

Prize Fighter

The exquisite satisfaction of a production in perfect sync –

Emerging from the dark box of the Studio Theatre out onto the bright streets of Darwin at the conclusion of [Prize Fighter](#) I found myself reflecting on the capacity of good theatre to take you somewhere else – the remarkable power of live performance to allow the suspension of disbelief.

In the case of Prize Fighter, my willingness to be taken in came not so much from an identification with the story but via a visceral response to the actors on the stage. Watching actors switch characters amid fast physical scenes, enhanced by tricks of lighting and a superb soundtrack, I was totally absorbed into the pace and intensity of this work.

When we enter Studio Theatre, the show has already begun – surrounded by climbing ropes, old tyres and boxing paraphernalia, a cast of six actors warm up on the floor of the theatre in a scene recognisable from any suburban gym (indeed in the evening performances of the work the opening gym scene included real life athletes from local Darwin gyms). A soundtrack of RnB and hip-hop pumps over the scene. Watching a woman in active wear (Ratidzo Mambo) as she effortlessly completed 20 pushups, I am instantly in awe of the physical prowess of these performers.

Boxing is the setting, the metaphor and the propelling force of Prize Fighter and it guides every aspect of the work. A low square lighting rig gives distinct shape to the stage. Looking down from the extremely raked seating of the Studio Theatre, we are ringside. All action herein occurs within and around this square. Storylines are embedded within the swift moves of boxing bouts and are switched up mid punch. The boxers (Marcus Johnson, Mandela Mathia, Gideon Mzembe, Pacharo Mzembe) are suddenly also fathers, soldiers and sons in Congo.

The work intensifies as the stakes of the boxing bouts are raised and the trauma of the past is revealed. At its core, Prize Fighter is the story of Isa a Congolese boy orphaned by war and forced to become a child soldier before fleeing to become a refugee in Australia. Prize Fighter, in this way, is filmic in scope and resolution – with all the key elements of a blockbuster movie. Congolese-Australian playwright Future D. Fidel himself describes the work as ‘a mythical story.’

It is the kind of script that with another director or theatre company may have become laden with sentimentality and cliché. Yet using the pace of a boxing match, the production by La Boite Theatre Company does not fall into these traps. Indeed through sharp contrast, the total incommensurability of an Australian boxing gym and the war in Congo is beautifully realised.

This is the exquisite satisfaction of witnessing all aspects of a production work together.

The work ends with an impressive technical touch of falling black sand – evoking spirit, absence and loss. I later learn the sand used is ‘coltan’ a metallic ore mined in war ravaged Congo and a main driving force behind the conflict. It is a significant inclusion in the production, as coltan is a key component in every electronic device we own, most commonly

within the mobile phone. Learning of the link, I wondered if the sand is perhaps a missed opportunity in the production – an indictment of our individual implication in war that is not realised by the audience. But then such political meanings are perhaps most powerful as suggestions rather than heavy-handed signposts.

Brilliantly produced with every element of the production working in sync with the performers – Prize Fighter is contemporary theatre at its best.

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(In OFF THE LEASH)