

STAGE

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STEVEN STANLEY'S STAGESCENELA.COM: SPOTLIGHTING THE BEST IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA THEATER

SUCKER PUNCH

South London accents either too thick to be understood or virtually non-existent along with loads of British slang prove detrimental to Coeurage Theatre Company's site-specific West Coast Premiere of Roy Williams' Sucker Punch. So do view-blocking sight lines for certain audience members squeezed into the Tiger Boxing Gym just off Melrose.

It's a shame because there are some terrific actors bringing Williams' edgy script to life, and when was the last time you saw a play that takes place in a boxing ring take place in an actual boxing ring?



The year is 1981, Margaret Thatcher is ruling English with an iron fist, and gym owner/trainer Charlie Maggs (Rob Nagle, superb) is doing his best to keep things afloat in a brutal economy.



While setting his sights on blue-eyed blond Tommy (dynamic Brandon Rüter) to propel him to higher ranks in the boxing world, Charlie has given Leon Davidson (muscle hunk Rick K. Jackson) and Troy Augustus (edgy Anthony Cloyd), a couple of aspiring black boxers, the chance to make up for breaking into his gym by having them mop up after the boxers and clean the toilets.

Not that Tommy's any more likely to stick around than the other amateur-turned-pro boxers Charlie has trained and been abandoned by in years past, which is why when Leon reveals himself a champion in the making, Charlie begins pinning his future on the great black hope.



There's only one hitch. Leon's started dating his trainer's nubile daughter Becky (Mara Klein), and in racist England, that is a big no-no.

Playwright Williams knows his boxing, knows his characters, knows his Iron Lady-era England, and in a grand tradition extending from Clifford Odets' *Golden Boy* to the *Rocky/Creed* franchise, knows better than to not have two of his major players meet in the ring for a final showdown.



Unfortunately for American audiences, *Sucker Punch* isn't the easiest play to follow, particularly for those unfamiliar with the oft-mentioned "Maggie," the Brixton Riots of 1981, or South London slang.

Lines like "Yer a one little batty bwoi and a half" or "when you get the shakes for a little bit of sliff" are head-scratchers even in print, and since director Michael A. Sheppard and dialect coach Abigail Marks have opted for authenticity over intelligibility, much of playwright Williams' already slangy dialog will likely fly over audience heads.



Not that leading man Jackson comes even close to approximating an English accent save an occasional word, phrase, or sentence, an unfortunate but significant drawback to what would otherwise be a big-things-ahead performance.

Cloyd and Rutter prove as dynamic as Jackson in the ring if frequently incomprehensible in rapid-fire exchanges.



Nagle is once again brilliant as all get-out, Klein's frisky, alluring Becky has what it takes to get Leon's blood racing, and

William Christopher Stephens and Gregor Manns are both excellent, the former as Leon's gambling-addicted West Indian dad, the latter as Troy's burly, bling-accessorized American trainer.



How much of Sucker Punch you'll be able to see clearly will depend on where you're seated. (Aside from some occasionally face-blocking ropes, my view was almost unobstructed, while the person next to me had to rely on ears alone in scenes taking place next to the ring.)



Where Sucker Punch merits unqualified raves is in Matt Richter and Adam Earle's electrifying lighting and John Nobori's equally thrilling sound design. Georgette Arison's authentic costumes and Sammi Smith's equally legit props score major points as well.

Last but not least, fight choreographer Jen Albert's theatrically staged championship matches are bona fide stunners, and Jackson, Rutter, and Cloyd owe major props to boxing coaches Charles Nwokolo and Emeka Nwokolo.

Lindsay Castillo-Dilyou is stage manager.

There's no denying Sucker Punch's high-energy excitement whenever its protagonists square off in the ring. If only its dialog scenes worked nearly as well.

Tiger Boxing Gym, 708 N. Gardner Street, Los Angeles. Through June 23. See website for performance calendar. Reservations: 323 944-2165
www.coeurage.org

—Steven Stanley

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Photos: John Klopping