

ENTERTAINMENT

Theatre Review: Available Light's Explosive Season Opener, Dance Nation



(l to r) Brian Gray, Dalia Natour, Wilma Hatton, Acacia Duncan, Mary Sink, Alanna Rex, and Elena Perantoni in *DANCE NATION* - Photo by Alex Abejuela, courtesy AVL T



Richard Sanford

September 13, 2019 3:42 pm

Available Light launches their 2019-2020 season to the moon with a wrenching, hilarious production of Claire Barron's *Dance Nation* directed and choreographed by Whitney Thomas Eads.

Dance Nation tears into the end of the season for a Liverpool, Ohio, dance team – seven girls and one boy – on the cusp of making it to Nationals in Tampa Bay, Florida – and in the last year several members can dance in the pre-teen division before the group splinters and some have to go to teens.

Under the frequently merciless direction of dance teacher Pat (Drew Eberly), Barron's play takes on these girls grappling with the first vestiges of a power and understanding they don't yet have the tools for; while also dealing with the crushing disappointment that not everyone can be as good at something, no matter who wants it more.

I've seen nothing that felt as much like adolescence – raging, wildfire emotions; the fracturing of friendships that used to feel like home; not everyone is special at the thing you most want to be seen for – as *Dance Nation*. Available Light takes pains to state this is not for children and the language

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turns surreal, extends to the childlike glee of playing with words no one wants you to use and finding the power in bringing them into the light.



(l to r) Acacia Duncan, Dalia Natour, Mary Sink, and Elena Perantoni in DANCE NATION - Photo by Alex Abejuela, courtesy AVL

The acting stuns with an intensity, honesty, and brutality throughout. Wilma Hatton's heartbreaking Zuzu struggles with the pressure and anxiety of wanting to be *great* and not quite getting there. Her soliloquy about trying to dance for her mother's cancer but "no one cries when they watch me dance," shoves a dagger through the heart of making art – the difficulty of making something great, making something true, and the yawning gap between desire and reality.

Zuzu's friendship with Amina (Alanna Rex), the clear and anointed star of the troupe, is the enormous, acid-filled heart of the play. If there's anything more deeply sad than watching Rex's character try not to make Zuzu feel bad about the disparity in their opportunities and making it worse and worse, it may be the killing blow of Hatton saying, "I still love you, I just can't look at or talk to you." It's the most moving few minutes I've seen on a stage this year; tears sprang back to my eyes as I wrote that sentence. Rex dazzles with her nuanced look at the loneliness and hunger it takes to be great, even in Amina's nascent stage.

Elena Perantoni's Ashlee brings us a virtuosic take on the righteous, charismatic demagogue of the dance team. Her monologue about claiming space for herself, trying to find the distance between honesty and cruelty, and the absorbing and repurposing of names pushed on her, left me breathless; her ecstatically sadistic, raging pep talk to the team left me breathless with laughter.

Acacia Duncan's Maeve, Brian Gray's Luke, and Dalia Natour's Connie serve as excellent foils for the towering talents and personalities Rex and Perantoni's characters serve up. There's delicate parrying and counterpunching from people who don't expect to "make it" and have their sights on something other than dance, but are fleshed out as people, never just another side of the coin. Mary Sink's ribald, worldly Sofia draws out some of the funniest sequences in this play full of uncomfortable and true laughs.



(l to r) Alanna Rex, Mary Sink, Dalia Natour, Brian Gray, and Acacia Duncan in DANCE NATION - Photo by Alex Abejuela, courtesyAVLT

Dance Nation side-steps the Charlie Brown problem by making adult characters strong enough to loom over the team without ever ceding the primary focus or using them as explaining machines. Eberly's hilariously amoral and hyper-focused hurricane dance teacher Pat leaves wreckage in his wake.

Dance teacher Pat also makes the people he chooses fly higher than they may ever, and all the girls and the boy know it. Susie McGarry does excellent work in a handful of scenes as all the girls' Moms we get to see. Their face-off about Zuzu's potential distills the argument about inborn talent versus their creation through a narrative into a snapshot of sparks flying.

Eads background as a dancer means she knows those backstage scenes – helped by Brad Steinmetz's anarchic, lived-in set, Griffin Dewitt's evocative lighting, and Jordan Fehr's razor-sharp sound design. Eads also understands the space between the characters and the electricity of anticipation and the comedown after the smoke clears.

Her breathtaking choreography encompasses the mannered, showy numbers the team would actually perform, the corny sailor-suit number to Bobby Darin's "Beyond the Sea" that opens the show, and rawer movement that reflects their psychological reality (a fiery full-group hip-hop number). Dance's ability to make complex abstraction and metaphor concrete and visceral doesn't have a better champion working in Columbus theatre.

At 105 minutes with no intermission, *Dance Nation* flags in its last third, the characters splitting into separate groups captures the melancholy of that first time you know something – a friend group, a situation – is ending but there's an acute loss of momentum compared to the propulsiveness of everything else. But that's a minor quibble with one of the best plays I've seen all year.

Dance Nation runs through September 28 with performances at 8:00 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 2:00 p.m. Sunday, September 22, and 8:00 p.m. Thursday, September 26. For tickets and more info, visit avltheatre.com.



