

Joe Straw #9

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Sucker Punch by Roy Williams



Rob Nagle and Rick K. Jackson - photos by John Klopping

By Joe Straw

Sucker-punch [suhk-er-puhch] verb (used with object) Slang. 1. To strike (someone) with an unexpected blow.

The Coeurage Theatre Company presents Sucker Punch by Roy Williams directed by Michael A. Shepperd at the Tiger Boxing Guy on Gardner just north of Melrose in West Hollywood through June 23, 2019.

Michael A. Shepperd, the director, gives us a spirited production of this show. The presentation is very stylized and imaginative in ways that are unpredictable. Shepperd presents the show with gritty realism and minimal symbolic structure. And, there are remarkable performances in Sucker Punch with standout moments that will leave one light headed when exiting the theatre, ahem gym.

Jen Albert's fight choreography is spectacular and plays well with Matt Richter and Adam Earle's Lighting Design. The hits to the head are punctuated by flashes of light and are nicely timed for complete expected impact.

But the show is called Sucker Punch for a reason that carries it beyond the fights. A sucker punch is thrown when the relationships are to change – like the flashes of light to the head – that send a character spiraling. The comedic play is pounded with those moments, a blow delivered to the psyche causing a dramatic change in the relationship. This show needed those moments strengthened although the timing might have been off due to performing two shows a day.

“Don’t you have toilets to clean or summin, boy?” Tommy

That line is a sucker punch.

The stylized opening makes way for Charlie (Rob Nagle) training an up-and-coming and athletically fit fighter, Tommy (Brandon Ruitter), in the ring.

“Jab. Double jab, cross. Jab, hook to the body...” – Charlie

Troy (Anthony Cloyd) and Leon (Rick K. Jackson) step into the gym as they good-naturedly argue about who is going to clean the nasty “white boys” toilet. Meanwhile, Charlie, in the ring with Tommy, can hardly hear himself talk with the commotion outside the ring.



William Christopher Stephens and Rick K. Jackson

Charlie’s been at this game for a while, has a nearly-grown daughter, and has dreams of moving on to another level through a boxer he has trained. At this point in his life, he lives on the dreams powered by a lack of funds.

Juvenile delinquents, Troy and Leon, are there because they broke into the gym, were caught, and now they are paying for it. Troy and Leon go at each other, first about who is cleaning the bog (bathroom) and for the fiver (money) Troy lent Leon.

“Isn’t one of you supposed to be doing the bogs right now?” – Charlie

Another sucker punch.

Charlie, not liking the way things is going for Tommy, pushes his fighter in the ring, but Tommy complains about shoulder pain and Charlie gives up on him for the day and sends him to shower. Charlie leaves to take solace in his office.

Meanwhile Troy and Leon talk about Becky (Mara Klein) Charlie's daughter, going to a posh school, knowing that she may be arriving soon.



L - R Brandon Ruitter, Rick K. Jackson, and Anthony Cloyd

A spirited and smart Becky enters the establishment, handles herself with the juveniles, and grabs the house keys from Charlie – getting her licks in before departing.

Tommy gets out of the locker room and verbally tussles with Troy and Leon and after a bit of sparring, Leon slaps Tommy and gets the better of him.

Charlie sees this and takes notice.

“Now was it me or did that little-monkey just gave you a right slap just now.” – Charlie (to Tommy)

One more sucker punch.

Charlie dismisses Tommy and tells Leon to put on the gloves while he sends Troy to clean the bogs.

What a treat to see a play that is site specific, a real boxing gym and a place to workout in West Hollywood. Knowing little of the playwright, or the play, coming in cold and observing life as it transpires within this creative atmosphere was an inspired journey.

But there is a want for a little more.

Initially, the accents seemed to place the play in South Africa. Later the dialogue reveals that they are in South London. Leon's father, Squid, shows just a trace of a Jamaican accent thus revealing that he is Jamaican (William Christopher Stephens) or of some Jamaican decent. It is not mentioned in the play.

