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***Sucker Punch* by Roy Williams**

Introduction

Sucker Punch, a play about boxing and the black experience in 1980s Britain, premiered at London's Royal Court Theatre in 2010. For the production, the stalls of the auditorium had been stripped out to make way for a full-size boxing ring on which all of the action of the drama played out, seen from two sides and from above by an audience who remained gripped for the show's unrelenting 90 minutes. The talented cast, who had gone through intensive boxing training in preparation, gave a dynamic performance, conveying all the excitement and the bruising physicality of boxing; reviewers responded in pugilistic metaphors, describing the show as 'punchy' (Aleks Sierz, *Tribune*), 'hard-hitting' (Charles Spencer, *Telegraph*) and 'a theatrical knock-out' (Michael Billington, *Guardian*).¹ As well as an engrossing and memorable theatrical spectacle, however, *Sucker Punch* also represents a high point in the writing career of Roy Williams, one of the most consistently interesting and challenging British playwrights of the current century.

This introduction is intended to enhance readers' understanding and appreciation of *Sucker Punch*. In putting it together I have been greatly aided by Roy Williams, who generously agreed to an illuminating interview about the play and his work more widely. Except where otherwise indicated, quotations from Williams are taken from this interview.

1. Roy Williams: An Overview of his Career

Roy Williams is now a well-established figure in British playwriting with a long string of acclaimed plays to his name and even an OBE, awarded in 2008 for services to

drama. Along with Kwame Kwei-Armah, Debbie Tucker Green and Bola Agbaje he is a leading figure in the emergence into the British theatrical mainstream of dramatists whose work articulates a black British perspective. That plays by these and other black British writers have been a prominent feature of the British theatrical repertoire in the years since 2000 is something that has been widely celebrated as a significant step towards a culture which is representative of British society more widely; however, the question of exactly how black British writers should best represent their experience and that of black Britons generally can at times be a vexed one.

Williams was born in 1968 and grew up in Notting Hill, West London, at a time before it became the gentrified district celebrated in the 1999 Hugh Grant film of the same name. The youngest of four siblings, he was brought up by his mother, a nurse, after his father moved to the US. A love of the theatre was kindled by his experience of being tutored by the writer Don Kinch at a time when he was failing in school; exposure to Nigel Williams's 1978 play *Class Enemy* proved a formative experience, convincing the young Williams that plays could be about people he could relate to, who shared his concerns and spoke the same way he did. After leaving school, his first practical theatre experience was as an actor in a series of plays for young people produced by Theatre Centre.

In 1993, Williams enrolled on a theatre writing BA at Rose Bruford College. He graduated with a First and also with a completed play: *The No Boys Cricket Club*, which then became his professional debut when it was produced at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East under the direction of Indhu Rubasingham. Since 1996 he has made his living as a professional playwright, though his CV also includes work for TV and radio. His plays have been produced by many of the UK's most prestigious theatre companies and have toured nationally; and he has maintained his involvement in theatre for young people performed in schools and colleges as well as in more conventional performance spaces.

Williams's early plays explored his Caribbean heritage and the experience of his parents' generation as immigrants into the UK. *The No Boys Cricket Club* (1996), *Starstruck* (1998) and *The Gift* (2000) all, either explicitly or implicitly, compare life in the UK with life in Jamaica, figuring the gains and losses of the move to the former

imperial heartland. With *Lift Off* (1999) he achieved a breakthrough: his first play to be produced at the Royal Court Theatre, often thought of as the UK's leading theatre for new playwriting, it saw him become the joint recipient of that year's George Devine Award for Most Promising Playwright. *Lift Off* also opened up a new seam in his writing that saw him focus on the experiences of younger generations of British youths, both black and white. *Clubland* (2001) and *Little Sweet Thing* (2005) further developed this theme.

The period from 2002-2007 confirmed Williams's status as a leading contemporary playwright, with significant plays staged by Britain's three most prestigious theatre companies. For the National Theatre, Williams wrote *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads* (2002, revived 2004), a play with a largely white cast exploring the links between football, national identity and racism. For his first production on the Royal Court's main stage (the Jerwood Theatre Downstairs) Williams wrote *Fallout*, a play that gave an unflinching response to the failed police investigations into the deaths of Stephen Lawrence in 1993 and Damilola Taylor in 2000. The play was later adapted for television by Williams for Channel 4. Finally, for the Royal Shakespeare Company, Williams wrote *Days of Significance*, arguably his most ambitious work to date, which uses Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* as the springboard for a fully-fledged 'state of the nation' play exploring the experience of British soldiers in Iraq. Hannah, the play's protagonist, is one of several central roles for women that Williams has written, though it has been noted that some of his plays are distinctly male-dominated; *Sucker Punch*, in keeping with its focus on the world of boxing, is one of these.

