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Photo: Mark Garvin

Y'all Come to See A Fight?

by Sophiann Moore

[Theatre Philadelphia](#) and [thINKingDANCE](#) continue our partnership, begun in 2018, bringing coverage and new perspectives to Philadelphia's vibrant theatre scene.

Heavy are the shoulders that carry the weight of an entire race's future. *The Royale*, an award-winning play by Marco Ramirez and directed by Zuhairah McGill at the Lantern Theater Company, is powerfully heart-wrenching with each blow the characters serve in and outside the ring. Inspired by the life of Jack "The Sport" Johnson, the story immerses us into the world of boxing during the time of Jim Crow, as an African American boxer fights to be the best at all costs.

As soon as the play begins, we hear the "ding" and the announcer quickly transports the audience into the early 1900s. During a boxing match between Jack Johnson and Fish Hawkins, Jack's (played by Philip Brown) booming presence is an enjoyable mashup against Fish's (played by Kahlil A. Wyatt) ambitious determination. Through McGill's choreography of swift footwork and powerful claps, Jack once again is the unofficial Negro Heavyweight Champion. This is a great accomplishment in his boxing career, but he wants to be seen as an equal not just in the boxing ring but throughout society. Jack Johnson challenges the recently retired white heavyweight champion, Bixby, to the "Fight of the Decade," but Bixby will only participate if he receives 90% of the winnings.

Jack prepares with his reliable trainer Wynton and now sparring partner Fish to be the all-around Heavyweight Champion of the world, but reality sets in as his promoter, Max, and sister, Nina, remind him of what else is at stake if he wins. Max (played passionately by Gregory Isaac) makes it clear to Jack and Wynton what it would mean for a Black Heavyweight champion to beat a White Heavyweight champion and the anger it will stir up. Nina provides an intense reminder while arguing with Jack that what he sets out to accomplish does not only affect him, but an entire race that does not have the luxury of protection to keep the violence of racism from their doorsteps. Max and Nina highlight the fear and racism that have been lingering outside of the ring the whole time.

As the fight gets closer and closer, we're brought into an intimate bubble where we see another side of Jack Johnson. We see his vulnerability and the inner turmoil he faces in the way he feverishly punches the air as if fighting an invisible opponent. He realizes that whatever decision he makes will have a ripple effect that goes beyond just him. In the end, Jack "The Sport" Johnson had an important decision to make and being witness to the life-altering events took my breath away and left the audience in quiet captivation. *The Royale*'s strong cast beautifully executed their performance and set the stage ablaze as they left us with messages about racism, prejudice, and how we can each grow as individuals to build a more equal society.

[The Royale](#), Lantern Theater Company, November 10-December 11.

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