



Theater: Lupita 'Eclipsed;' Snug 'Red Speedo;' TKO for 'The Royale'

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By Michael Giltz

ECLIPSED *** out of ****

RED SPEEDO *** out of ****

THE ROYALE ** 12 out of ****

ECLIPSED *** out of ****

GOLDEN THEATRE

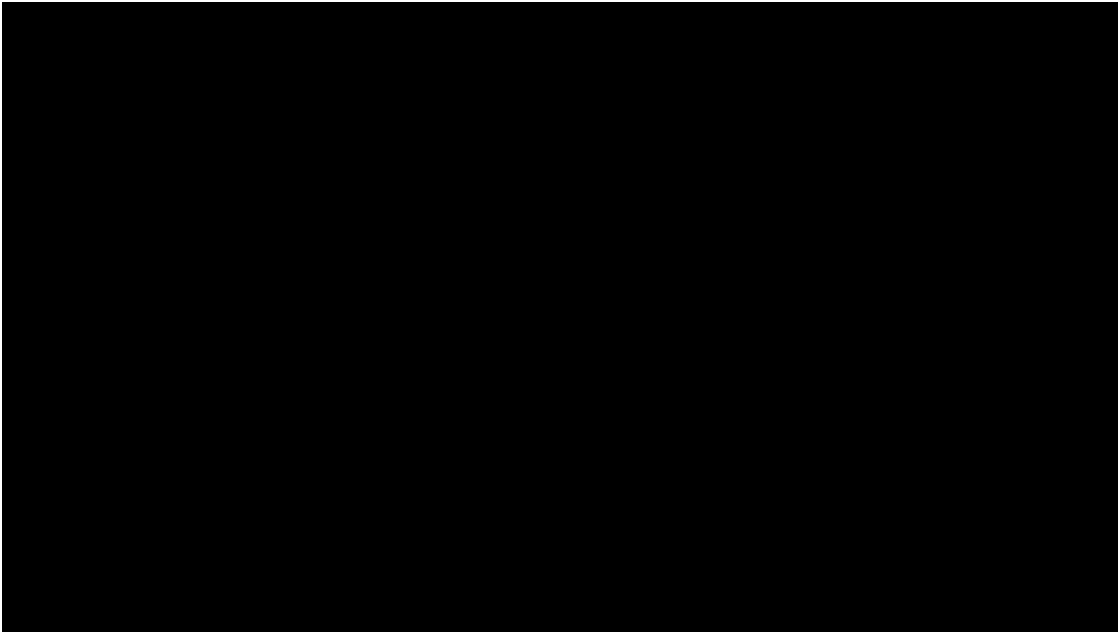
It's always a pleasure to see a serious new drama playing on Broadway. The fact that it stars a rising movie star who sees value in tackling theater is a bonus. When the playwright of *Eclipsed* -- Danai Gurira -- also has a well reviewed comedy playing Off Broadway at Playwrights Horizons called *Familiar* AND is a formidable presence on TV's blockbuster hit *The Walking Dead*, you have to shake your head and ask yourself: where are we, London? (In London, actors are also writers and directors and producers, while everyone jumps back and forth between movies and theater and tv and radio when not publishing books on the side with almost unseemly ease.)

Eclipsed features an ensemble of women, almost all of them former or current prisoners of a war lord in the strife-ridden land of Liberia. They are raped, used up and tossed aside. The women must either compete with one another for a slim chance of survival or band together and trust to their shared humanity. That humanity is slipping away when an outsider named Rita (Akosua Busia) comes in and asks a simple but piercing question: what is your name? Not "Wife #3" or "Wife #1" as they now call each other, but the name their families gave them before all of this terror began. Some are afraid to share this last scrap of their former life; others simply can't remember.

Their humanity has been eclipsed by violence but it's still there. Wife #1 (Saycon Sengbloh) may not be #1 when it comes to their overlord's violent needs. But she oversees the daily duties of others and who gets what when precious clothing or food is handed out. Wife #3 (Pascale Armand) may moan about having to service the man and wishing it were over "quick quick." Wife #2 (Zainab Busia) may look flashier and more confident than ever, sporting a gun now that she's abandoned the role of victim and become a soldier, inflicting her own vicious dominance over others rather than suffer it herself.

