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THROUGH 4/23: THE WINNAH! Burning Coal's Deeply Personal Knockout Play, *The Royale*

By [Alan R. Hall](#)

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[Burning Coal Theatre Company](#) continues its winning streak of deeply personal plays with the North Carolina premiere of a play by Marco Ramirez, *The Royale*. Set in the days of the Tin Lizzie one hundred years ago, the work seeks to tell us the trials faced by the first Black man to achieve the status of Heavyweight Champion of the World in boxing.

On a simple stage designed by Trevor Carrier – a rectangle of simple wooden planks you would find in any boxing arena – Jay "The Sport" Jackson battles bigotry, murderous intent, a major opponent out to scalp everything he can get, and a host of his own demons to achieve his life's ambition of becoming Heavyweight Champion, and the first black man to claim the title. With only a scant five actors, Ramirez tells a tale following Jay (Preston Campbell) and his entourage across the country as he pursues his dream. The characters consist of Max (Alex DeVirgilis), Jay's promoter, a thin, reedy Irishman with a brogue to match; Wynton (Philip Bernard Smith), his manager, a big, solid bulk of a man who has seen his own fighting days fade; Nina (Danielle J. Long), his sister, who travels a long distance by train to see if Jay *really* understands what it is he is doing; and Fish (Sheldon Mba), a young black man who manages to go seven rounds with Jackson, and earns the right to be called his sparring partner, which means everything from giving Jay his rubdown to fetching their meals. We follow this quintet across the country as they build up their repertoire, approaching the day when Jackson will face the current Heavyweight Champion, Bernard Bixby. The first Black man to hold the title is not something many a racist would like to see come to pass, and several of the many foes Jay faces are outside the ring.

Director [Avis HatcherPuzzo](#) underscores Jay's journey with ample rhythm and movement. Accompanied only by the percussive stomping of feet, the show begins with a rousing rendition of "Let the Man Go Through," an anthem for Jay's upcoming prizefight. The music for the rest of the play features a varied repertoire, from blues piano and soaring fiddle, to a lonesome wailing violin as Jackson fights his own inner self, to a stunning rendition of a tune by Led Zeppelin as Jay's Entrance Music. It is a strong and mighty sound design by Areon Mobasher that serves to heighten the approach to Jay's final destiny.

This outstanding cast developed Jay's trek to his ultimate conclusion with a fine ensemble approach; all five worked as a unit to bring this play to fruition while each developed his or her own individual character. DeVirgilis gave a fine performance as Max, sporting a thick Irish accent and doubling as the Fight-master and Play-by-play Announcer. Mba gave a lovely portrayal of youth and exuberance, showing how his character learns to love this man who once

laid him out in defeat. Smith portrayed Wynton as a hulking brute of a manager, overbearing and dynamic, a very different role from his successful turn in Raleigh Little Theatre's [The Whipping Man](#). Nina was played fiercely by Long, who also serves as several minor characters before stepping into the ring with Jay to explore the real reasons why he does what he does. But this entire play is dominated by Campbell, who played Jay as a seemingly easygoing and humorous man outside the ring, but a smoldering powder keg within. Campbell gave a winning performance in every sense of the word, and carried us along with him on wide and powerful shoulders. All five actors worked seamlessly to build up this unique character study of a man who must finally understand why he fights so unflaggingly, in a world where he is not welcome, to achieve his final goal.

Burning Coal brings *The Royale* to its first North Carolina performance with a stellar, finely meshed cast and a crisp and stirring performance. We come to understand, as does Jay Jackson, that if he is to win he must be better than the best, and defeat not only a bigger, heavier foe in the ring, but also those nasty, incessant demons inside his own head. *The Royale* is a microcosm of a fight to overcome every obstacle, not just by a black man, but by the Black Man. Today, as minorities everywhere are losing many of the rights they have fought to win over long years of struggle, this is a rallying cry to keep on fighting, no matter the foes we face.

The Royale continues through Sunday, April 23. For more details on this production, please view the sidebar.

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