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Theater Review: SUCKER PUNCH (Coeurage Theatre at Tiger Boxing Gym in West Hollywood)

by [Tony Frankel](#) on June 6, 2019

in [Theater-Los Angeles](#)



A PUNCH IN THE GUT



Raw as realism requires, good plays about boxing are more than just *Rocky* slugfests. Like Clifford Odets' seminal *Golden Boy*, they transform an atavistic popular distraction into a metaphor for sweet success, the reward of pluck and nerve — or, as the title of *Sucker Punch* implies, a parable on selling your soul in deals with the devil.

Director Michael A Shepperd's pile-driving, extraordinarily well-choreographed West Coast premiere — with

intense fight moves by Jen Albert — pulls no punches in galvanizing U.K. playwright Roy Williams’ pugilistic 2010 play about “Black British” dreamers. Coverage Theatre’s production — which actually takes place in a real sweat-smelling, cushioned-floor, metal-chair boxing gym — scores big as sheer sensation, engrossing storytelling, and high drama, even as a few of the perfectly cast performers are still settling into their roles. That it only plays for a week and a half boggles the mind. That it has a knockout scene for the books — made memorable because it was between two consummate actors, Rob Nagle and Gregor Manns — only heightens my recommendation.



Sadly, especially during the overly high-pitched first act, the dialogue — and therefore the story — is sometimes rendered impenetrable with the thick slang and accents almost too well-coached by Abigail Marks (you’ll wish there could be supertitles somehow). Thank goodness it slowed way down in the second act. But there was so much movement for the cast to handle (awesome blocking, Mr. Shepperd) that I fear it was tough for some performers to actively *listen* to others; some reactions seemed predestined.



Williams’ hothouse world centers on a scruffy working-class London gym seen from 1981 to 1988. It’s a time of race riots and class warfare, the ugly era of dominatrix Margaret Thatcher and her “soak-the-poor” reactionary regime, mired in recessions that spared minorities the least. Over this near decade we watch the disparate careers of two scrappy young boxers who bump gloves at local venues, the Olympic Games at L.A. in 1984, and a title bout back in Britain.



Williams' protagonist is a modern Job in his accursed misfortune. Leon Davidson (Rick K. Jackson) is a local African-British lad who chooses between friendship and career, family and fortune. His brawling mate Troy (Anthony Cloyd) also cleans toilets and mops the mat. Troy also feuds with Charlie Maggs (the always vital Nagle), the alcoholic white owner who bets too much too often, hoping his "boys" can make the big time and bail out his bad luck and worse choices. Briefly, these friends connect in a common cause. But bonds can break.



During the Brixton Riots of 1981, Leon and Troy make life-changing choices as they react to the racial violence, with the former following the line of least resistance. Allergic to his own happiness and badly advised by his feckless Jamaican dad Squid (the under-playing yet astoundingly accurate William Christopher Stephens), Leon neglects his once but not future girlfriend Becky (Mara Klein, more tough than tender), Charlie's estranged daughter. For color contrast there's also Tommy (Brandon Ruiter), a white boxer who leaves Charlie's gym for better venues and bigger purses.



Nagle's performance is so piercingly right-on, and his accent so meticulous, and his drunk scene so convincing, that at times I swore the play is about Charlie (in some ways I think it is, as he represents the old world trying to keep up with the new). But the true find here is Gregor Manns as Ray, a ruthless U.S. manager; as happy as I was to watch this force field demanding respect and delivering the opposite, I was equally as happy not to be in his face.



Sucker Punch may have more axes to grind than points to make, but Williams' action painting is nonetheless dynamic — in drive if not destination. Not one person working on or behind this show escapes getting covered in glory. Now all we need is for the first act to bre-e-e-ath and some serious diction.



photos by John Klopping

Sucker Punch

Coeurage Theater Company

Tiger Boxing Gym

708 N. Gardner Street in West Hollywood

ends on June 23, 2019

for tickets, visit [Coeurage](#)

Sunday, June 16 at 2

Sunday, June 16 at 7

Monday, June 17 at 8

Wednesday, June 19 at 8

Thursday, June 20 at 8

Friday, June 21 at 8

Saturday, June 22 at 2

Saturday, June 22 at 8

Sunday, June 23 at 2

Sunday, June 23 at 7