



BWW Review: Boston Playwrights' Theatre Concludes Season of New Plays With DEAD HOUSE

[by Nancy Grossman Apr. 22, 2019](#)



Dead House

Written by Beirut Balutis, Directed by Adam Kassim; Scenic Design, Steven Doucette; Lighting Design, Hannah Solomon; Sound Design, J Jumbelic; Costume Design, [Ruth King](#); Fight Choreographer, Jessica Scout Malone; Dramaturg, Daniel Blanda; Stage Manager, Brittney Page

CAST: [Christine Hamel](#), Thomas Mitsock, Christopher Reilly, Trey Shields,

Amanda Figueroa, Liana Giangiulio, Isabella Lampson

Performances through April 28 at Boston Playwrights' Theatre, 949 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA; A BU New Play Initiative, produced by Boston Playwrights' Theatre and Boston University College of Fine Arts School of Theatre; Box Office 866-811-4111 or <https://web.ovationtix.com/trs/cal/168>

The Boston theater community is enriched by the presence of Boston Playwrights' Theatre, founded in 1981 at Boston University by Nobel Laureate [Derek Walcott](#). The BU New Play Initiative is an element of the Boston University College of Fine Arts which fosters a commitment to the School of Theatre's development of new work. Together, BPT and NPI are producing the final entry in the 2018-2019 season of new plays, *Dead House* by Beirut Balutis, a member of the BU M.F.A. Playwriting Program, class of 2019. M.F.A. directing candidate Adam Kassim (*The Honey Trap*, 2017) returns to BPT to direct this new drama.

In the service of its mission to produce new plays by its M.F.A. alumni, students of the School of Theatre also benefit from being cast in these shows and getting the opportunity to participate in new work, an education in itself. The cast of *Dead House* features one faculty member and six current undergraduates who tell the story of a small town Pennsylvania community reeling with shock and grief after a car accident claims the life of Whitney, a popular high school football player. [Christine Hamel](#) (Leah) plays the victim's mother whose sorrow and loneliness drive her to seek comfort by taking in a mysterious new boy at the school. Merle (Thomas Mitsock) walks a fine line between trying to fit in and becoming the balm for everyone's suffering.

Whitney's crew and the survivors of the accident that killed him include two of his fellow gridiron warriors, Levi (Christopher Reilly) and Max (Trey Shields), and three cheerleaders: his girlfriend, Prairie (Amanda Figueroa), June (Liana Giangiulio), and Barbie (Isabella Lampson). As best friend of the deceased, Levi figures he is the one to be the new top dog, but Prairie is both the glue that holds the group together and the self-proclaimed leader (aka bossy mean girl). Even as they struggle to move on from the tragedy, they are all consumed with the same goals - to have a winning football team and to find a way to escape from Bone Flat, PA. Merle's arrival provides a distraction that is a double-edged sword. They can't seem to figure him out, yet they allow him to insinuate himself into their clique (which they refer to as a house).

As much as a season of new plays offers a mixed bag of degrees of readiness for prime time, so does the utilization of actors in training. This is not Kassim's first rodeo and he melds the ensemble into a cohesive unit, with Hamel anchoring as the adult in the room. Her character exhibits some unhinged behavior, but she gives a steadying performance. Mitsock conveys an air of mystery veiled by a "who, me?" innocence, and Figueroa (with an earlier BPT new play under her belt) displays confidence in the role of the cocky head cheerleader. The portrayals of the other friends would benefit from greater nuance, but the writing tends to present them as stereotypes.

At a talkback following the performance I attended, some of the questions echoed my own thoughts about the lack of clarity in the character development and the narrative. In an interview with Balutis in the program, and in some of his remarks at the Q&A, the playwright detailed his inspiration for the play and the themes he hoped to convey. There are a number of elements that he mentioned that, if included, could raise the dramatic level of *Dead House*, but some of what's in there now needs to be cut or polished to sharpen the focus and answer the questions for the next iteration.

Photo credit: Kalman Zabarsky (Christopher Reilly, Amanda Figueroa, Liana Giangiulio, Trey Shields, Isabella Lampson, Thomas Mitsock)