

The Royale at Geva delivers a punch without throwing one



Jamal James (left) and Rochester-raised Dazmann Still in *The Royale* at Geva. (Photo: Geva)

The creators of *The Royale*, running through April 28 at the Geva Theatre Center, have noted that no punches are thrown in the fight scenes of this intense play about a heavyweight boxer.

That choice — a good one, as it turns out — is certainly not because the play is squeamish about violence. The storyline, after all, takes an unflinching look at Jim Crow America.

But it's hard to imagine a conventional boxing scene working on stage — especially for an audience that's been exposed to Hollywood's vast catalog of boxing films.

Imagine actors trying to simulate a fight on stage without the benefit of cinematography, editing and special effects? So *The Royale*, directed by Pirrone Yousefzadeh, uses a dramatic interpretation of fights rather than trying to mimic them.

But this is not a work-around. Judging from Saturday's opening-night performance, our exposure to Hollywood boxing scenes actually preps us well to conjure the action. The audience brings with it a memory bank full of exacting boxing imagery. All it needs are some well-crafted prompts for the fight scene to play out perfectly in the imagination.

The approach comes with a lot of creative risk. But *The Royale* delivers, and a great deal of the fun lies in being transported into the scene by the deft acting, inspired stagecraft and one's own imagination. When the lights go down, it feels like being ringside in 1905 — enough to almost smell the cigar smoke.

In short, the storytelling is excellent. As for the story itself, well, it's a work of art in its own right. Although most of the play takes place in a boxing ring or a training room, it's not essentially about boxing or the punishing violence of boxing. No: All the real issues and the real violence take place outside the ring.

Jay "The Sport" Jackson with "toes like Jack Nimble" and "fists like John Henry" is a black boxer who has the goods to make a run at becoming America's first black heavyweight champion. But will the racists in America let that happen?

Jamal James plays Jackson, a would-be champion forced to live life as a second-class citizen, and he plays it well. We learn from him what we learn in seemingly every boxing story. We learn what propels that person to stand half naked in a ring and risk losing blood, teeth and dignity. Jackson's unique motivation is revealed slowly and eloquently in the face of uniquely frightening risks.

Not a single moment of the 70-minute run time is wasted. And although award-winning playwright Marco Ramirez's script is hard-hitting, it's not without some humor and plenty of heart. The cast of five, meanwhile, provides warmth, rage and regret with near perfect pitch.

As with most good narratives and good boxing matches, the tension grows round after round. And in the Geva's intimate Fielding Stage, the tension is palpable. This show would pack less punch in row "EE" than it does in row "E." Fortunately, *The Royale*, which has only appeared in small theaters since its 2013 debut, puts us in the room with these terrific actors, an artful production and an important story that come together for rousing theater.

The main character — and presumably the play's premise — was inspired by Jack Johnson, who in 1908, long before Jackie Robinson and Muhammed Ali broke the barriers they did, became the first black heavyweight champion. But becoming the champ didn't make Johnson a hero to everyone, especially with Jim Crow laws in place to bring him down.

If one went looking for a flaw in the show, it could be that it covers some well-trodden ground. But even so, *The Royale* has plenty new to say about the struggle for equality. It serves as a reminder of how far we've come and how far we still have to go. In an America where racism lately has been raising its ugly head — where "black lives matter" is uttered without a shred of irony — it's a welcome reminder.