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THE FRISCO FLASH

Overview and History

Cecil Lewis “Young Jack” Thompson was born in 1904 in Los Angeles and died at a relatively young age in 1946 again in his hometown. However, from the 1920s through the 1930s, he boxed first in northern California, then in Los Angeles, eventually rising to world welter weight champion – the first African American to achieve a boxing title in more than 21 years after Jack Johnson won the boxing crown that so enraged the white populace.

Boxing was *the* sport to escape from poverty as well as gain some social respect. Not surprisingly Young Jack’s story intersected with other boys from their respective ghettos - in particular a Jewish and an Irish boxer¹ - who were his rivals and likewise ended up champs. Unfortunately, for nearly all of these boxers, the fall from grace was as sharp as the rise. But Young Jack is particularly forgotten today. There are no books or even chapters of books written about him.

Thus, I wrote “The Frisco Flash” partially as a quest to re-dress that injustice, but also because the era itself proved to fascinate and directly reverberate with our current political and social turmoil.

While I’ve of course fictionalized, compressed, and created amalgams of multiple real people, this play is essentially factual, and deeply based on my own original historical research – newspaper accounts, historical film footage, photographs, marriage and death certificates, court transcripts and census records. Additionally, I was able to make use of secondary research in regards to the general era and additional facts regarding the Irish and Jewish boxers.

The cast is made up of 5 men (3 Caucasian and 2 African-American) and 2 women (1 African-American and 1 Caucasian) who would all play these multiple roles. The genre is heightened realism mixed with surrealism. It especially utilizes the devices of Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht’s Epic Theatre, including projections, breaking the fourth wall, song and dance. Additionally, the actual fight scenes range from highly stylized to brutal realism.

¹ *In real life, these would be Jackie Fields and Jimmy McLarnin, but I’ve fictionalized both slightly, combining their stories with other boxers and my imagination, thus in the play they are Jackie Grant and Jimmy McClary*

The play begins in the present day in the Angelus Rosedale Cemetery where the developing relationship between the ghosts of Young Jack and an African American teen named Lewis both serves as a recurring framing device for the historical story, as well as makes explicit how the past informs the present.

The plot of the historical story evolves non-linearly, shifting back and forth in time to go beyond the three boxers' main careers on into the 1940s, 1957, 1983 and the 1990s. These later events include not only Young Jack's early death, but also a precedent setting court case when Jack's sister sued the publisher of Ebony and Jet magazines regarding the publication of a false story about how Jack died.

The themes and motifs of the play include parental – child relationships (positive, negative and in-between), capitalistic exploitation, bigotry and racism, identity, immigration, justice and ultimately, **survival and redemption**.