ARTS

"Honey, I'm on fire, I feel it everywhere / Nothing scares me anymore"
SUMMERTIME SADNESS LANA DEL REY

New Yale Cabaret season aims to break out of Drama School bubble

BY ASPYN KASKALLA
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

The Yale Cabaret's 59th season opened this month under a new leadership team pursuing a specific goal: to make the David Geffen School of Drama's student-run theater feel less like an insider's space and more like a hub for Yale and New Haven.

According to the Cabaret's mission statement, which is updated annually, this season is built around "coalescence, connection, creation," with core values emphasizing transparency, collaboration and art that reaches "far and wide" across the drama school, Yale and New Haven. The Cabaret traditionally provides a space for students to explore production and performance.

"We really want to be a hub of connection and creativity across the different spheres of DGSD, Yale, New Haven," Raekwon Fuller DRA '27, the managing director of the Cabaret, said in a video interview, adding that the Cabaret has sometimes felt insular in the past, drawing mostly from within the Drama School.



ILLUSTRATION BY BEATRICE BARILLA
The student-run theater at the David Geffen School of Drama officially opened its 59th season last month with new objectives to incorporate new mentorship programs and community partnerships

The team has already partnered with the Connecticut Center for Arts and Technology and worked with a regional domestic abuse treatment center to raise awareness during its first show, "dirty butterfly" by debbie tucker green, which concerns domestic violence. The season, titled "Nexus," officially opened on Sept. 17 with that production.

Each season, the Cabaret is led by a new team of Drama School students: a managing director, two co-artistic directors and two associate artistic directors.

One of this season's newest initiatives is a mentorship program spearheaded by Richard Lee DRA '27, one of the associate artistic directors. The program pairs the Cabaret's student advisory board — made up of representatives from each discipline at the Drama School — with newcomers curious about theater but unsure where to start.

The program is open not just to Drama School students working outside of their usual disciplines, but to any Yale student or New Haven community member, Lee said.

"We do believe that knowledge is not just owned by us," he said. "We would love to share this knowledge and also share the joy of making together with the whole community."

Mia Van Deloo DRA '27, one of the Cabaret's co-artistic directors, said in a Zoom interview that the season began with members of the artistic team modeling the kind of cross-disciplinary work the season is built around.

She and co-artistic director Jeremy Fuentes DRA '27 directed the season's first show while both working outside their usual disciplines — Van Deloo in dramaturgy, Fuentes in acting. The show also included a playwright student and a public health student as actors and an actor working as costume designer, she said.

"It was intentional for us to kind of start the season off by showing we, as the artistic team, will also work outside of our discipline," Van Deloo said. "We also want to learn something new and challenge ourselves and see what the scope of our artistry can be."

The Cabaret's commitment to community-building shows up in concrete partnerships, according to Fuller. Before opening this season, the Cabaret teamed up with the Connecticut Center for Arts and Technology, bringing in two students from its culinary program who will serve as chefs for the entirety of the season.

Olamide Oladeji DRA '27, who also works as an associate director at the Cabaret, said they are taking a "formative, educational approach" to partnerships this season.

For their opening production of this season, "dirty butterfly," the team worked with the Umbrella Center for Domestic Violence Services to incorporate informational pamphlets since the show centered around themes of domestic violence.

"It was quite heavy, so the focus was on our audience, on the resources that exist in the New Haven area for them," Oladeji said in a phone interview.

Oladeji also said the team is finalizing a discount ticket arrangement with the New Haven Free Public Library for cardholders, and she's hoping to bring in the New Haven Pride Center before the season ends.

Fuller said one of the season's most concrete pushes for change will come in November, when the Cabaret opens its call for spring semester show proposals. He said the team is aiming to draw pitches from beyond the Drama School.

"I do want people to know that we do exist," Fuller said, "and that they can always email us at any time that they want to get involved."

For the team, success this season isn't defined by one metric. "We really want Nexus to be a public communication and connection," Fuller said.

Van Deloo put it more simply: "People having fun — that's a win for me."

The Yale Cabaret is located at 217 Park St.

