

REVIVAL

★★★★

Through Sunday, May 7
Ward Theatre Company, Durham
www.wardtheatrecompany.com

THE ROYALE

★★★★

Through Sunday, April 23
Burning Coal Theatre Company, Raleigh
www.burningcoal.org

It's generally good advice for a theater critic to review the performers and not the audience. But **REVIVAL**, the quirky, atmospheric new work from Ward Theatre Company, renders that counsel null and void.

As in last summer's *I Wish You a Boat*, director Wendy Ward and her company have transformed their modest studio into an evocative place—one far removed, in time and space, from its mundane office park surroundings. After that earlier production placed us in steerage aboard a doomed ocean liner, now a doorway veiled in floor-length pieces of sturdy, cream-colored canvas takes us into an old-time tent bedecked with strings of clear and colored lights hanging overhead. At one end of the space, the following is written in large, red capital letters: "He will make your paths straight. Fear the Lord and turn away from evil."

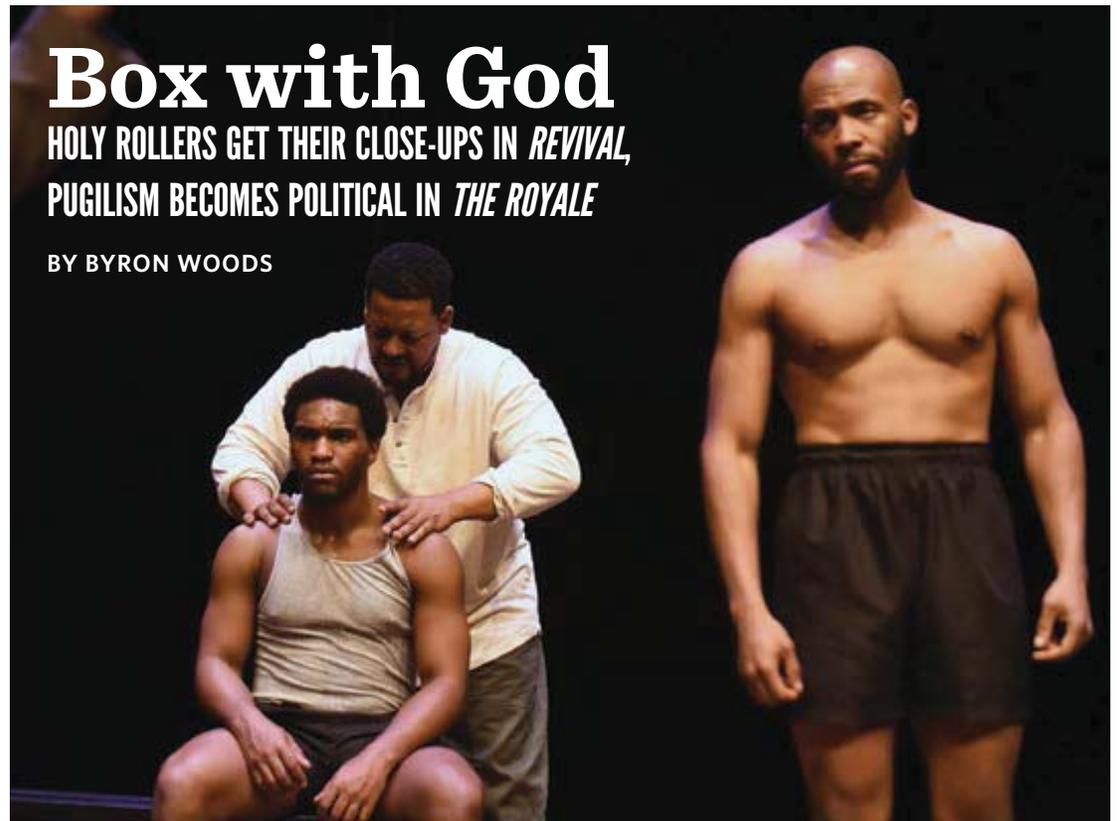
As crickets chirp in the distance, Mae (Alexandra Petkus), a young woman in a plain gray fifties housedress, sits on the mourner's bench, wilted from the day's exertions. She beckons the tent's other occupant, a teacher named Ephraim (Evit Emerson), to stop putting up chairs and tell her, again, of the religious vision he had.

In this visitation, the deity doesn't split the skies or raise the dead. Instead, he helps Ephraim straighten up his bedroom, do the laundry, and grade some papers, which prompts Ephraim to marvel, "And the marks were fair and just!"

It's a quiet, telling moment amid an annual tent revival—multiday summertime church camp gatherings that have been a social and spiritual high point in Appalachian Christianity for well over a century. Dramaturgical research, another Ward Theatre hallmark, is in evidence in the compiled text for this self-styled "collage." In one of the excerpted sermons, I recognized passages from Alan Lomax's Appalachian field recordings for the Library of Congress.

