

ARTS & CULTURE APRIL 7, 2017 2:26 PM

# Burning Coal's 'The Royale' striking, beautifully choreographed



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BY ROY C. DICKS  
*Correspondent*

The struggles of African-American sports figures against prejudice have been well documented on screen and stage. One might question choosing another telling of a black prizefighter aiming to become a champion.

But Marco Ramirez's "The Royale" proves a highly theatrical, poetic script, especially in Burning Coal Theatre Company's admirable production. Its many striking images and novel staging techniques help diminish some writing flaws and directorial decisions.

Ramirez took inspiration from Jack Johnson, whose 1910 win over a white world heavyweight champion signaled a major step in African-American history. Here the black boxer is Jay Jackson, driven to break the championship's color barrier. Jay's manager Max, trainer Wynton and sparring partner Fish fervently support him. Only Jay's sister Nina vehemently objects, citing dangers to him and all black citizens if he wins.

ADVERTISING



An intriguing conceit is the staging of the fights with the participants widely separated, facing straight out. Blows are realistically mimed, accompanied by sharp stomps, shouts and claps. The fighters also spout running monologs of what's on their minds as they box. These sequences are beautifully choreographed, artful yet dramatic.

Director Avis HatcherPuzzo applies her choreographic skills to the non-boxing scenes as well, binding the production together satisfyingly. Trevor Carrier's spare wooden platform easily becomes boxing ring or locker room with Elizabeth Newton's period props and Christopher Popowich's mood-enhancing lighting.

Preston Campbell gives Jay a towering presence and fierce determination, along with believable boxing stances. He has great chemistry with Sheldon Mba's Fish, whose humorous personality and beaming energy are extremely appealing. Phillip Bernard Smith makes a crusty but warm Wynton, moving in his monologue about the brutal fighting contest of the drama's title.

Alex DeVirgilis skillfully conveys Max's devotion to Jay, but also a realist's understanding of the odds against the fighter. Danielle J. Long's Nina enlivens the play's second half with a sister's valid concerns for her family's safety.

The uneven script has some scenes overstating their points and a first half less involving than the second. Inserting an intermission into a 90-minute one-act exacerbates the problem. Some steam is also lost through lengthy, disruptive scene changes.

Nevertheless, the show is one of the company's strongest in recent seasons, worth seeing for its fine cast and vivid theatricality.

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## DETAILS

**What:** "The Royale"

**Where:** Burning Coal Theatre, 224 Polk St., Raleigh

**When:** 7:30 p.m. April 7-8, 13-15, 20-22; 2 p.m. April 9, 16, 23

**Tickets:** \$25 (seniors \$20; students/military/all Thursdays \$15)

**Info:** 919-834-4001 or [burningcoal.org](http://burningcoal.org)



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