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Meet Desta, the dance team preserving East African culture at Yale

BY ALISSA SUNDRANI AND EMILY NGUYEN
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EMILY NGUYEN / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER
The group incorporates dance traditions from Ethiopia and Eritrea, along with some from Somalia and Sudan.

One thing that choreographer Meti Negewo '28 likes to tell aspiring members of Desta, her dance group is, "You don't know how to dance? Come learn."

Founded in 2022, Desta is the only Ethiopian and Eritrean dance group on campus. While the group focuses on dances from the two countries, they are also guided by other East African influences, incorporating Somali and Sudanese dances into their repertoire.

"It's a very inclusive group of dancers and artists who are really passionate about experiencing all that the Eastern African region has to offer," Hermela Shimelis '29, another one of Desta's choreographers, said.

In the last year, the team has performed at the Black Solidarity Conference, the Yale African Innovation Symposium and events for the Yale Ethiopian and Eritrean Students Association and the Yale African Students Association. On Sept. 19, Desta held its first performance of the year on Beinecke Plaza to celebrate Enkutatash, or the Ethiopian and Eritrean New Year.

Members of the group, which recently introduced dance workshops and auditions for hopeful members, said they do not seek to foster an exclusive environment.

"We're not the type of organization that cuts people," Negewo said.

Instead, Desta dancers find other ways to strengthen relationships with their art and each other in order to build community. The team coordinates their own tap night, a special tradition that fosters a sense of camaraderie in their new members.

"We tapped all the freshmen who were new to the team and everything, and we did the same thing again this year," Negewo said. "It's been really beautiful."

When Desta was formed, according to Sityana Abdu '27, one of Desta's three founders, there was no student organization focused on East African dance.

"It really just started because I didn't feel fully represented," Abdu said. "Fall 2022 is when we had our first performance."

Desta is not only a space for dancing, but also a place for members to explore themselves and express their identity.

"Ethnicity is a very contentious thing in Ethiopia and in the diaspora, and I think that dance is a very interesting way to explore ethnicity," Abdu said. "I think it's very important for spaces to exist like this."

Ethiopia is comprised of 12 regional states and the chartered cities of Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa, most of which have been historically controlled by different ethnic groups. The country's northern Tigray region was once the site of a violent civil war ended by a 2022 peace deal. Last week, fighting returned to Tigray and has spread to the regions of Amhara and Afar.

While the most well-known Ethiopian dance globally is Eskista, a type of dance originating from the Amhara region, Desta also practices and performs dances from other parts of Ethiopia and Eritrea.

"I do think, for the diaspora, dance is one of the ways to express your ethnicity in a way that is not combative," Abdu said. "I think it was something that I always thought about, but never talked about."

By honing their art and exploring their identity together, Desta has grown to become a vibrant community.

Negewo said it is difficult to explain to her peers why she dedicates so much time to Desta and how much she loves the group, especially against the backdrop of Yale's hypercompetitive club environment.

"You could argue that it has no resume value," Negewo said. "I care about Desta a lot. It's something that I've put so much of my time and effort into these past three years."

Though Desta members concentrate on creating and giving great performances, they also create memories in the process. Negewo said one of her fondest Desta memories was at late-night dance practices.

"It was like midnight, we were tired, and we recorded a final run-through of our entire performance, took a video of it, and then everyone was running to the phone to see the video," Negewo said. "And I was so proud of them."

Shimelis said her best memories at Desta were made following their rehearsals, when the group would simply talk and share stories about themselves.

"I think that those moments are always the best," Shimelis said. "Practice for sure, but also what happens outside of practice is just as precious."

"If this place did not exist, I don't know how my experience at Yale would be," Negewo said.

Moving forward, current leadership said they hope Desta will continue to serve its members as a space for creating art, expressing identity and cultivating community.

"I think there's such a beautiful cultural preservation aspect to what Desta is. I don't think there's any other space on Yale's campus like it," Negewo said. "I hope it continues to be something 10 years from now."

And there is always that next performance.

"We are gonna have our first showcase this semester," Negewo said. "Stay tuned."

Desta's workshop auditions were held at the Broadway Rehearsal Lofts on Elm Street.

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