

Prize Fighter

Reviewed by Colleen L Edwards for ArtsHub, 14 Sept 2015

One man has to fight not only his opponent but his past if he is to become boxing's new champion.



Pacharo Mzembe and Kenneth Ransom in Prize Fighter. Photo: Dylan Evans

Having opened to rave reviews, there was a trepidation that this La Boite and Brisbane Festival co-production might struggle to live up to the hype.

And sometimes a story such as this, which deals with subject matter as heavy as child soldiers and the plight of refugees, can become overwrought and overwritten – no matter how ‘worthy’ the topics addressed. Thankfully, there was no such danger here, with this tale penned by La Boite Artist-in-Residence Future D Fidel producing some excellent theatre.

They say the key to good storytelling is 'writing what you know' and although a fictionalised account of his past, Fidel has lived much of what he put down on the page, having fled the Congo as a child and lived in a Tanzanian refugee camp for almost a decade before being granted refugee status in Australia.

In *Prize Fighter*, Isa (played with conviction by Pacharo Mzembe, who not only had to perform, but also required the stamina to box realistically throughout the show) is orphaned by war, and subsequently forced into being a soldier by those who killed his family. However, he is eventually able to begin a new life in Australia, where he quickly becomes a rising star of the boxing world dubbed Steven 'The Killer' Alik.

Here, the drama stems not only from the fact that he has to fight the man in front of him to gain the national title – he also battles his past, with his memories piercing every key moment in the ring.

One brutally confronting scene in particular depicting the loss of his family had some of the audience in tears.

Impressive design saw the Roundhouse Theatre converted firstly into a West End boxing gym before morphing into the championship ring. Scenes jumped backwards and forwards with every round of the bout, tearing between the present and the past with all actors (bar Margi Brown Ash as trainer Luke) playing multiple roles to tell Isa's developing story.

Gender blind casting was a feature of the show and at times caused some confusion, if only for an instant before the performances took away any concerns. The authenticity of the African accents also made it difficult to hear some of the dialogue – but this is hardly a criticism and just highlighted how good it was to see the diversity on display. Now to somehow get this on our screens!

When you have such material to work with, you can expect great performances from the actors, and here they all deliver.

Having built a profile as a rugby league player in Queensland's state competition, Mzembe's real-life brother Gideon revelled in the physicality of his multiple roles. His portrayal of a warlord was terrifying, but it was Thuso Lekwape as a damaged child soldier who produced the greatest impact. He was at once a figure of revulsion but also of pity as he perfectly depicted this victim of circumstance.

Prize Fighter plays at a time when the plight of those fleeing Syria has pieced through our collective conscience. Here, it is the journey and struggles of refugees escaping worn-torn areas of Africa that are in the spotlight and it is a human and compelling story.

Rating: 4 ½ stars out of 5