

Theater Interview: Actor Jerod Haynes Shines in ‘The Royale’

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CHICAGO – One of the most well-received 2015 theater performances in Chicago has been from actor Jerod Haynes as boxer Jay Jackson, in American Theater Co’s production of “The Royale.” Inspired by real life boxer Jack Johnson, the play is about setting up an early 1900s heavyweight championship, for the first time in U.S. history, between a black and white boxer.

The play is magnificently incendiary, told through a series of dialogue scenes and monologues. Haynes is magnetic as the mercurial Johnson, and communicates the intelligence, skill and frustration of being a notable African American in a less tolerant time. “The Royale” runs until March 29th, 2015, and is written by Marco Ramirez (“Orange is the New Black”) and directed by ATC ensemble member Jaime Castañeda.



Jerod Haynes as Jay Jackson in ‘The Royale’

Photo credit: Michael Brosilow for American Theater Co.

Actor Jerod Haynes is a native Chicagoan, born and raised on the South Side. He has remarkably portrayed three other significant African American male roles in his varied career – as Bigger Thomas in “Native Son” (Chicago’s Court Theatre), Tom Robinson in a Milwaukee Repertory Theater production of “To Kill a Mockingbird” and over 100 performances as Walter Lee in “Raisin in the Sun” for TimeLine Theatre in Chicago. He will also make an appearance this Wednesday, March 11th (8pm Central Time), on the FOX-TV hit show, “Empire.”

HollywoodChicago.com caught up to Jerod Haynes, as he spoke eloquently about the issues present in “The Royale,” and his personal

journey as an actor.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was the first thing you noticed that you had in common with Jack Johnson, the heavyweight champion that was the basis for the character of Jay in ‘The Royale’?

Jerod Haynes: Just from a very basic level, his ambition, and his wanting of more out of life. He isn’t aware of what people think about him, which allows him to think outside the box. Overall in life, I started out in basketball, and got a Division One scholarship out of it. When it didn’t work out, and I got a bit depressed, I focused on something else that I thought I’d be good at. I just applied the same principles and dedication to acting, because it is a sport in my eyes.

HollywoodChicago.com: What do you think the society that Jay lived in most feared about him? How did you filter these fears in your performance?

Haynes: The fact that he was present, and was ahead of his time. He knew that presence, and never cowered from it. Many times we mistake timidity for humility, and I believe he knew where he came from, and knew the source of his power. He felt that he was worthy, and he knew he could use what he had for the greater good. Yes, he turned people off, those who were insecure, but as scripture says your skill set can bring you among kings.

Also, both Jay Jackson and Jack Johnson were not afraid to die. When I say that, I mean if I’m afraid of death, then outside forces have power over me. But if I’m not afraid of death, then I hold the power, and I’ll do what I think I should do. I feel no consequence, because death is the highest consequence. The moment I remove the fear of death, I am a powerful man. You take life by the hand, and you guide it to where you want to go.

HollywoodChicago.com: The sport of boxing, despite its designation as a ‘sweet science,’ is essentially two men beating each other up within the confines of a few rules. After studying the sport, what do you admire about it, and what do you think is brutal about it?

Haynes: Well, let’s talk both Jack Johnson, and in modern times, Floyd Mayweather. Both are under-appreciated in their respective styles because they made it look so easy. Both were naturally gifted, but they both worked really hard to get to where they got in boxing. It’s a skill set, with a position of the feet, and knowing when to jab.

I feel like it’s a game of chess in that ring, it’s about your wits. Now, to have the gall to get into that ring and test your manhood, that’s scary on a lot of different levels. [laughs] It’s like jazz or blues, when it’s played effortlessly it doesn’t seem that complicated.

HollywoodChicago.com: What do you find in common with working at a high level as an actor, and working at a high level in a sport?

Haynes: The work never ends, and the more success you acquire, the more work that needs to be done. There is always room for growth in both disciplines, you never really master it. And especially with acting, which you can do as long as you have a brain and breath, you can do it until you go. In sports, once the physical element starts to diminish, you’re pretty much done.

Acting is a very enlightening sport, it tells you a lot about yourself.

HollywoodChicago.com: The documentary maker Ken Burns came up with a term to describe Jack Johnson, “Unforgivable Blackness.” Why do you think Johnson implied such a term?

