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## THEATER REVIEW: Playwrights' 'Back the Night' doesn't let go of you

In her gripping new play "Back the Night," local playwright Melinda Lopez courageously tackles issues involving physical assaults on women and how a community responds and protests the violence.

The play is driven by the action, packed with taut, crisp lines, and flows seamlessly between locations, while focusing on three college seniors who are familiar and easy to empathize with. As you watch the play, you'll feel as if you could be observing life on any college campus, although this production has touches that definitely place it in New England. Lopez encourages theaters to change a few college and politicians' names to make each production feel local and timely.

We are thrust immediately into the action by an opening scene in which Sean brings his friend Cassie, with a bloodied head, to the room of their close friend Em, who's a pre-med student, hoping she could staunch the blood and patch up the wound. Em quickly realizes she's in over her head and insists they take Cassie to the campus infirmary. Immediately you're caught up in the play, wondering where and how this happened and who did it.

"Back the Night" is being performed by Boston Playwrights' Theatre with director Daniela Varon giving the show a clean feel while keeping it moving at a good pace and the actors relating honestly to each other. Lopez has had her plays performed around the country and is a past Huntington Playwriting Fellow and the inaugural playwright-in-residence at the Huntington Theatre Company. She writes from the experience of an actor who has performed in many shows at numerous theaters.

Cassie had been returning from the observatory where a star-watching session was scheduled, and she reports that she was accosted behind the Theta fraternity by a guy who yelled, "Hey slut." "And I turned," she said. "Like it was my name." The play weaves in issues that frequently surround male attacks on women. A doctor suspects Cassie isn't telling the full story when she says that she simply fell, and yet her hands don't have any of the dirt or scrapes of trying to break a fall. A university security officer calls her a girl rather than a woman. "Old habits. Old dogs," he says, apologizing to her.

Cassie had been a familiar figure at the security office, copying police blotter reports of assaults on women to put into her blog. And she has created a petition calling for the end of the fraternities on campus because of their violence towards women. This makes her an obvious target for frat retribution.

Amanda Collins plays Cassie, giving her strong determination, a sense of knowing who she is and what she's about, and a courage that tells us she's not about to be bullied. She's an English major, without an obvious career path. Lopez inserts a funny line - yes, there is humor in this play - when the doctor asks her to say a few words that begin with "m" to prove she isn't concussed. Cassie rips through a list of sophisticated words, typical of what might come only to an English major's mind.

Evan Horwitz plays Sean, a gay student with a gentle, friendly touch, making him very likeable. In some ways, he's the glue between the three students and is heading for Wall Street after graduation. In another funny moment, he claims his father sent him back to school on a bus at one point. Em corrects him, saying it was a limo. Sean frequently calls for queer housing, as a peripheral issue to the main thrust of the play.

Em is the most complex of the three characters, and Melissa Jesser does an excellent job of making Em feel warm and appealing as well as uncertain, troubled and probing. She had her own experience with fraternities, different from Cassie's and with a different response, that's eventually revealed in the play. She has a close boyfriend, Brandon, who's in one of the school's fraternities. Actor Michael Underhill gives him a very masculine, direct and sexy manner.

Surprises are deftly woven into the play bit-by-bit, making it richer, more complex, and more daring than you might have guessed it would be.

Stephanie Clayman gives a lovely variety to the doctor, a dean of the university, and a U.S. senator who's Em's mother, so it feels as if more than one actor is playing the roles.

John Kooi also gives refreshing variety to the university police officer, a reporter and the president of the university. Between these multiple characters, we get quite a sense of the variety of responses to violence against women.

Scenic designer Rob Eastman-Mullins has created a terrific set that feels like a cutout from an elegant children's book. It includes a cozy bedroom as well as lit windows at night, a silhouette of a chapel, the name of a fraternity above an arch, fall leaves blowing through the sky and dark hills in the background.

This play grabs your attention from the start while also causing you to think more and more deeply as it goes along.

**"Back the Night"**

**WHEN:** Through Feb. 28

**WHERE:** Boston Playwrights' Theatre, 949 Commonwealth Ave., Boston

**TICKETS:** \$30

**INFO:** 866-811-4111; [www.bostonplaywrights.org](http://www.bostonplaywrights.org)



Melissa Jesser, Amanda Collins and Evan Horwitz in "Back the Night," at Boston Playwrights' Theatre. Courtesy Photo/Kalman Zabarsky