Yet they all instinctively want to protect the Girl (Lupita Nyong'o). Wife #1 and #3 hide her as long as they can from the predatory rape of their captor. Wife #2 (Zainab Jah) thinks to offer Girl the "protection" of a gun: isn't

it better to abuse others than be abused yourself? And the peace-brokering Rita -- a member of a delegation of upper class women -- is both pushing for an end to the war and searching for her own lost daughter. Could the Girl be that child? And even if she isn't, won't Rita want to protect her as much as the others?



It must be said that *Eclipsed* is good but stands in the shadow of *Ruined*, the Pulitzer Prize winning play by Lynn Nottage about women in the war-town Democratic Republic Of Congo. One wants to be seared by the story of *Eclipsed* but never quite feels it the bone-deep way one did with *Ruined*. Nonetheless, Gurira has a gift for establishing characters and weaving in a natural humor. The play is strongest when staying right with Wife #1 and her desire to survive with both her life and a compassion for others intact. A joke about them reading aloud from Bill Clinton's memoir grows from an amusing gag to a useful way of illuminating the culture they are steeped in and finally a touching contrast to their existence.

But *Eclipsed* falters by introducing a gun in act one and not having it go off in act three, as they say. Their world is steeped in violence and while violence is constantly occurring off stage, it feels wrong that the characters themselves don't face a moment where that violence intrudes even further. It feels inevitable that Wife #2 will kill one of them or The Girl (briefly armed and trained for fighting) will kill Wife #2 to defend them. You certainly didn't want anyone to come to harm, but the stakes are too high to avoid this showdown. Frankly, someone needed to die.

Further, the show ends confusingly with an image of The Girl torn between the false promise of being a soldier and fleeing for safety. It's confusing because we sensed that decision had already been made.

Nyong'o herself is eclipsed as well by the talents of everyone around her. That's all to the good. She acquits herself well in her Broadway debut and is wise to be part of an ensemble bursting with good actors. (One hopes Forest Whitaker will return soon under similar circumstances.) It's no discredit to her that the others

with more stage work shine brighter. Jah has swagger as Wife #2 and Busia keeps Rita from being a superior scold. Sengbloh is effortlessly riveting, immediately commanding our attention and the obedience of the women around her. You don't doubt for a second that she's in charge. And Armand has a blast as the spiky Wife #3, always angling for the best new clothes or complaining about the favors granted to the Girl, adding welcome humor and very human selfishness of the ordinary sort in extraordinary circumstances. (Her basic decency is never in doubt.)

Director Liesl Tommy has molded the actors into a true ensemble. While the sound design of Broken Chord seamlessly set the scene, I was of two minds about their original music. The costume design of Clint Ramos was very good but the scenic work seemed designed for a smaller space. Once or twice, when the room where most of the action took place was turned this way and that, it felt like the show was making do rather than achieving a cohesive vision. The lighting design of Jen Schriever was an asset throughout.

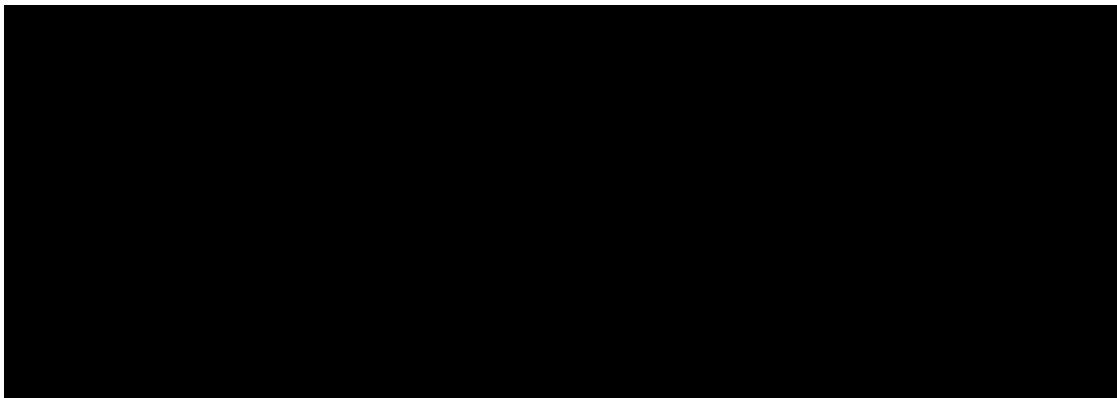
Still, the sense of satisfaction in seeing this work on Broadway remains. This drama introduces a wider audience to a group of very talented actors and establishes Nyong'o as a burgeoning presence in the theater. And we already know that Gurira will be heard from again because she already has. If *Eclipsed* isn't a stone cold masterpiece, it's clearly the next stage in a number of promising careers.

