

"Dance is incredibly life-affirming"

Competition, teamwork and female adolescence: Clare Barron talks to **Marianka Swain** about her play *Dance Nation*, soon to arrive at the Almeida Theatre

"I was a very bad ballet dancer," recalls playwright Clare Barron. "I couldn't even touch my toes! I grew up in a small town in Washington state, where there was one studio with a terrifying, ancient teacher, and she did *The Nutcracker* every year. But all my important female friendships came out of dance - through the shared challenge of class and performing, and also just changing in the dressing room. Dancing together is a really intimate way to know someone."

From that experience - and also from Barron's obsession with TV show *Dance Moms*, "where these young dancers, in a tough environment, are such pure souls" - *Dance Nation* was born. The play follows a pre-teen competitive troupe aiming for nationals, and in particular two girls: one surpassing her friend in landing the star role.

"It took a long time to develop, because there's so much dance in it, plus these wild theatrical gestures," explains Barron.

"I wrote it in 2015, and then added little parts this year, so it's a collage of old and new. Almost

like visiting a past version of myself."

That's apt, as the work has a "ghost" quality, with the actors deliberately cast older than their characters.

"We see who they grow up to be, and who these adult women were. Thirteen is such a defining age - things happen then that you carry for the rest of your life. Like the power of parents and teachers to 'name' you: I remember being called 'messy', and I became this messy person."

The focus on pre-teen girls also means the story isn't about "boys and dating, but girls discovering their sexuality - as autonomous beings.

"Some audience members get uncomfortable that the play deals with the female body, but if you have that response, it's worth reflecting on."

Barron is interested in "how sexual power interacts with agency, why women apologise for taking up space, and why, when we demand the authority men get for free, we're labelled 'difficult'."

The gender politics conversation has shifted dramatically since 2015; "pussy",



Clare Barron's *Dance Nation* is an "exploration of youth, ambition and self-discovery"

IMAGE: MARC BRENNER

which is in the play, now evokes Donald Trump and protest Pussyhats. That's a bit terrifying as a writer - you just hope new meanings will grow on top of old ones."

As for the dancing - which features "several numbers, plus interludes" - Barron wanted it to be "authentic to these actors' bodies, and for them to have a joyful experience as a team, like their characters.

"They've been doing barre every morning and learning routines together. There's always some fear, but everyone's game. I'm so impressed - dance is

incredibly life-affirming, and they capture that."

Dance Nation was staged in New York this summer, but working on it with a new team, says Barron, feels like "doing two world premieres!"

"It's exciting - we're discovering totally different solutions."

She's thrilled to be at the Almeida, which has produced work by her mentor Anne Washburn, and though "it can be lonely making a play far away from your support system, I've found a wonderful surrogate family here."

Barron hasn't made many alterations for British audiences - other than the play's setting.

"I had a town called Liverpool, Ohio, and everyone said 'You have to change it!' But otherwise I'm

curious to see how it's perceived in a different culture."

Barron's favourite response so far came from a 13-year-old girl. "She said 'It was like they were saying everything I think, but don't know how to say yet'. That's pretty special."

Does it make Barron nostalgic for her dancing youth? "I miss the group camaraderie, and that moment when you step on stage and it's magic - when the world was a place where magic could happen.

"The line that always hits me is 'I want my life to start!' We never stop longing for the next adventure."

***Dance Nation* at the Almeida Theatre is a UK premiere. It runs from Monday August 27 until Saturday October 6.**



Action from the rehearsals of *Dance Nation*, which will premiere at Islington's Almeida Theatre

IMAGE: MARC BRENNER



Dance Nation playwright Clare Barron

IMAGE: RJ TOLAN