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REVIEWS



Rob Nagle and Rick K. Jackson in Coeurage Theatre Company's production of Roy Williams' "Sucker Punch" at Tiger Boxing Gym. (Photo by John Klopping)

Sucker Punch

Reviewed by **Lara J. Altunian**

Coeurage Theatre Company

Closed

Roy Williams' *Sucker Punch* is a narrow look at 1980s British race relations through the lens of boxing— a sport known for instigating fighters' personal passions as a way to boost the excitement within the ring. Williams is able to successfully capture this grueling, often underhanded side of the profession with his sharp writing. However, Coeurage Theatre Company's rendition of this 2010 Alfred Fagan Award–winning work fails to live up to the script's depth, due largely to its weak performances.

Chaz, or Charlie (Rob Nagle), is a washed-up, retired boxer who owns a training gym in London. His latest protégé Tommy (Brandon Ruiter), acts out of a sense of entitlement and ambition. He constantly clashes with maintenance employees Leon (Rick K. Jackson) and Troy (Anthony Cloyd), whom

Chaz has agreed not to report to the police regarding a petty crime in exchange for free work. However, their presence creates a less than steady atmosphere due to incessant arguments with the racist Tommy, whose sentiments echo British distrust of minorities prevalent during Margaret Thatcher's term as Prime Minister.

During one of Tommy and Leon's skirmishes, Chaz notices the latter's fighting style and decides to take him on as an additional project. The decision alienates both his star pupil and the bitter Troy, whose talents are also considered but ultimately passed over by due to his bad attitude. Troy thinks Leon is being taken for a ride by his new white trainer who has falsely convinced him that he will be offered the same advantages as the arrogant Tommy. The situation becomes even more complicated when Leon begins dating Chaz's daughter Becky (Mara Klein) without her father's knowledge. Racial tensions come to a head in the ring, with all three men's careers being held in the balance.

The premise is strong and the dialogue sharp. However, the actors' garbled accents make much of the discourse difficult to understand. Unfortunately, Jackson is the worst offender, distracting from his otherwise affecting portrayal and excellent boxing chops. Cloyd and Klein's cartoonish deliveries are a close second. What is especially comic is that Cloyd and Jackson supposedly grew up together in the same neighborhood, but ultimately sound nothing alike.

Leon and Becky's romance is a weaker point within the plot. In the end, the affair winds up being more scandalous on paper than in practice. The narrative hardly goes into detail about the duo's romantic endeavors other than mentioning that they are dating, and the actors are not able to infuse their on-stage relationship with the energy needed to express its vitality.

Nagle's performance is the most solid of the six — an unsurprising fact considering the theater veteran's long list of credits (most recently [Julius Weezer](#) with the Troubadour Theater Company and [The Judas Kiss](#) with Boston Court Pasadena). However, even his steady cadence and sympathetic portrayal of a man about to lose his last chance at making a name for himself within the sport isn't able to balance the shakier performances in the play. Likewise, William Christopher Stephens as Squid — Leon's gambling and womanizing Jamaican father — is entertaining and definitely underused.

Tiger Boxing Gym is an excellent mid-city setting for the play, emphasizing the theme better than any set design or collection of props ever could. Michael A. Shepperd's direction is able to make the most use out of a tiny space as the characters brawl with each other verbally and with their fists, the latter form convincingly brought to life thanks to Jen Albert's fight choreography. The only thing that could be said about the boxing matches is that the knockouts could be more realistic.

Tiger Boxing Gym, 708 N. Gardner St., West Hollywood; closed. <http://www.coeurage.org/>. Running time: two hours with one 10-minute intermission.