

ABC Radio

Reviewed by Alison Crogan 11 Sept 2015

Playwright Bertolt Brecht would likely have approved of *Prize Fighter*, La Boite Theatre's contribution to the Brisbane theatre scene.

Theatre, Brecht said, should be as exciting as a boxing match. It should exist under harsh lights, its mechanisms naked, its audiences cheering and applauding every punch. And it should matter. *Prize Fighter* is, in every respect, theatre that matters.

Ideally for the in-the-round theatre at La Boite, it is a theatrical boxing match. The set is a boxing ring, and the action is a fight, literally and metaphorically. Penned by Brisbane playwright Future D Fidel, a refugee from East Congo, *Prize Fighter* is a passionate, confronting and moving piece of theatre. Fidel fled the civil war in 1966 and spent eight years in a refugee camp, desperately seeking his missing sister, before hearing in 2001 his mother had been killed.

His story is close to that of his protagonist, Isa (Pacharo Mzembe). But you hope it is not too close. Isa, who is training in a Brisbane gym to win the Australian title, has a background as a child soldier, captured by rebels after they slaughtered his father and sister before his eyes.

The production, directed by Todd MacDonald, takes a simple, even a crude, conceit. We see Isa in training and in the ring in some superbly choreographed fights, and as he fights he has flashbacks that reveal his story.

Aside from the white trainer, Luke (played with pugnacious charm by Margi Brown-Ash), the other members of the ensemble—Sophia Emberson-Bain, Thuso Lekwape, Gideon Mzembe and Kenneth Ransom—perform multiple roles.

Prize Fighter is skilfully realised theatre that generates considerable emotional potency. What makes it especially powerful is the complexity and delicacy that runs through Isa's story. We see brutalities, but also how sometimes it is only the humanity of our relationships that saves us. In a chilling performance from Lekwape, for example, we see the terrifying violence of a brutalised child, but also his need and vulnerability.

The cast is superb, generating an electrifying physical energy that catches fire in the audience, who cheer throughout, just as they might in a stadium, unless they are rendered absolutely silent by one of its moments of theatrical beauty.

I saw the show in preview and already it was a slick production, the performances complex and urgent, driven by the sense of necessity that makes remarkable art.

It can only get better, and is shaping up to be a Brisbane Festival highlight.