

# Pugilism Gets Political in *The Royale*, a Cracking Dramatization of "The Fight of the Century"

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Byron Woods

There's a magic moment when a gifted boxer whaling on a speedbag—a weighted, teardrop-shaped leather sack about the size of a human head, suspended from an overhead stand—transcends calisthenics and enters the realm of music. Slowly at first, and then faster, the taped fists tap out paradiddles with the moving bag. A change of attack alters the barrage from sixteenth notes to triplets; a glancing blow to the side introduces syncopation. A chain of unexpected change-ups invokes a drum solo worthy of Billy Cobham, Bill Bruford, or John Bonham.

There's a reason, then, when prizefighter Jay "The Sport" Jackson (Preston Campbell) says he's playing "just a little jazz" in the ring during his opening bout with Purley "Fresh Fish" Hawkins (Sheldon Mba) in the 2015 drama [The Royale, now showing at Burning Coal](#). When the newcomer gives the champ a run for his money, Jackson exults, "We makin' music, boy!"

A play about boxing should be markedly physicalized. In this rewarding production, guest director Avis HatcherPuzzo establishes the facts of human percussion and its impact on the body from the outset, when Campbell and Mba, dressed in boxing shorts and gloves, stomp out a pattern across designer Trevor Carrier's old wooden ringside set. When these and other actors face off in a match, HatcherPuzzo has them reinforce the landing of their scripted blows with the same percussive footwork in a theatrical coup de grace.

In his fictionalized version of the "Fight of the Century," the first interracial match for the world heavyweight boxing championship, held during the Jim Crow era, in 1910, playwright Marco Ramirez focuses on the psychology of boxing, from the "inside game" of a fighter's thoughts during a match to the life events that drive him into the ring in the first place.

Yes, Jackson (the stand-in for real-world fighter Jack Johnson), trainer Wynton (a robust Philip Bernard Smith), and manager Max (a vacillating Alex DeVergilis) are all aware that this bout will permanently change racial relationships in the United States. Jackson's long-estranged, apprehensive sister, Nina (a strong Danielle Long) predicts a violent backlash as she upbraids him for the single-mindedness of his pursuit. "I know you're ready to win," she chides. "I just don't think the rest of us are."

Smith's vivid monologue about Wynton's coming-of-age as a boxer is a stand-out moment in *The Royale's* second act, and the staging of the championship bout will raise eyebrows as it uncovers who and what Jackson's really fighting, and why he has chosen a career that ultimately amounts to "get[ting] punched in the face for a living." Campbell's authoritative performance makes this inquiry into the mind of a prizefighter a hard-hitting show. Strongly recommended.

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