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'Dead' is alive

BY BAY GUARDIAN STAFF - OCTOBER 13, 2009

DANCE REVIEW Wonderboy, Basil Twist's adorably insecure puppet in Joe Goode's 2008 work of the same name, has grown up. His name is Monroe (Daniel Duque-Estrada), and he lives in a community looking eerily like that in one of Armistead Maupin's light-hearted *Tales of the City*. It even includes a wise woman named Anna (Lura Dola) who likes to grow plants. But Goode digs deeper.

Monroe is the hero of Goode and Holcombe Waller's new musical *Dead Boys*. He is still scared, but now to the point where he has shut down his emotions. It's not a good way to be, particularly if you are a would-be writer whose sense of pain, anger, and helplessness paralyzes your work as well as your life. One of *Dead's* funniest monologues is Monroe's raging using performance theory vocabulary, the *lingua franca* in today's academy.

Created with and performed by students from UC Berkeley's departments of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies and Music, the evening-length *Boys* is a "multidisciplinary mashup of dance, music, and theater," as Goode calls it. At 90 minutes, it takes Monroe a long time to take the risk of perhaps being hurt one more time. Nor is his motivation for the decision — the channeling of one more gay man having died unnecessarily? — all that clear.

Dead is Goode and Waller's second collaboration, and one can only hope they continue to work together. The wistfulness and wit of their sensibilities are in synch. Waller writes good melodies, but his use of the six musicians is first rate. Often the orchestra makes its own comment on the action.

Dead's first act is slow in setting up the characters' gender-fluid identities. It becomes a background-foreground issue and tends to hold back the work's dramatic thrust. That could be better balanced. Goode, however, peoples the piece with intriguing individuals: the motor-mouth, bondage-embracing jock (Ben Abbott); the flower child/seer Roberta (Caitlin Marshall); and Monroe's counterpart, the commitment-leery Carly (Rachel Ferensowicz). Carly's hilarious go-away-closer duet with transsexual DJ (Megan Lowe) is a jewel of sharp choreography, split-second timing, and valiantly performed vocals. In general, the performances are good; some approach professional-level.

The choreography, mostly for the chorus, is small-scale but appropriate, since it speaks for the unseen — the dead boys. The set (Erik Flatmo), costumes (Wendy Sparks), and lighting (David K.H. Elliot) are excellent. With some work, this show could travel.

DEAD BOYS

Fri/16-Sat/17, 8 p.m.; Sun/18, 2 p.m., \$15

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