In the years since, Williams's output has continued to be both prolific and varied, including two further football-themed plays, *Joe Guy* and *There's Only One Wayne Matthews* (both 2007), the prison play *Category B* (2009) and a return to the Caribbean setting of his early work in *Kingston 14* (2014). His most high-profile work of recent years, however, is *Sucker Punch*. One of several of Williams's plays to use sport as a prism through which to explore issues of cultural identity, *Sucker Punch* has the distinction of going back to the 1980s to examine an earlier stage in the development of the multicultural society in which today's young people grow up. Through the story of two black British youths and their ascendancy in the world of

professional boxing, Williams considers complex issues of identity and loyalty and asks searching questions about integration and exploitation which resonate far beyond the 1980s and into the present decade.

In the first scene the audience are presented with Leon and Troy, two young black men, who are being made to do chores in a boxing gym after been caught breaking into it by white owner Charlie. Charlie has high hopes for his young protégé Tommy, also white, while his daughter Becky despairs of his shoddy book-keeping and overly personal approach to the job. Seeing Leon and Troy play-fighting inspires Charlie to start to train them and Leon embraces the opportunity, keen to impress Charlie even as Tommy deserts his trainer for the big time. Troy misses a match when he is stopped by the police, and eventually leaves for the US; Leon's father Squid is supportive of his son's new career only up to a point, betting against him in a crucial match. A developing relationship between Leon and Becky is kept secret from Charlie until it is revealed by Tommy after he loses to Leon in the ring. The play's second act begins with Charlie agreeing to be Leon's manager on the condition that he cease seeing Becky - a condition Leon accepts, much to Becky's disgust. Leon's ascendance in the world of boxing continues until he is brought face to face with an American opponent – his old friend Troy, who has become a serious contender on the other side of the Atlantic, ruthlessly managed by the domineering Ray. Leon's bout with Troy forms the play's dramatic climax and leaves him questioning both his past and his future.

2. *Sucker Punch*: Production and Reception

Asked what prompted him to write his play, Williams – perhaps surprisingly – highlights not the subject of boxing but the setting of the play during the 1980s. As he writes in his introduction to the fourth volume of his plays:

I was watching a television programme a few years back that was a tribute to the 1980s, and this gave me the initial idea to write *Sucker Punch*. The programme makers were discussing the period as if it was something that happened many years ago, but for me it was like yesterday... The 1980s were important years for me. I was twelve when they began and twenty-one when

they ended. Everything that went on between helped to define the person I am today.²

I will discuss the significance of the 1980s setting in more detail below, but for now it might be noted that the play's setting in the (relatively) recent past will provoke differing reactions from audience members and readers of different ages: for those, like myself, old enough to remember the decade, the play is likely to prompt a mixture of nostalgia and reflection; but for younger theatre-goers there is likely to be the distinct experience of engaging, possibly for the first time, with an era that might seem very different from anything that has been personally experienced. This may be especially significant as the years since 2010 have increasingly invited comparisons with the 1980s through events as disparate as the 2011 London riots and the death of Baroness Thatcher in 2013.

In terms of the experience of the play in its original Royal Court production, however, it was most definitely the show's evocation of the world of boxing that made the strongest impact, beginning with Miriam Buether's striking design. The effect was vividly described by Susannah Clapp of the *Observer*:

[Buether] has transformed the Court into a place of gladiatorial combat: spectators eyeball one another over the ropes of a boxing ring, lit by Peter Mumford so that it both smokes and shines. Giant punchbags dangle from the ceiling; sponsors' ads cover the walls; even the corridors into the auditorium are plastered with posters of old fights. This is a theatre truly squaring up to its subject.

As mentioned earlier, the auditorium had been reconfigured so that the performance space occupied the area normally containing the front stalls, with a second balcony of audience seating taking up the area normally occupied by the stage. The result was a playing space with audience members looking on from beneath (in the back stalls) from two sides (in the two balcony levels) and from above (in the circle). As Buether explained:

With *Sucker Punch* we were trying to stage another kind of event, in this case a sports event, as a contrast to what you expect from a theatre experience. The ring itself was so central to Roy's play; that's the way he wrote it. We used the ring in the gym. It worked as the training ring, but it also worked for the fights. Mirrors flanked the ring to reflect and amplify the action of the play and to resonate the emotions.³

This bold design was expensive, not only in terms of the cost of reconfiguring the space and building the set, but in relation to the reduced audience capacity it entailed; in 'pushing the boat out' in this way the Court was positioning its production as an event and an experience, exposing theatregoers to the visual dynamics and atmosphere or a much more visceral kind of cultural event.

