was). Everyone is shocked when Zuzu (Alison Russo) lands the solo instead of Amina (Catia), the most talented dancer in the class. Though the two are friends, even wearing matching outfits to practice, things are tense between them, since Zuzu is jealous of Amina's talent. By her own admission in an affecting monologue, she is a good but not good enough dancer; her dancing can't make people cry or cure her mother's cancer. While the solo is her chance to prove herself to be Amina's equal, the pressure to succeed, especially from her mother, who is clearly living vicariously through her, takes its toll on her. In one scene, she takes a bite out of her own arm and returns to rehearsal with blood on her arms and mouth. Russo is both fragile and feral in the role, plagued by her own uncertainty. She spends a scene or two just lying face-down on the ground after a fall, unmoving, but she manages to convey so much even in that position. As her — and everyone else's — mother, Jennifer Mischley perfectly runs the gamut from supportive and proud to overbearing and pressuring.

Blood ends up being a common sight in this show, which stands to reason, given the changes the girls are going through. Poor Sofia (Tanya Anderson) gets her period and bleeds through her tights right before the team performs, but her shame subsides as the team declares their intention to brutally destroy the other teams, even though they have (gasp) boys, and she smears the blood on her face like war paint. Though this may make many audience members uncomfortable, it serves as a strong and, if nothing else, memorable statement against the stigma assigned to periods — and perhaps by extension, the stigma assigned just to being a girl. This is where Barron's work is at its boldest and most original.

Perhaps the most memorable monologue comes from Michelle L. Walker as Ashlee, who sings her own praises as a beautiful and brilliant young woman with a kind of confidence most pre-teen girls only dream of, but expresses frustration at her habit of denying compliments, a habit any girl knows all too well. In this moment, she is unapologetic and fierce in her profanity-laden self-affirmations.

There is a lot of discussion of genitalia, sex and masturbation as well — such is this age group, just beginning to discover such things — which, among other elements of the play, may be uncomfortable for some audiences. But through these elements, the play is a powerful declaration of what girlhood means. These girls have lofty dreams: They aspire to be surgeons and astrophysicists and enchantress queens. They hope to find love and friendship. But it is an uphill battle to get there, as they face impossible expectations, self-doubt and other oppressive forces. It is through banding together, believing in each other and themselves, and allowing themselves to unleash their inner power that they will achieve their dreams and make the world take notice.

Dance Nation runs in repertory with You Got Older at the Wilbury Theatre Group, 40 Sonoma Ct, PVD, through Dec. 22. For tickets and more info, visit thewilburygroup.org or call 401-400-7100.