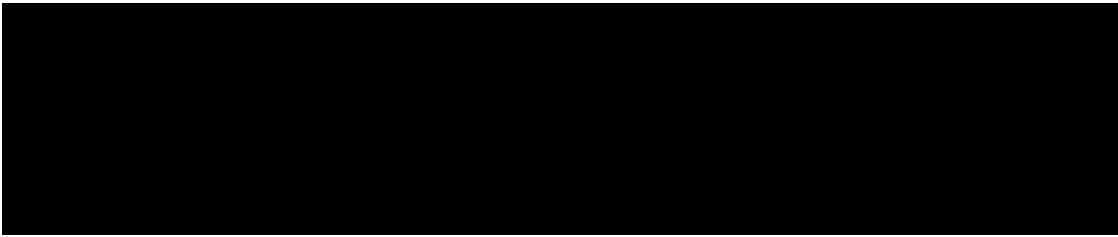
RED SPEEDO *** out of ****

NEW YORK THEATRE WORKSHOP

Red Speedo is the latest addition to the increasingly substantial body of work by playwright Lucas Hnath. If you're serious about the theater, you have to see his shows and read his plays and look forward to whatever is next with anticipation. I first saw *Isaac's Eye*, a play about Newton that struck me as exceptionally intelligent and entertaining. It remains my favorite of his work. Next was a formally daring piece about Walt Disney. And now that has been followed in quick order by two more plays, both button-pushing in their way. *The Christians* is about an evangelical preacher who confesses to his congregation that he's having a crisis of faith. And *Red Speedo* revolves around an Olympic hopeful swimmer, performance enhancing drugs and how the lure of fame and fortune can warp everyone tantalized by the prospect of success.

Each play is bracingly smart. Each finds its particular voice by toying with presentation. (*The Christians* is given the setting of a church and the actors brandish microphones like preachers on Sunday; *Red Speedo* features a giant swimming pool across the length of the stage where the actor playing the swimmer starts off the night by diving in and swimming a few laps.) Each play involves a crisis of faith in one form or another. And each feels like the work of an artist still flexing his muscles, still figuring out what he can do. Hnath, I believe, is just getting started.





Red Speedo is disarmingly direct. It begins with rat-a-tat dialogue between two men as the swimmer Ray (Alex Breaux) stands between them, dumbly silent in his red Speedo as they duke it out. Performance-enhancing drugs have been discovered at the site where they train. The coach (Peter Jay Fernandez) has every intention of reporting the PEDs to the proper authorities, even though they're on the eve of the Olympic trials. Peter (Lucas Caleb Rooney) is the swimmer's brother and his agent; he'd prefer the PEDs be tossed out and ignored. The PEDs belong to another swimmer but even the *possibility* of being tainted by association with PEDs freaks Peter out since Ray is about to make the Olympic team and sign an endorsement deal with Speedo that will make them both rich. (Hey, a brother has to get his cut.)

Each scene in the brisk, always engrossing work reveals new information. Actually, the PEDs are Ray's after all, even though Peter and the coach don't know it. And what a tangled history everyone has here. Peter wants Ray to abandon his long-time coach and go with another, better known figure in the swimming world. Ray wants Peter to get him some more PEDs, since he knows he can't win without them. The coach wants to keep Ray in-house since his swimming facility is failing financially and after years of letting Ray train for free, this is the coach's chance to finally profit from his work with Ray. Peter wants to quit his miserable job as a lawyer and become a sports agent full-time. And Ray's ex-girlfriend Lydia (Zo Winters) just wishes he'd stood up for her against his brother Peter, who keeps running her down and fed info to another lawyer that destroyed her career.

Shifting loyalties? That doesn't begin to describe the twisted loyalties and undercurrents on display here. Add in that spare, machine gun dialogue between Peter and the Coach and you might think we're in David Mamet territory. Not quite. That opening barrage of elliptical banter feels more rarified and spare than the earthy terrain of Mamet. And while most everyone proves far more complex than expected (even the seemingly dim Ray), Hnath doesn't paint villains and heroes or delight in showing everyone morally compromised. He shows everyone as human and complicated, with people doing what's good for themselves happily overlapping most of the time with what's good for others, so why look too deep when they don't? You'll just drown.