The visual impact of the show was also striking in relation to the staging of the fight scenes. Daniel Kaluuya and Anthony Welsh, who played Leon and Troy, embarked on a rigorous fitness programme, under the tutelage of former British boxer and European champion Errol Christie, and the movement sequences were choreographed by Leon Baugh. For the majority of the show, boxing matches were conveyed through a combination of monologue and stylised movement; only the climactic bout between Leon and Troy was staged in full, giving the play's dramatic climax a singular impact in performance as something the audience were able to witness rather than hear described. The dramatic impact of the fight sequences was vividly described by Paul Taylor of the *Independent*:

Kaluuya and Welsh perform this head-to-head contest as a dazzling dance of simulated realism and rhythmic stylisation, slipping effortlessly between an objective and a subjective presentation of proceedings.

An atmospheric soundscape was used throughout to enhance the effect of the fight sequences so that, as Clapp wrote, 'each punch lands with a thump; at times the blows fall so quickly they sound like the beats of a panicking heart.' If the overall mode of the play is naturalistic (something discussed in more detail below), the heightened theatricality of these sequences emphasised both the aesthetic spectacle

of boxing and its sometimes overwhelming physicality. The result was, as Sam Marlowe of *Time Out London* wrote, 'ferociously beautiful'.

The production received very good reviews. As well as offering vivid and approving descriptions of the staging, as quoted above, reviewers also praised Williams's 'astonishing' ear for dialogue (Neil Norman, *Daily Express*) and the complexity of the drama: 'motives are mixed, nobody is a hero, nothing is just black and white' (Dominic Maxwell, *The Times*). Writing in the *Tribune*, Aleks Sierz described the play as:

An illuminating study of ambition, motivation and the will to succeed. How does the colour of your skin help fuel the passion and commitment that success in sport demands? Williams gives several answers in a play that is short but full of complexity.

This is not to say that some reservations were not voiced, relating mainly to plot developments that not every critic found convincing and to a feeling that 'the play is probably a little over-schematic' (Georgina Brown, *Mail on Sunday*). This suggestion that the play's narrative is rather too obviously designed to illustrate its thematic ideas, while voiced by several reviewers, was not enough to stop the overall critical verdict being positive, a factor in ensuring an extended sell-out run. Critical and commercial success was cemented when *Sucker Punch* was nominated for the *Evening Standard* Theatre Award for Best Play of 2010 and the Olivier Award for Best New Play of the same year. Leon Baugh won the Olivier for Best Theatre Choreographer for his work on *Sucker Punch*, Miriam Buether won the *Evening Standard* Award for Best Designer, and the play itself received the prize for Best Theatre Play at the 2011 Writers' Guild of Great Britain Awards.

Sucker Punch received its US premiere at the Studio Theatre, Washington DC in 2012 under the direction of Leah C. Gardiner. There were initial concerns that not all the references would be clear to an American audience, and Williams agreed to some changes to the dialogue to increase the play's accessibility; to American audiences the play's gritty approach contrasted with that of other British cultural offerings, providing 'an antidote to the highly popular but no longer realistic

refinement of TV's *Downton Abbey*'.⁴ Williams observed that the US production took a more literal approach to the play, in particular preserving the final action of Leon walking away from the ring where Wares at the Royal Court had opted for a subtler, and potentially more ambiguous, moment of thoughtful stillness. The production attracted some rave reviews and, like the London premiere, enjoyed an extended run.⁵ Peter Marks of the *Washington Post* had reservations about some aspects of the writing but praised the production's 'blunt-force theatricality'⁶ while other critics followed the British example in their choice of metaphor; for Alan Zilberman of *Brightest Young Things*, for instance, the play had 'the power of a hay-maker'.⁷ The political perceptiveness of the Washington reviews also demonstrate that the play's critique of Thatcherism communicates – and resonates – beyond the UK.

3. *Sucker Punch* and the 1980s

A crucial context in which *Sucker Punch* should be considered is as a response to and representation of the 1980s. Since 2000, there has been an increase in the number of books, films, television series and plays set in the 1980s ranging from literary fiction such as Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* to police drama such as *Ashes to Ashes*. For Williams, however, these have not given the complete picture:

I felt it was an area that wasn't covered to my satisfaction in drama – I felt there are stories missing here.

As so often in his plays, the experiences and perspectives Williams presents in *Sucker Punch* are those which he feels have been under-represented in culture thus far.

