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THEATER REVIEWS

# Song and dance



The dance troupe from Liverpool, Ohio, channeling the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi, in "Dance Nation."

"Dance Nation" swings at Black Box, while "Gypsy" at Vintage trips up



The carnality of prepubescence gets its untamed moment in the looney and touching "Dance Nation," by Clare Barron. Photos by Michael Ensminger, provided by square product theatre

**By Lisa Kennedy**  
Special to *The Denver Post*

Same old songs. Not the same old dance.

In a scene involving fangs of the lupine variety, the tween competitors in "Dance Nation" prove to be surprisingly wild. But like many girls of this age, they also can be touchingly mild. Their inner lives — their yearnings and confusions — are made visible in Square Product's vivid production of Clare Barron's one-act play, a finalist for the 2019 Pulitzer Prize in drama.

The show runs through July 30 at the Atlas Black Box Theater on the University of Colorado campus in Boulder.

Dance teacher Pat (Lorenzo González) is trying to get his young dancers into shape for nationals. To get their competitive juices flowing, he reminds them of the alumni who leveraged their time on the squad into joining Broadway shows. Aptly, this production — directed

by Gleason Bauer — begins with the girls lined up, projecting the hopes of being singled out a la "A Chorus Line."

Before they can head to that hallowed event in Tampa, Fla., they must win a couple of other competitions and, more vitally, nail the choreography of his latest concoction, one he's certain will impress judges: a dance featuring Mahatma Gandhi.

The team — Amina, Zuzu, Connie, Ashlee, Sofia, Maeve and Luke

— are pretty sure who will get the lead role. Amina (Isabella Cho Jones) is the best dancer among them. But maybe the lead should go to Zuzu (Savanna Arellano), a dedicated dancer and Amina's bestie. Or what about Connie (Huda Aljidaa), who flies under the radar, but doesn't she have *something*?

"Dance Nation" stakes out a pubescent terrain that will soon enough give way to the more freighted Astroturf of Sarah De-

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## THEATER

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Lappe's "The Wolves" or the wilderness of Showtime's "Yellowjackets." (Each deals with a high school soccer team.) For the briefest moment these girls — and one boy — from Liverpool, Ohio, do their darndest in a studio where camaraderie can be true but also mercurial; tender affection can give way to accidental treachery; self-esteem comes as a vulnerable bud; and blood blooms to the horror of the newly menstruating.

That the team is played by actors of a variety of ages underlines the indelible feelings of those betwixt-and-between years. Interestingly, the actors closest in age to their characters deliver slightly rigid performances of youth. Does this have to do with being young professionally, or being scarily nearer to those dramatically affecting years? That one wonders this at all is a sign that the casting and conceit are cleverly provocative.

Two of the zanier performance come from seasoned pros. Emily K. Harrison's Ashlee is a dervish of hormone-juiced energy: sometimes certain, just as often wrongheaded about how sex and desire actually work. Her increasingly unhinged monologue is triumphant and harrowing. Edith Weiss' Maeve earns poignancy points late in the play when she tells Zuzu that she yearns to be an astrophysicist or something "cosmic," not a dancer. Zuzu can't quite fathom that.

Much of "Dance Nation" takes place in the rehearsal studio, with exceptions. A heart-to-heart between Luke (Rodrigo Gallardo-Antúnez) and Zuzu takes place on swings. And a couple of scenes unfold in achy ways between a girl and her mom, or between Luke and his mom. Anneliese Euler does a deft job inhabiting the maternal roles. As Zuzu's mom, she tries to say the right things about practice and possibility, even as she says the contradictory thing about performance.

Competition is compli-



Zuzu (Savanna Arellano), right, shares a romantic fantasy with hopeful Luke (Rodrigo Gallardo-Antúnez) in "Dance Nation" at the Atlas Black Box Theatre in Boulder. *Michael Ensminger, provided by square product theatre*

cated. Ambition can be uncomfortable. But "Dance Nation" suggests there's nothing like the thrum of hormones doing their song-and-dance number on young girls (and a boy) to heighten their confounding effects on individuals and dance squads alike.

