

## Prize Fighter: Stunning blow from one-time boy soldier

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Pacharo Mzembe, left, and Thuso Lekwape in Future D. Fidel's visceral and gripping *Prize Fighter*. Picture: Dylan Evans

Umm, did that just happen? Could it be that Brisbane has just witnessed the world premiere of the most perfectly structured, brilliantly produced and best-acted new play seen in this town in, well, living memory probably?

After years of La Boite's distinctive theatre-in-the-round being compromised with artificial fourth walls, here at last is a play conceived exactly for this space. And why wouldn't it be? Future D. Fidel's magnificent fictionalised autobiography, *Prize Fighter*, is set in a boxing ring, where Congolese-Australian refugee Isa (Pacharo Mzembe, sublime) fights light-heavyweight bouts that are about so much more than sport.

Through David Walters's blisteringly slick snap-lighting cues, Isa's horrific tale of bloodshed and enforced child-soldiering in his native Congo is interwoven with the actual boxing.

The genius is in the simplicity and the perfect execution of it. Just like in a title fight, the universe is contained within the most compact, tightly controlled of dramatic structures, just an hour of theatre rendering some too overwhelmed to join the standing ovation.

The key to it is Fidel's script which, be warned, is harrowingly graphic in parts. You're in from the first moment when Isa wins a fight but has a brain-snap in the process, risking elimination as his violence uncontrollably spills over.

In this masterly example of theatrical storytelling, the war crimes informing Isa's road to redemption are truly frightening, their impact all the more confronting because, onstage, they're done just once and done right. Theatrical credibility? You bet. As the pre-show fight-training routines demonstrate, these guys can really box, and when they hit the ring and each other, it's on, fair dinkum.

Then there are some remarkable theatrical debuts in an ensemble cast that has no weaknesses.

Recent National Institute of Dramatic Art graduate Thuso Lekwape is chilling as a child-soldier who's as reckless and cruel as would be expected from a boy forced to murder his own family. Sophia Emberson-Bain is radiant in various female roles, and the casting of Queensland theatre icon Margi Brown-Ash as boxing trainer Luke is inspired.

Ex-rugby league player Gideon Mzembe is the linchpin, doubling as the beloved missing brother and the title fight opponent, while Kenneth Ransom is brilliant in roles of both genders. Don't expect a fairytale ending, but somehow amid the shock you emerge uplifted at the end. It's gobsmacking, literally and figuratively, so take a bow, Chris Kohn, David Berthold and director Todd MacDonald, who nurtured it. It must tour.