

Spirit soars despite heart of darkness in La Boite's Prize Fighter

Reviewed by Phil Brown for *The Courier-Mail*, September 15, 2015

IT'S a tough and uncompromising play but Prize Fighter is also redemptive. Congolese immigrant Future D. Fidel, who came to Australia as a refugee, fleeing the horrors of his home country, the Democratic Republic of Congo, has written a debut work that is an instant classic.

I believe it was this piece that inspired Brisbane Festival director David Berthold to follow his instincts and program a number of works from the troubled Congo. More power to him for doing so.

I first heard that La Boite was mounting this work a year ago and immediately thought it sounded promising.

For a start I love boxing and it has been a foil for so many great stories in the past, in print, on stage and on the big screen.

Boxing is a fabulous metaphor for individual struggle and it works so well in this play directed by La Boite's artistic director, Todd MacDonald, who has been doing a bit of boxing himself recently. It helps if the director is engaged and knows a bit about his subject matter.

MacDonald threw himself into the project with gusto and he has done a terrific job, fuelled by his own passion for the subject matter.

It helps if you have a believable star too, and local actor Pachero Mzembe, who plays immigrant boxer Isa, is himself an African immigrant. His family is from Malawi but he was born in Zimbabwe.

Pachero Mzembe shapes up on stage at La Boite while brother Gideon gets punchy in the background. Picture: Liam Kidston

Mzembe is a boxer and trained hard for this role, which means he looks the part.

He does an amazing job and is supported by a small but superb cast including Sophia Emberson-Bain, Thuso Lekwape, Kenneth Ransom and Pachero's brother Gideon Mzembe, who is a sportsman and also a talented boxer.

But let me turn my attention to the surprise package of the evening, local theatre treasure Margi Brown-Ash who plays Isa's trainer.

With that spiky hair she makes you think of the once ubiquitous Don King, the fight promoter who presided over some of Muhammad Ali's greatest fights.

She also seemed to be channelling Burgess Meredith, who was Rocky's trainer in the original movie. She's fabulous.

There's a lot of history to this boxing business. Retro posters remind us of that and the play uses audio visuals and hip-hop music to great effect.

The stage is a ring in this instance and the narrative takes place as a title fight ensues. This requires some dexterous directing. The mechanics of the play work well to advance the drama and if the boxing looks real, that's because it damn well is.

The story itself is pretty gruelling and taps into Africa's heart of darkness. There's no point pulling punches, if you'll pardon the pun. Isa (Mzembe) is escaping a country that playwright Fidel has described as "a hell on earth" at the height of conflict that killed millions.

Isa is orphaned by war and becomes a child soldier forced to fight for the people who killed his family.

As he fights in the ring he relives the brutal, tragic past but this story is told in light of his own survival and his new life in Australia. In Brisbane.

I looked over and saw Future D. Fidel sitting in the audience on opening night and thought how easily he could have been just another statistic in Congo's tragic history. His parents died in the conflict but he and his siblings survived.

In his new home, Australia, he still grapples with his own past and that inspired him to write this powerful, poignant, play.

It's just over an hour long, which is enough considering how intense it is for all of us. But it's a crowded hour and it will remain one of the most memorable hours I have ever spent in the theatre.

This is the Brisbane Festival production you simply cannot miss.