

Acclaimed African-Australian playwright's story of survival centre stage in Darwin

CHELSEA HEANEY, NT News
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AN African-Australian playwright has brought his acclaimed first full length performance and story of survival to the Darwin Festival.

Fleeing the Congo as a child, Future D. Fidel lived in a Tanzanian refugee camp for eight years before being granted refugee status in Australia in 2005. Now Fidel's play, inspired by his own story, will be centre stage at the Darwin Entertainment Centre over the weekend.

Prize Fighter was premiered by La Boite Theatre in 2015 and scored Fidel a nomination for Best New Australian Work at the 2016 Helpmann Awards.

The play sees Isa, a young Congolese boxer, gearing up for the national title fight. He soon discovers it's not just his opponents he has to outdo, he also must take on the demons from his tortuous past as a boy soldier. Tackling issues of immigration, war and personal struggle *Prize Fighter* is adrenaline-pumping, full-contact theatre.

Lead by a cast of two brothers and esteemed actor Margi Brown Ash, *Prize Fighter* is set to lead this year's Darwin Festival theatre offering.

Actor Pacharo Mzembe, who plays Isa, said rehearsals had been tough in preparation for tonight's opening preview performance.

"It's a physical show. The dialogue is crucial, but it is important to be physically fit to deliver the dialogue and to deliver the beautiful poetry that Future has written," he said.

Pacharo said the play's subject matter was close to home.

"I have an African background and was born in Zimbabwe," he said.

"This story is an African story but it is an Australian story as well. But for me personally it touches home. It is about the Congo. Everything in the elemental chart can be found in the Congo. As a result, the Congo has been the victim of a lot of things and is subject to a lot of the Western world's demands."

Pacharo said the strongest message in the play for him was that memories can be our greatest strengths, and also our greatest weakness.

"Within this play, you see him trying to win that championship and, I won't ruin the ending, but he needs to come to peace with something," he said.

"You can either use what you've been through to your advantage or it can cripple you. That is one of the biggest messages that I take from it, outside of all the other political messages that's wrapped up around it."

His brother Gideon Mzembe, who plays various roles in the production, said audiences can expect an entertaining but physical play.

“The story itself, you don’t necessarily have to be African, the message in it is something everyone can relate to — being traumatised by your past and not being a victim of your past circumstances,” he said.

“Audiences can expect to see themselves in Isa.”

Margi Brown Ash has taken up the role of Isa’s coach, which was initially written for a man. Ms Brown Ash said she had loved developing and adapting the powerful female character for the performance.

“More than that, I love working with this team. These two brothers are astonishing humans as well as beautiful artists,” she said.

“They want to make a difference in the world and because of that I want to work with them. And Future brought a beautiful story to Australian stages.

“It’s a very shocking story, and yet it is a very important story and a very entertaining story.”

Ms Brown said she had also taken her own key message from the play.

“I’m a coach in the show, but I’m also an artists’ coach out of the show and one of the things I’ve taken is that it is very hard to beat someone who does not give up,” she said.

The play will have its preview performance tonight Thursday August 16 from 7pm and have subsequent showings on Friday, Saturday and Sunday.