### The stage mom of all stage moms

If the mothers in "Dance Nation" ever saw "Gypsy," they'd work even harder not to be stage moms. After all, Mama Rose from the 1959 musical — book by Arthur Laurents, music by Jule Styne, and lyrics by some whippersnapper named Stephen Sondheim — is the apex predator of the species.

Ethel Merman played her on Broadway; Rosalind Russell embodied her on the silver screen. Other portrayals include Angela Lansbury, Tyne Daly, Bernadette Peters and Patti Lupone. It takes a big personality to inhabit the girth of Mama Rose, and Vintage Theatre got that part right, casting Mary Louise Lee as one of the great — and intentionally grating — stage moms of all time for its current production of the musical directed by Vin-



A mother-child reunion in "Gypsy" — Camryn Nialah Torres as Louise and Mary Louise Lee as Mama Rose at the Vintage Theatre. *RDG Photography, provided by Vintage Theatre*

tage artistic director Bernie Cardell (running through July 31).

The show took its inspiration from striptease artist Gypsy Rose Lee's 1957 autobiography, "Gypsy: A Memoir." That Mama Rose, not Gypsy, is a terrific, enduring and telling irony.

Lee has stage presence to spare and a beautiful — and muscular when required — singing voice. But something has gone

awry in this staging. A show celebrated for its emotional complexity has been revived as a jukebox musical. Not actually, of course, but there is something breakneck in the pacing here. The show seems in a hurry to get to the next number and then the next. Sure, "May We Entertain You?," "Together, Wherever We Go," "Rose's Turn" and "Everything's Coming Up Roses" are legendary, but they

became so for a reason. They spoke for and to the deeper tensions between the mother and daughter.

Camryn Nialah Torres is Louise, the shy daughter who grows into the famed practitioner of elegant disrobing. Michaela Murray portrays younger sister (by a year) June, the one Mama was pushing hard on the vaudeville circuit. When June (who became the actress June Havoc in real life) makes

### If you go

"Dance Nation," written by Clare Barron and directed by Gleason Bauer. Featuring Lorenzo González, Isabella Cho Jones, Savanna Arellano, Rodrigo Gallardo-Antúnez, Anneliese Euler, Emily K. Harrison and Huda Aljidaa. At the Atlas Black Box Theatre on the University of Colorado-Boulder campus, 1125 18th St., through July 30.

For tickets and info: [squareproducttheatre.org](http://squareproducttheatre.org)

"Gypsy," book by Arthur Laurents; music by Jule Styne; and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. Directed by Bernie Cardell. Featuring Mary Louise Lee, Camryn Nialah Torres, Michael O'Shea and Michaela Murray. At Vintage Theatre, 1468 Dayton St. in Aurora, through July 31. For tickets and info: [vintagetheatre.org](http://vintagetheatre.org) or 303-856-7830.

her escape, all Mama's attention turns to Louise. Michael O'Shea gives an affable turn as Herbie, the salesman turned manager and indulgent suitor of Mama.

It makes dramatic sense that Louise — so uncomfortable in her skin, so overshadowed by Mama — wouldn't entirely register on stage early on, but Torres doesn't get to subtly tease that wallpaper vibe. And while her Act II metamorphosis has its charms, the transformation isn't nearly as powerful as it should be.

While it might be tempting to blame this on Mama, the cause for the letdown is more mundane. This production chose to satisfy hankerings for familiar tunes and some easy laughs (kudos to Jenny Mather as stripper Tessie Tura), but it missed the opportunity to make the triumph and tribulations, the love and resentments of the women here matter.

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## NETFLIX

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episode first season was filmed last year in Denver by



## FESTIVAL

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to 150,000 attendees over two days, although this year is anv-