

Trevor Abes: Writer

Review: Swim Team (Nowadays Theatre with Alma Matters Productions)

by trevorpantera3112



Swim Team (<https://tickets.theatrecentre.org/TheatreManager/1/login?event=286&tmsource=TCWebSite>) introduces us to an Iranian all-women swim team as they train in a town with no pool. The play—produced by Nowadays Theatre in collaboration with

Alma Matters Productions—is an act of worship to the imagination and the barriers it can remove. It's also a stirring metaphor about gender inequality for presenting a world where women's rights can fall into the fantastical territory of make-believe.

The cast are on a whole other level of play here. Think about the imaginative demands placed on their characters. They swim by acting out the motions on a dusty patch of land, using towels and wringing out wet hair to keep up the suspension of disbelief. It's enough to make you feel young again, when limitations on what might exist weren't really an obstacle.

But at the same time, having to occupy a space of make-believe just to participate in a sport is a powerful metaphor, one that seeks justice for oppressed women by imbuing their struggle with absurdity. As in, it's absurd for the team to have to disavow their humanity and fictionalize their own existence to jump into some water. As in, it's absurd that women need to strive to make something from nothing in a country where they're already second-class citizens. The team doesn't mention state-enforced ideology much at all, which made it harder for me to ignore its shadow in the background.

Roya (Banafsheh Taherian), the swim coach, carries the memory of students drowning on her watch with palpable anxiety. It makes for good fuel to drive her to whip her current team into shape but feels too high-octane for the task. The excess energy she could be using to forgive herself for losing the students is piled onto her new ones, generating an imbalance where something has to give, and I was on board to find out what did.

Roya and her three-person team occupy a hierarchy of strength, such that she seems tougher than Nary (Tina Bararian), who seems tougher than Katy (Mahsa Ershadifar), who seems tougher than Lili (Aylin Oyan Salahshoor). This is interesting for a number of reasons. For one, it lends a sense of order to the story, one that speaks to the regimented country they live in, the geometry of the imaginary pool they swim in, and just makes things that much tighter symbolically. It's also a strategy that offers many chances for disruption, such that characters often change rankings. Sharing how would just spoil the story.

The details surrounding the team's imaginary swims had me laughing the hardest. Stuff like drying off a diving board, taking deep breaths after each stroke, or making sound effects with a tub of water to mimic a toe in the pool. It's such a roundabout way to participate in the sport, it's as if I was watching a living Rube Goldberg Machine. I was also laughing because I couldn't recall the last time I tried anything without filtering it through some sense of what could and could not be.

Playwright Jaber Ramezani plants little nuggets throughout to further comment on fantasy's relationship with reality, and on his characters' ability to imagine the lives they want into existence. For one, I became familiar with characters' motivations as they interacted during practices, but they actually share very little about their personal histories. This combo adds up to intimacy that is somehow both authentic and fabricated. I was left thinking that we are the stories we tell ourselves, as well as solely responsible for how good we get at believing in them.

There is also Lili's unacknowledged arm pain, which might seem disjointed but fits into the same line of thinking. Her pain is not worthy of belief as far as her coach and teammates are concerned; therefore it's as if it doesn't exist. Lili goes along with this erasure, replacing her pain with the truth that best serves her, that there is water in the pool. This malleability of self has a revolutionary kick to it. Lili and her team assert their autonomy and go about their business by playing God, picking and choosing the sensations and situations that deserve a life of their own.

What ties it all together for me is how even the difficulties of friendship contribute to the team's air of refuge. In spite of how annoyed Lili gets by Nary's teasing, she misses her when she's not around. And even though Lili calls her names, Nary returns to her side. Regardless of the dispute, they stick together, tight as confidants, extending each other the benefit of not having to self-censor to explore who they are. By the end, this bond borders on the sacred.

Swim Team (<https://tickets.theatrecentre.org/TheatreManager/1/login?event=286&tmsource=TCWebSite>) is a bountiful offering of child-like wonder that speaks to the realities of Iranian women without overt politicization. I was combing through the layers of its deceptively simple story long after the curtain fell.

- Swim Team (<https://tickets.theatrecentre.org/TheatreManager/1/login?event=286&tmsource=TCWebSite>) runs at The Theatre Centre (1115 Queen St. West) from November 8-17.
- Tickets are available online (<https://tickets.theatrecentre.org/TheatreManager/1/login?event=286&tmsource=TCWebSite>), in person, or through the box office at 416-538-0988.

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