But the production takes an unexpected twist during the dramatized sermons: the preacher, Pastor Ralph Hewitt (Brandon Cooke), is never seen. When only his voice resonates through loudspeakers, all that's left for us to focus on is his audience—the congregation.

We face them straight on and watch the



Sheldon Mba, Philip Bernard Smith, and Preston Campbell in *The Royale* PHOTO COURTESY OF THE RIGHT IMAGE PHOTOGRAPHY INC.

Box with God

HOLY ROLLERS GET THEIR CLOSE-UPS IN *REVIVAL*,
PUGILISM BECOMES POLITICAL IN *THE ROYALE*

BY BYRON WOODS

different ways they respond—or don't—to the down-home appeals and cautions of the reverend. Some have clearly brought their troubles with them to this separate, sacred place. Dwight (Chadwick Thompson), who occasionally pulls from a flask, lost his wife two weeks earlier. Margery Rinaldi's Artie, tasked with the camp cooking, is at odds with her taciturn husband, Spark (Rick Skarbez).

The rousing songs and liturgical dances that punctuate these proceedings are borrowed from contemporary R&B, blues, rap, and gospel music, but their fervor is not far removed from the Pentecostal expressions of faith this work is based on. Faith is also made manifest as the congregants eagerly

interact, vocally and physically, with the preacher. Hands are lifted in supplication as a spiritual point hits home; wounded souls nod earnestly as they seek comfort and confirmation in the pastor's words.

Ward's strategic focus verges on voyeurism as we explore the faces of people having religious experiences of varying intensity. As Evelyn (Dominique Barnes) leads soulful renditions of "Trying to Make Heaven My Home" and "Angels in Heaven," Elsie (a striking Kara Phelps) grapples with the spirit moving among the congregants, and Artie physically surrenders to the moment.

I must observe that a sequence depicting schisms among the group in rap form is less effective, and certain gestures begin to lose

their impact when the same actors repeat them too often. Still, an eerie water ceremony at the close overcomes many earlier doubts. At this distance, I'm still not certain if I was moved in places by something holy, or by the naked needs of the humans before me—needs that were met in some cases and not in others. Perhaps they're one and the same, in the end. Still, I can report, without doubt, that I was moved.

There's a magic moment when a gifted boxer whaling on a speedbag—a weighted, teardrop-shaped leather sack about the size of a human head, suspended from an overhead stand—transcends calisthenics and enters the realm

of music. Slowly at first, and then faster, the taped fists tap out paradiddles with the moving bag. A change of attack alters the barrage from sixteenth notes to triplets; a glancing blow to the side introduces syncopation. A chain of unexpected change-ups invokes a drum solo worthy of Billy Cobham, Bill Bruford, or John Bonham.

There's a reason, then, when prizefighter Jay "The Sport" Jackson (Preston Campbell) says he's playing "just a little jazz" in the ring during his opening bout with Purley "Fresh Fish" Hawkins (Sheldon Mba) in the 2015 drama **THE ROYALE**, now showing at Burning Coal. When the newcomer gives the champ a run for his money, Jackson exults, "We makin' music, boy!"

A play about boxing should be markedly physicalized. In this rewarding production, guest director Avis HatcherPuzzo establishes the facts of human percussion and its impact on the body from the outset, when Campbell and Mba, dressed in boxing shorts and gloves, stomp out a pattern across designer Trevor Carrier's old wooden ringside set. When these and other actors face off in a match, HatcherPuzzo has them reinforce the landing of their scripted blows with the same percussive footwork in a theatrical coup de grace.

In his fictionalized version of the "Fight of the Century," the first interracial match for the world heavyweight boxing championship, held during the Jim Crow era, in 1910, playwright Marco Ramirez focuses on the psychology of boxing, from the "inside game" of a fighter's thoughts during a match to the life events that drive him into the ring in the first place.

Yes, Jackson (the stand-in for real-world fighter Jack Johnson), trainer Wynton (a robust Philip Bernard Smith), and manager Max (a vacillating Alex DeVirgilis) are all aware that this bout will permanently change racial relationships in the United States. Jackson's long-estranged, apprehensive sister, Nina (a strong Danielle Long) predicts a violent backlash as she upbraids him for the single-mindedness of his pursuit. "I know you're ready to win," she chides. "I just don't think the rest of us are."

Smith's vivid monologue about Wynton's coming-of-age as a boxer is a stand-out moment in *The Royale's* second act, and the staging of the championship bout will raise eyebrows as it uncovers who and what Jackson's really fighting, and why he has chosen a career that ultimately amounts to "get[ting] punched in the face for a living." Campbell's authoritative performance makes this inquiry into the mind of a prizefighter a hard-hitting show. Strongly recommended.

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