Red Speedo doesn't quite get the gold. As with *The Christians*, it's not completely at home in the world that's depicted. *The Christians* did not seem like a play by someone who felt the pulse of Sunday sermons in their blood. Here, the world of Olympic competition also isn't precisely detailed: swimmers who are "certain" to make the Olympic team and are setting records left and right would probably already be locked up with sponsors or at the very least the center of a bidding war. Peter would have no need to pretend Speedo had competitors for signing Ray. The idea of switching coaches months before the Olympics certainly happens but even the malleable Ray would speak up more forcefully about the obvious dangers. Even if Peter is meant to

be seen as a pretty clueless agent, the lack of loyalty to a coach that had trained Ray without charging for years would be a blot on the Olympian to say the least. At the very least, it would be part of their thinking. Toss in some asides like the cover-up of a disastrous car crash (a late but passing reference) and *Red Speedo* feels a body shave and a few meets short of competition-ready.

On the other hand, the enigmatic finale toying with violence that segues smoothly from steroid-induced rage to brotherly sparring is weird and awkward and...interesting. Not wholly successful perhaps but absolutely interesting. All the technical elements overseen by director Lileana Blain-Cruz are first rate. And the cast is exceptional. Fernandez is always good, especially here when making his case to Ray. Rooney is appropriately hard to pin down as the wily, always talking Peter. Breaux is easy to underestimate as Ray; it's by far the trickiest role: a not-so-bright guy who is revealed to have his own internal drama going on. Breaux gets the humor and the humanity of Ray, avoiding the trap of turning him into some sort of duplicitous figure and settling on a confused, appealing but not wholly trustworthy dude. You understand he and Peter and brothers in many ways.

And Winters is just sensational as Lydia, tilting the play into an entirely new perspective when she takes the stage. Winters plays Lydia as sharp, down to earth and perhaps the only character who (mostly) tells the truth to others and even herself. You immediately like her, which makes you immediately like Peter less and Ray more. If she likes Ray, he must have more going on than we expect. It's a reminder how the casting of even one role (the NYTW casting director is Jack Doulin) can dramatically change how we understand a play and the dynamics between the players.

Hnath is blessed again with a strong production of his work. Now what's next?

THE ROYALE ** 12 out of ****

LINCOLN CENTER THEATRE AT THE MITZI E. NEWHOUSE

Lincoln Center's varied stages continue their tradition of giving new playwrights an excellent platform. *The Royale* -- by Marco Ramirez of TV's *Orange Is The New Black* and *Daredevil* - is boldly theatrical, well-acted and the very definition of "promising." Like Lucas Hnath and Danai Gurira, he is clearly a writer to watch.

Set around 1900, *The Royale* is inspired by the saga of Jack Johnson, the first official heavyweight champion of the world to be black. (Others probably deserved the title before him but were never given the chance.) Here called Jay, the boxer cuts a familiar figure to people of today who take Muhammad Ali for granted. Jay is a huge draw for fans and clearly the challenger most worthy of fighting for the title. But the white owner of that title is retired and has absolutely nothing to gain by giving a black man the chance to dethrone him. But while Jay talks and boasts and mocks and cajoles, money talks even louder.

Yes, there's money to be made in a fight between the reigning champ and the dusky dark knight who would dare to take him on. A lot of money. When the champ finally relents and offers to fight it's only on the absurd, insulting demand that the champ get 90% of the prize money. Jay accepts and the fight is on. (In real life, Jack Johnson got about a third of the cut compared to the champ's two-thirds. A lot less, but still nearly \$2 million in today's dollars.) A last minute wrinkle occurs when Jay's sister appears out of nowhere right before the fight, warning him about the turmoil to come if he fights. Indeed, after Jack Johnson won, race riots broke out across the country and people were killed via lynching or stabbing or simply being beaten to death. But the fight is inevitable.



The Royale is given a pretty sterling production, with the Mitzi E. Newhouse turned into a convincing turn of the century venue complete with wooden steps and barriers holding back the audience. (The effective sets are by Nick Vaughan.) All other elements -- including the lighting by Austin R. Smith, the costumes by Dede M. Ayite and especially the sound by Matt Hubbs which creates an entire world beyond the ring -- are top-notch.

