

Portola's Night of the Living Dead is a Ghoulish Thrill
written by Chloe Radtke, a junior at Beckman High School

Portola High School's The Night of the Living Dead delivers a masterclass in sustained tension, plunging the audience into a farmhouse besieged by the undead. This gripping production balances raw emotion with visceral horror, creating a truly immersive theatrical experience.

The human heart of the terror lies with Barbara (Valletta Gaylord), and Ben (Zubin Bhatia). Gaylord portrays a devastating arc from shock to sheer terror, her realistic panic attack and emotionally vulnerable state anchoring the show's high stakes. Bhatia's pragmatic and commanding performance provides a sturdy counterpoint. Their chemistry is electric, a dynamic of conflict and reliance that plays out with compelling authenticity even in the background of scenes.

They are opposed by the terrifying ghoul ensemble, a force that is as choreographed as it is chaotic. Their movements are unsettlingly detailed: synchronized, jerking limbs, dragging feet that scrape the floor, and heads that loll on stiff necks. The Cemetery Ghoul (Vedant Atreya) is a standout, with his unnerving, startling physicality —twitching and nearly tripping over himself —and pained screams. The entire horde is composed of distinct, committed characters, ensuring that the threat outside the farmhouse walls feels vast, varied, and utterly relentless.

This horror is magnified by impeccable technical work. The sound design by Randall Chang, Cori Dudley, and Emilia Riva (126 cues, 71 SFX) is a star performer. Every zombie bash and punch is punctuated with a sickening, perfectly-timed thud or crunch, making the stage combat visceral and real. The props team, led by Star Draeger, Audrey Schneider, and Chloe Im, provides this violence with its tools—realistic weapons and functional items that are wielded with shocking skill.

The sprawling set, designed by Amogh Kakuturu and Mallory Kim, is a masterpiece of atmospheric storytelling. The weathered farmhouse, constructed from 19 platforms and 14 flats, creates a fortress. Its deliberate placement to the right of the stage places it in the audience's direct line of sight to draw attention to the cast. Every element—from the functional door that breaks under attack to the windows that become vulnerable entry points—serves the drama. The set doesn't just house the action; it actively participates in it, with the firm line of its walls making every horde attack feel catastrophic and heart-pounding.

Portola's production was dead-on in its execution, demonstrating how impeccable teamwork between cast and crew can bring relentless, thrilling horror to life.