

# TheaterJones

Review: *The Wolves* | Dallas Theater Center | Dee and Charles Wyly Theatre

## Leaders of the Pack

At Dallas Theater Center, Sarah DeLappe's *The Wolves* is a fierce look at life through teenage girls' eyes.

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Photo: Karen Almond/Dallas Theater Center  
Lauren Steele and Zoë Kerr in *The Wolves* at Dallas Theater Center

**Dallas** — Are we still surprised that a pack of girls can shake the ground like this? The word *fierce* is worn to shreds from being wrapped around trendy clothes, makeup and other ephemera—but for the intense 90 minutes of *The Wolves*, there's no better descriptor for the nine teenage girls we follow through a life-changing season of their multi-school indoor soccer team.

Fierce.

The **Dallas Theater Center** scores big at mid-season with this game-changing production of Sarah DeLappe's Pulitzer Prize-finalist play. Done in collaboration with the **Theatre Division of the Meadows School of the Arts at Southern**

**Methodist University**, DTC's all-female cast includes a half-dozen student actors from the university's theater programs (plus a recent graduate or two), and is a showcase for, as DTC artistic director Kevin Moriarty told the audience on press night, "how lucky we are" to have this pipeline of talent heading our way.

*The Wolves* isn't a dainty piece. It doesn't take us by the hand—it pulls us along by the guts, laughing and struggling all the way. Our emotions clench and roil as we work to understand characters, decipher overlapping conversations and sort through competing, shifting relationships. And then suddenly we are all in, flinging ourselves completely into this very specific world. We flinch, recognize, laugh, and agonize as the girls battle toward the edge—is it a launch point or a cliff drop?—of becoming women. The twenty-something playwright doesn't shy away from language to make mothers turn pale, but there's no doubt of its truth.

Player 46 (team members are identified by jersey numbers, not names) is a mysterious "new girl" with mad soccer skills. Player 2 knits scarves to help "caged" Mexican children at the border. Player 00 loses her lunch before every game. Player 25, the team captain, has had it with Player 7's potty mouth—and Player 14 clings too hard to her role as 7's sidekick. These girls, like a true wolf pack, are bonded for life to their team, though inevitably they will grow away from it. In a telling, touching side story, we learn that the Wolves began as a team of six-year-old "Blossoms" ...with Moms on the sidelines bringing bags of fresh orange slices for energy and hydration.

The ensemble work is funny, jolting, and engaging, and it doesn't take more than 15 minutes to become crystal clear about who's who. The full cast roster (including actor and SMU acting teacher Alison Pistorious as the one adult character) includes Ana Hagedorn, Zoë Kerr, Sydney Lo, Kylie Tru Ritter, Amber Rossi, Molly Searcy, Lauren Steele, Kim Taff, and Elena Urdaneta—and you will remember every one of their characters as you ponder the play tomorrow...and the next day.

Director Wendy Dann maintains a fine balance, helping us follow the team as a living organism without losing track of individual characters and their stories. Prepping for games on the green indoor "grass" (Steve TenEyck's set design of soccer-field turf and chalk lines in the Wyly Theatre's studio space—bathed in Adam Honoré's clear lights—reminds us these girls are green and growing too), the nine move smoothly through stretches, shifting positions with dance-like synchronicity—and talking a mile a minute about everything from Cambodia's mass killings to zits and periods. Mostly from privileged families, they seem educated and naïve in equal measures. One girl defends her cluelessness with "We don't do genocide until senior year." But there isn't much of childhood left in these girls. Team captain No. 25 lets the new player know the score: "It never gets easier. You get better."

The nine actors, almost none of them experienced soccer players, put on a convincing show of ball skills and maneuvering—and a fascinating demonstration of the "walk-and-chew-gum" phenomenon as they juggle non-stop movement and endless talk with what looks like ease...but must be ridiculously demanding. One can only imagine the physical work that went into this show: the play called on the input

and talents of dance and fight captain Kim Taff, plus a team from the Baylor Scott & White Institute for Rehabilitation: athletic trainer/coach Andrea Strebler Santos, director of athletic training Kendall Goldberg, area sports medicine coordinator Lydia Kim, and physical therapist and Kinstretch instructor Nick Dobson. Surrounded by the whistles and shouts of the athletic field (sound design by Sarah Pickett), with wild hair flying and soccer uniforms authentically rumpled and stained (kudos to wig maker Nicole Alvarez and costume designer Sarah Harris), these ladies aren't your grandma's storybook "sugar and spice" girls—but they're not outside the literary canon, either. How easy is it to envision Alcott's Jo March or Shaw's Eliza shedding petticoats and leaping into the team huddle, feeling right at home? The more girls you've had in your life, the better you see them deep down, setting aside the curls and cuteness: strong, smart, unwavering, purposeful, caring...and oh so ready to run with wolves.

The Wolves don't worry about what "everyone" thinks of them. They are their own judges. They watch each other, compete with each other—and spend little energy and attention on the outside world of adults (mostly mockable) and of course, boys-- "hot" in a theoretical sense, but even in tremendous drama remaining minor (and unseen) characters.

The one adult character plays a pivotal, circle-closing role—but the girls are at the controls, making their choices, mourning their losses, holding one another tightly in a chanting huddle that roars the roof off as they announce their presence. It's a howl of determination, triumph, and power:

"We *are*...the Wolves, we *are* the Wolves!" **TJ**