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Prize fighter Future D. Fidel packs a punch

The Congolese-Australian bringing a story about a refugee boxer to the stage.



By Christopher Currie

I step out of the buffeting Brisbane August winds and through the castle-like walls of La Boite theatre. While I wait I have a coffee at one of those ubiquitous foyer cafes that are designed for pausing rather than lingering. I observe a group of actors sitting around a table, resting or practising lines. The reason they're here, the reason I'm here, is a young man named Future D. Fidel, a Congolese-Australian playwright whose play *Prize Fighter* is one of the star attractions at this year's Brisbane Festival.

When Future walks in he greets me warmly. Unassuming is the word I initially and incorrectly attribute to him. His breathy laugh – a precursor, I'm to learn, to nearly everything he says – is not so much nervousness but a kind of audible barrier.

The cast are herded into La Boite's rehearsal space, a grey room with a raised square stage and the high-walled air of a science fiction cargo hold. It's here that preparations are under way for *Prize Fighter*, the story of Isa, a Congolese-born boxer preparing for and undertaking the literal fight of his life.

Prize Fighter's director, Todd MacDonald, is surprisingly inviting, considering I am encroaching on what is only the second week of rehearsals. "You can stay as long as you want," he says. "You won't see much of Future, though. He tends to be very quiet while we're rehearsing. He just sits and writes."

"He writes in here?" I say, probably a little too incredulously.

Todd nods. "Often we'll stop to ask him something – a detail about a scene – and he'll tell us a story that will blow us away." He motions to the corner of the room, where I notice Future hunched over his laptop perched on a tiny IKEA desk.

After a brief warm-up, four of the actors – Sophia, Margi, Kenneth and Thuso – start a type of circuit training, cycling between skipping, whaling on a punching bag and a sort of gruesome push-up/human crab combination. Meanwhile, on the raised stage, Pacharo "Pach" Mzembe (who plays Isa) and his brother Gideon begin to spar in gloves and headgear. To make it very clear, *Prize Fighter* is not just a play that features a boxer: it is a play that includes significant periods of choreographed boxing.

Throughout the course of two boxing matches, Isa is transported back to moments of his traumatic childhood, fleeing from a war-torn home, seeing his family killed by a militia he is then forced to join. Isa's opponent, we learn, is as much his own mind as the boxer in the opposite corner. Loud hip-hop begins to blast as the actors sprint around the room, before moving into intense scene-work in the ring, through Isa's childhood flashbacks and interspersed with Isa's interrogation by an Australian immigration official.

This mixture of the theatrical and the athletic seemed nearly impossible when I read an early version of the play, but seeing the actors in action – under the tutelage of fight director Nigel Poulton – I begin to think this extraordinary balancing act may just work.

Through it all, Future's tiny desk seems an oasis of calm, his face – frozen in its eternal half-smile – gently lit by his laptop screen. I have the strange impression of him as a schoolkid quietly doing his homework. Maybe it's the green mug of tea with his name taped to the front, or his enormous yellow watch that makes his arms look half their real size; I expect to look down and see his legs swinging underneath the chair, unable to find the floor.

It's only later, when I get a chance to properly talk to him, that I realise what a privileged idiot I am. As one of those modern breed of writers whose greatest personal injustices are spotty wi-fi and underwhelming coffee extraction, I suddenly feel intensely embarrassed to be talking to a young man who's lived through hellish war, loss of family and enforced statelessness, asking, "How can you possibly concentrate while music's playing?"

Future's narrative skills are not so much how much to tell, but how much to leave out. He assures me the character of Isa is only "5 per cent" him, but admits they share certain experiences. After the 1996 civil war, Future was forced to flee the Congo to Tanzania. He found out soon after that his mother had been killed, and his sister, who had left for university some years before, was nowhere to be found. He spent eight years in Nyarugusu, a Tanzanian refugee camp, before finally being granted refuge in Australia in 2005. He reunited with his sister, who had been in another refugee camp, also looking for him, a year earlier.

When I ask about his time in the camp, Future's speech is measured, almost coldly logical. He speaks of Nyarugusu as being safer than the outside world.

"When you know no one's going to come and kill you," he says, "life is a bit safer. But you're still battling against hunger, against illnesses that there may not be enough medication to treat. That's the way it was."

When I try to press him on what he makes of the Australian concept of the "refugee issue", on what he hopes the audience *learns* from his play, he gives me another of his disarming chuckles.

"The experience made me who I am," he says. "If I hadn't gone through these difficulties, or through the war, the refugee camp, I wouldn't be in Australia. What I want people to get from *Prize Fighter* is a lot of confidence. It doesn't matter what you've been through, or where you've come from. You can still make it."

Future's personal philosophy – one that lives up to his name – has no time for negativity.