So is the cast. Tony nominee Montego Glover is head-spinningly different from her acclaimed work in *Memphis*. Clearly, she should be getting better and more prominent roles. McKinley Belcher III is amusing and sweet as Fish, the competitor turned sparring partner who serves as a humanizing perspective onto the violent sport of boxing. John Lavelle is nicely subtle as the promoter Max. The great Clarke Peters of TV's *The Wire* brings immediate authority to the trainer Wynton. And Khris Davis is very good as Jay, allowing the boxer to remain convincingly human but driven to win, when a lesser actor might have gone hog wild with the braggadocio.

I especially liked the staging of the fights themselves, overseen by director Rachel Chavkin. Capturing a sport onstage is tricky and *The Royale* wisely goes for theatricality. (The Broadway mounting of *Rocky* made the mistake of trying for realism; though highly acclaimed by others it seemed a miserable choice to me and this show demonstrates a smarter way to capture the sport.) When two boxers are fighting, one of them either stomps their feet or lifts and drops one of the wooden posts for a resounding thud, while the other actor faces the crowd and reels from the impact. It's simple and effective.

The Royale somewhat lets itself down by leaning too heavily on such devices. The actors clap in unison repeatedly throughout the show at key moments. It's a modest attention-grabber. But it's never as good as the staging of the fights and is used way, way too frequently. Better if they had done it at the start and then dropped it.

Similarly, a press conference has a great conceit: when Jay faces a tough question, one that might taunt him into making a "provocative" statement, his trainer Wynton is on the sidelines offering tips like "Keep your hands up" and "Breathe," elegantly comparing an actual fight to the sparring with the press that Jay must bob and weave through. Unfortunately, instead of saving this effective idea for just a few racially charged queries by the press, it's used incessantly, diminishing its power.

Finally, the emotional climax comes when Jay's sister confronts him, urging the boxer not to fight because people will suffer if he wins. (Never mind that people will continue to suffer every day whether he fights or not.) Jay brings up how he's fighting for her because when they were growing up she would see ads for beauty products and the women in them never looked like her. She responds with a lengthy charge that is a little confusing and not terribly convincing. The match begins and cleverly Glover is the stand-in for the white champ, with Jay having to battle his own demons -- his own sister, in a way -- when fighting for glory.

But Glover is not nearly as good at stomping her feet. The sound she makes in their fight is tepid in comparison. It should have been augmented by the other actors or the sound design. Worse, Jay makes another speech, again bringing up the ads for beauty products featuring women who don't look like her. And then he describes a scene so overwrought and fearsome I thought Jay was describing his sister being raped by a white man, when in fact it was him stumbling upon her trying to unkink her hair. It was a wholly misjudged, repetitive speech and comes at the climax of the play, much to its detriment.

That's a shame since after her earlier plea, Jay met with his trainer Wynton. Here Peters is given a treat of a monologue, an enigmatic but powerful story of his own dawning realization about the violence of boxing and making peace or at least acknowledging how a black boxer is in some way simply dancing for the white man. Unlike the speeches of the two siblings, it feels real and vivid and passionate, without ever spelling out the obvious. It gave us everything we needed to know to launch into the final bout with passion. Instead, it was lessened in our memory by the more prosaic speech that came later from Jay. Finally, they showed Jay as timid and doubtful in the ring at the climax, uncertain over what to do. That too is unsatisfying.

The Royale would have been stronger if they had pared some of the artifice, if they'd cut back on the speechifying toward the end and allowed Jay to enter the ring with the fierce determination he needed to triumph. Cold, hard reality was going to sucker punch him soon enough -- let the man have at least a moment of triumph.

THEATER OF 2016

Employee Of The Year (Under The Radar at Public) ***

Germinal (Under The Radar At Public) *** 1/2

Fiddler On The Roof 2015 Broadway revival with Danny Burstein ** 1/2

Skeleton Crew ***

Noises Off (2016 Broadway revival) ** but *** if you've never seen it before

The Grand Paradise ***

Our Mother's Brief Affair * 1/2

Something Rotten ***

Sense & Sensibility (Bedlam revival) *** 1/2

Broadway & The Bard * 1/2

Prodigal Son **

A Bronx Tale: The Musical **
Buried Child (2016 revival w Ed Harris) **
Nice Fish ***
Broadway By The Year: The 1930s at Town Hall ***
Hughie **
Pericles (w Christian Camargo) * 1/2
Straight ** 1/2
Eclipsed ***
Red Speedo ***
The Royale ** 1/2

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.

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