Haynes: Back then, it was understandable. I reached out to Randy Roberts, who was in the Ken Burns documentary, and wrote the book about Johnson called ‘Papa Jack.’ We talked about it, and like I said before, Johnson knew what he possessed and that was very threatening – on many levels – to the society at that time.

It shocks me that many people have never heard of Jack Johnson, doesn’t even know he existed. That is a problem. Because he was a rare breed, who had the mind and the body to know who he was. What he did within the culture at the time simply was unheard of, and in a sense, he was a type of ‘president’ of the United States, in his representation of race.



Jerod Haynes, Philip Earl Johnson and Edwin Lee Gibson in 'The Royale'

Photo credit: Michael Brosilow for American Theater Co.

HollywoodChicago.com: In a performance like this, how is the relationship between the director and the actor play out when making adjustments. What note did director Jaime Casteneda give you that made the most sense for you character?

Haynes: Jaime was great, because he wanted my performance to stick to the basics. First, we wanted to make it clear that the character of Jay was NOT Jack Johnson. For this character, we took it moment-to-moment. We wanted to give Jay what he needed for that moment in time during the actions of the play.

HollywoodChicago.com: African American men in U.S. society endure daily slights based on the color of the skin and not the content of their character. What incident in your life did you remember in regard to understanding the world of Jay Jackson?

Haynes: I can't get past my hue, it is what it is. As a kid, a lot of things went over my head, because I wasn't conscious of it at the time. But as I got older, you run into certain situations or incidents which make you say, 'Woah.' And it's really mostly in conversations, but I don't point a finger. We're all ignorant to things, and it's a very tricky situation in that context.

We've made strides, because there is only one race, and that is the human race. We've moved, I think, from racism to ignorance. For example, look at the Pit Bull dog. It is probably one of the nicest breeds you'll ever meet. But I once heard this line in a movie when someone brought up the point that the Pit Bull is a dangerous dog. The line was, 'it's not their fault that the owner is an a*shole.' The perception has been given to us before, but it isn't the reality. It's up to us to accept or deny these perceptions. I can't control what you think about me, but I can do my best not to accept those perceptions the world may have of me. It's a never ending process.

HollywoodChicago.com: You've taken on some of the classic African American fictional roles – Bigger Thomas ['Native Son'], Walter Lee ['A Raisin in the Sun'], Tom Robinson ['To Kill a Mockingbird'] and now a variation on Jack Johnson – what common thread do you find in these men, that makes them stand out from other people in their time?

Haynes: The fight for their lives, every guy you just named was fighting for their lives. Some literally, and some figuratively, but they were all fighting to be heard, seen and respected.

I portrayed Walter Lee over 100 times. And this was a guy who wasn't heard, by society AND his own family. The family can take on those perceptions as well, and the psychology of what everybody else thinks.

HollywoodChicago.com: As you portray the role of Jay, and bring it into your heart over a number of weeks, do you understand a solution to the type of bigotry that he faced, and that we still practice in our society, or are there still many miles to go?

Haynes: [Laughs] That's tough, but the interesting thing is that God gave us all free will, and our minds are the best computers on earth. He gave us this ability to do, feel and think of what we want. But the thing that makes me know that we have many miles to go is like facing a jury when they have to decide something. There is always that one person who is going to be contrary to what is happening.

We all look through a different lens. And these are learned habits – you don't have these attitudes when you're a baby or a child, it all has to be taught. What I will say is that people are open to the conversation, but whether they agree with what is being said in that conversation, that's another story.

HollywoodChicago.com: 'The Royale' is partnered with the Chicago Public School system as an educational tool for students. What has

been the most insightful question or insight you’ve received from the students, either about your character or the play itself?

Haynes: We haven’t had the main meetings yet, but so far the students love Jay Jackson’s confidence. They hear the word ‘confidence’ all the time, but applying the word in your life is different than saying it. Like I said before, being humble doesn’t mean being timid. We can be confident – and we must be, if we’re not to be eaten alive. Jack Johnson and Jay understood that confidence, because if their opponents smelled fear, they were done.

American Theater Co. Presents the Chicago Premiere of ‘The Royale’ – Thursdays & Friday at 8pm, Saturday and Sundays at 2pm & 8pm – through March 29th, 2015, at American Theater Co, 1909 West Byron Street in Chicago. [Click here](#) [20] for more information and to purchase tickets. Featuring Jerod Haynes, Edwin Lee Gibson, Mildred Langford, Julian Parker and Philip Earl Johnson. Written by Marco Ramirez. Directed by Jaime Castañeda.



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