

Playwright Future D Fidel draws on his past as a Congolese refugee in an energetic production let down by less-than-convincing performances

Review by Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore in *The Guardian*, 27 Sept 2015

As the audience files slowly into La Boite's theatre, transformed into a boxing ring for the debut of *Prize Fighter*, the cast trains to pumping music: some spar gently, some do punishing sets of push-ups, others whack the punching bag.

Prize Fighter tells the story of a promising young Congolese-born boxer called Isa (Pacharo Mzembe) preparing for what seems like the biggest fight of his life, the Australian national title. Egging him on is his trainer, the spunky, tough but affectionate, no-nonsense Luke (Margi Brown-Ash). She wants him to win.

The twisting limbs, jerking bodies and illusion of breaking bones that is Flex dancing is used to create a disturbing portrait of racial discrimination

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But when Isa loses control during a match and risks disqualification, it becomes apparent he is fighting much bigger battles. Unconsciously, he shifts his goal – no longer to win the title but to overcome the demons that haunt him.

In this new work the playwright, Future D Fidel, has drawn on his own harrowing story, lending the play a heartfelt authenticity. La Boite's artist-in-residence fled Congo when he was just 13 in the 1990s, during a war that killed millions. Orphaned and alone he made it to a refugee camp in Tanzania where he lived for eight years before moving to Australia in 2005.

The play is fashioned around a simple but effective premise. As the boxing unfolds on stage, Isa has flashbacks to his traumatic childhood. These include the murder of his family (his sister is raped in their home before being shot) and his enlistment as a child soldier, from which point he is forced to make his own life-or-death decisions.

Fidel has been credited with inspiring the Brisbane festival's new artistic director, David Berthold, to develop a strong African theme for his inaugural program, including a number of projects from Congo. Yet *Prize Fighter*'s strength not only lies in its revelations about that nation but about Australia, such as when Isa is questioned harshly by immigration officials and later when he asks, with a look of horror, what a sausage is.

The director, Todd MacDonald, injects vivacity into boxing scenes that appear real. It helps that Pacharo Mzembe, playing Isa, and his brother Gideon Mzembe, as Isa's opponent, are accomplished boxers. Mzembe not only looks the part, he juxtaposes his bulk and taut physique with a confused vulnerability. Meanwhile the boastful, lanky-limbed teenage soldier Kadogo (Thuso Lekwape) is portrayed as callously cruel yet childish.

For all Mzembe's talents outside and inside the ring, he gives a one-dimensional reading of the script. And much of the supporting acting – with individuals switching between multiple roles and (at times uneven) accents – felt more dutiful and well meaning than convincing. Although energetic and bursting with enthusiasm, *Prize Fighter* did not pack quite the punch that it should.