

Burning Coal Theatre Company Review

## ***The Royale* Is a Gripping and Often Humorous Reminder of the State of Racism in America**



*The Royale* by [Marco Ramirez](#) opened April 6th in [Burning Coal Theatre Company's Murphey School Auditorium](#) in Raleigh for a three-week run. Ramirez's 2013 play is based on the experiences of [Jack Johnson](#) (1878-1946), a black boxer of the early 20th century who became the first World Boxing Champion who was non-white.

The "royale" of the title of Ramirez's play is an outstanding example of overtly cruel and stupid racism in 19th century America. A group of sturdy young black men were persuaded to be blindfolded in a fenced-in arena. For the entertainment of the onlookers, they swung out and felt around in a melee that would be won by the last man standing. As the fighting became more intense, the spectators would throw money into the arena, which the winner was allowed to grab up and take with him.

Whether Jack Johnson, the country's foremost black boxer for many years, perhaps, until [Joe Louis](#) (1914-81) came along, ever fought in a royale or not we do not know; but his manager had.

What is commonly known of Jack Johnson is that he was a great black boxer with a penchant for white women and a flamboyant lifestyle. Therefore, he was the subject of much animosity and hatred.

Jay "The Sport" Jackson represents Johnson in this play, which carefully details two up-close-and-personal boxing matches in which no glove ever falls on flesh. However, the intimacy and tenacity of the boxer in action is demonstrated with a keenness and punch that keeps us on our toes. It is beautiful choreography, punctuated with foot stomps representing landed blows and dialogue that brings us into the mind of the athlete in action.

Director [Avis Hatcher-Puzzo](#), making her North Carolina directorial debut, has done a magnificent job of casting, to begin with. Then she has created an ensemble that clicks like the tumblers of a lock falling into place. It took unusual knowledge of the "[sweet science](#)" to choreograph the blows and reactions in a way that shows more clearly than any movie how two skilled masters of the pugilistic art interact. She demonstrates emphatically the drive for personal victory that sports represent, and what the truly great must assume to achieve the heights they pursue.



The cast for Burning Coal Theatre Company's production of *The Royale* includes (from left) Sheldon Mba, Phillip Bernard Smith, and Preston Campbell (photo by The Right Image Photography, Inc.)

**Preston Campbell**, with his royal bearing, makes a stunningly beautiful boxer. His eyes twinkle, his firmly set jaw frames a tiny but never escapable smile, his 6 feet or so of bone and muscle aptly portray a champion fighter, Jay "The Sport" Jackson. Campbell is a fine actor, wielding the pride and ambition of a man held down knowing he outclasses his oppressors by miles. You feel the weight of the American Negro race on his shoulders, borne with the grace of a hero.

Wynton, Jackson's manager, is in the capable hands of **Phillip Bernard Smith**, who has tackled hefty characters with ease in the past, and soars in this role. With surprising agility and an emotional dexterity that is slightly understated, he is the perfect partner for Campbell in their interlocking roles. His final monologue is incredibly stirring.

Fish, the young naive challenger who becomes Jackson's sparring partner and friend, is played by **Sheldon Mba**. His chemistry with Campbell is palpable, and their execution of the boxing choreography is perfect. Although they never land a punch, the audience feels the impact as if they had hit each other with sledge hammers.

**Danielle J. Long** is fine as Nina, Jackson's older sister, whose urge to be white infects her young athletic brother's drive for superiority. Long is graceful and poised, she displays maturity and protectiveness of her younger sibling, and also shows a remarkable athleticism herself.

Max, as well as several cameo roles, are all played by **Alex DeVirgilis**, who brings a gamut of dialects and mannerisms to his work. His prolific energy incorporates the consistent rhythm that underlies the entire production like a tympani in the orchestra.

A simple set, consisting of a risen square representing a ring and one heavy punching bag, is kept alive by expert use of lighting to add nuance to the scenes. Credit **Trevor Carrier** and **Christopher Popowich** for these.

[\*The Royale\*](#) at Burning Coal is a gripping and often humorous reminder of the state of racism in America even today.



Danielle Long and Preston Campbell star in *The Royale* (photo by The Right Image Photography, Inc.)

**SECOND OPINION:** April 7th Raleigh, NC CVNC review by **Alan R. Hall:** <http://cvnc.org/article.cfm?articleId=8438>; April 7th Raleigh, NC News & Observer review by **Roy C. Dicks:** <http://www.newsobserver.com/entertainment/arts-culture/article143342344.html>; and March 29th Durham, NC **Indy Week** mini-preview by **Byron Woods:** <http://www.indyweek.com/indyweek/the-royale/Event?oid=5797571>.

**Burning Coal Theatre Company** presents **THE ROYALE** at 7:30 p.m. April 8, 2 p.m. April 9, 7:30 p.m. April 13-15, 2 p.m. April 16, 7:30 p.m. April 20-22, and 2 p.m. April 23 in the **Murphey School Auditorium**, 224 Polk St., Raleigh, North Carolina 27604, near the **Historic Oakwood Section**. **TICKETS:** \$25 (\$15 students and active-duty military personnel and \$20 seniors), except "Pay What You Can" Day on Sunday, April 9th, \$5 Student Rush Tickets (sold at the door, 5 minutes before curtain), \$15 Thursdays, and \$15 per person for groups of 10 or more. **BOX OFFICE:** 919-834-4001 or <http://www.etix.com/>. **SHOW:** <http://burningcoal.org/the-royale/> and <https://www.facebook.com/events/1868862146770653/>. **PRESENTER:** <http://www.burningcoal.org/>, <https://www.facebook.com/Burning.Coal.Theatre>, and <https://twitter.com/burningcoaltc>. **VENUE/DIRECTIONS:** <http://burningcoal.org/murphey-school-auditorium/>. **NOTE:** **Arts Access, Inc.** of Raleigh will audio-describe the show's 2 p.m. Saturday, April 9th, performance. **OTHER LINKS:** **The Royale (2013 Los Angeles and 2016 Off-Broadway play):** <http://www.samuel french.com/p/58387/royale-the> (Samuel French, Inc.). **Marco Ramirez (playwright):** <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm3059675/> (Internet Movie Database) and <https://twitter.com/marcoramirezmd> (Twitter page). **Avis Hatcher-Puzzo (Raleigh director,**

*founder/director/choreographer at Koffee Dance Company of Durham and associate professor of dance at Fayetteville State University): <http://www.uncfsu.edu/arts/faculty-and-staff/avis-hatcher-puzzo> (FSU bio) and <https://www.facebook.com/avis.hatcherpuzzo> (Facebook page), and <https://twitter.com/hatcherpuzzo>.*



**EDITOR'S NOTE:** [Martha Keravuori](#) is a life-long theater artist -- an actress, director, and stage manager -- in North Carolina, around the country, and overseas. She has a theater degree from UNC-Greensboro, and has been active in the arts in Raleigh for the past 40 years. Martha is the retired executive director of the [North Carolina Theatre Conference](#). [Chuck Galle](#) returned to Raleigh last year after a 17-year absence. He was active in community theater for many years, and directed the troupe of maximum-security inmates at Raleigh's Central Prison known as the Central Prison Players. In New England, he performed on stage, on TV, and in films. He is the author of [Stories I Never Told My Daughter -- An Odyssey](#), which can be ordered on his website: <http://www.chuckgalle.com/>. Chuck Galle and Martha Keravuori review theater for [Boom! Magazine](#) of Cary. Click [here](#) to read