That said, the beginning was slightly confusing. Troy and Leon's dialogue near the door was muffled with that of the overlapping dialogue coming inside from the ring with Charlie barking and Tommy shuffling. Also, the play takes place over a period of four years and the passage of time has little physical discernable representation. We get the placement of time with only references to certain events in the 1980's in the dialogue.

Still, Sucker Punch by Roy Williams is a wonderful play about the dreams of athletes and

their manager. By all accounts, it is a comedy with some dramatic overtones. The timing of the dialogue is as essential as the boxing scenes in order for the comedy to hit home. There were hits and misses this night, but overall a wonderful production by the coeourage theatre company.

Rob Nagle is fantastic as Charlie, a man who only wants the best for himself and his daughter. But, Charlie has issues. He lacks the fortitude to bring up his man to the top. Amateur athletics is not paying the bills and he desperately wants to ride the coattails of a successful fighter. He is near the end of his game in life and if something doesn't happen soon, he will be lost, and then he loses himself in alcohol. His performance is terrific.

Brandon Ruiter is Tommy, a physically fit character ready to take on the world. Unfortunately, he is a little lazy, which is complimented by being racist. He is not as fast as the other boxers and probably never will be and although, he loves his trainer, he is ready to move on and dump everyone who has helped him along the way. His career will not be long term. Ruiter gave it his all and has an especially warm appreciative smile during the curtain call.

Anthony Cloyd as Troy has a very nice presence on stage. Troy is a character who doesn't box much and gets into a lot of trouble with the law, pushing the boundaries of what is ethical or legal. And, he is in constant need of a partner in crime. There was a moment when Troy's trainer grabs him by the back of the neck and the fear in Troy's eyes said a lot about Cloyd's craft. There was a lot of backstory in that moment and it was terrific work.

Rick K. Jackson plays Leon a man tortured by the many around him – his father, his manager, his friend, and his girlfriend. Leon has one objective, which is to be the best fighter he can be and in many ways, he pulls this off. But he has to make serious choices to be the best. Jackson does well in the role. If he teaches the moonwalk, he must be proficient at the moonwalk. Also, love must compliment the choices for this actor. Love propels this character - a love for the fight, love his trainer, and love his girlfriend so when he changes course the hurt is that much greater. Other characters ask Leon why he is crying. Those moments didn't play well. That aside, there are moments where one believes he had really been hit hard in the ring and those moments ring a dramatic truth.



Mara Klein and Rick K. Jackson

Mara Klein is Becky, a strong girl/woman, who also tries to look after her father. She is

also the love interest. Klein does well in the role but her objective is unclear and her choices to move her in that direction gets a little lost. Is she there to help her father? Is she upset about losing her boyfriend? Will she save her father's business? Klein has a strong voice and a very nice look on stage.

William Christopher Stephens is Squid, Leon's father. He does everything to destroy his son's career. He wants money to get high and, because he was the 1973 disco king, he is able to dance for money. But the moves are squalid and the drugs have taken over. He doesn't want his son to succeed, rather he wants his money. Stephens does a lot to give the character a backstory and he mostly succeeds.

Gregor Manns is in the second act. He is another manager, dangerous, and physical. He is also a man who preys on weak and defenseless fighters by bailing them out of jail. He is a negotiator and knows the faults of the manager he is negotiating with. There may be more Manns can add to this character.

Other members of the crew are as follows:

Lindsay Castillo-Dilyou – State Manager
Georgette Arison – Costume Design
Sammi Smith – Prop Design
John Nobori – Sound Design
Charles Nwokolo and Emeka Nwokolo – Boxing Trainers
Elizabeth Wilson – Venue Manager
Abigail Marks – Dialect Coach
John Klopping – Production Photographer
Ken Werther Publicity – Press Representative.

The play had a short run. But if you are able to see it in another venue, run, run, run!
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