The central aspect of the 1980s highlighted in the play is the distinct experience of black British people during that decade. The play shows audiences 'the casual racism of that time, which was everywhere, not just in the world of boxing', as Williams notes. Widespread feeling within London's black community that the Metropolitan police routinely discriminated against black people (the term

'institutional racism' had yet to achieve popular currency in the UK) sparked riots in Brixton, a predominantly black London district, in 1981. Williams says:

Those riots came from a sense of real anger – a whole generation who felt they were being shat on by the establishment, and were made to feel they don't belong here. Their parents, our parents, the Windrush generation, they had to put up with a lot of racism, a lot of, you know, 'go back where you've come from, you don't belong here', but they stuck through it, they stuck at it, had the children – us – then I think we kind of grew up thinking, 'OK, well, bad for our parents, but we were born here'. But growing up it was still the same, as bad as it had been for our parents, so there was a raw anger. It was like 'You're not gonna get away with this, you're not gonna attack us, you're not gonna hurt us the way you hurt our mums and dads, we're gonna fight back'.

In the play, this feeling of raw anger is largely channeled through Troy. It is inflamed when he falls foul of the so-called, bitterly resented 'sus laws' that allowed the police to stop and search people they perceived to be behaving suspiciously irrespective of whether any actual crime was being committed. Troy's mother has to restrain him from assaulting the police officer who has stopped him; he wants to challenge the idea that 'they can feel anyone's collar, so long as they are black'. Leon, by contrast, is fatalistic: 'They do, so why cry about it?' (p. 52) Troy's antagonism towards the police features again when he and Leon are caught up in rioting, as Williams involves his fictional characters in further real-life riots which took place in 1985 in Brixton and elsewhere. Finally, and ironically, Troy's anti-police attitude provides his entry into professional boxing when, having moved to the United States, a bust-up with some US cops draws him to the attention of a big-time promoter.

Williams wants young audiences of today to have some understanding of the conditions experienced by black people in Britain in the 1980s, but not in order to suggest that the problems of that decade have all now been solved. As he comments:

It wasn't that long ago, it's only twenty or thirty years ago, and it's easy to forget about it, to assume 'oh, that can't happen again', but it can. It happens just so easily.

This statement is borne out by the fact that the summer of 2011 saw widespread rioting in London and elsewhere in the UK, starting once again in Tottenham and growing out of protests about the police shooting of Mark Duggan, a 29-year-old black man, during an attempted arrest. The riots of 2011 surprised many, but not Williams (as he says, 'I was shocked, like everyone else was, but I wasn't surprised'), and his examination of the unrest of the 1980s in a play that had premiered only the previous year must be considered prescient.

The tensions and divisions that were exposed so openly in the 1980s, Williams argues, may not always be so evident or so starkly expressed, but to a certain extent remain with us nonetheless. His plays repeatedly suggest that just because it is no longer socially acceptable to explicitly articulate racist views in the way that Charlie and Tommy do in the play ('I know they all look the same in the dark, son.' 'I can't tell them apart in the day', p. 48), we should not assume complacently that longstanding prejudices do not remain in play. That is certainly the message that comes through in Williams's earlier play *Sing yer Heart Out for the Lads* (2002), which ends with a horrifying descent into open conflict between its black and white characters and the frightening suggestion that 'No matter what, it'll come to this'.⁸ While not exactly nostalgic for the violent, polarised, unreconstructed 80s, Williams does indicate that there was an openness and a clarity about that time which is absent today; as he told an interviewer at the time that *Sucker Punch* was first performed, 'In a weird way, though I'm not condoning it, you knew where you stood'.⁹

A key figure in the polarised climate of the 80s was Margaret Thatcher, whose term as Prime Minister began in the very late 70s and ended in the very early 90s. She is referred to a number of times in the play with reference to her domestic, foreign and economic policy. Britain's first woman Prime Minister was a confrontational figure who led Britain to victory over Argentina in a conflict over the disputed Falkland Islands, and whose determination to face down the powerful trade union movement culminated in the miners' strike of 1984-5 which ended, again, with Thatcher

victorious. Charlie, in the play, refers to both of these events in the context of the riots in which Leon and Troy have been caught up. Of the rioters he asks:

Do they really think they have the essentials to take on Maggie? What planet are they on? She kicked the Argys into touch without losing a wink of sleep. She walked all over the miners like they weren't even there, and they ain't that little bit impressed? (p. 65)

Charlie is clearly a supporter of Thatcher, something the play suggests is entirely compatible with holding racist beliefs. However, his faith in her proves to be a significant part of his undoing as the money he makes from Leon's success is invested in the stock market (Thatcher encouraged and oversaw a fourfold increase in the number of British people who owned stocks and shares over her time in office) and then lost in the crash of October 1987 (known as 'Black Monday' or 'Black Tuesday' depending on what time zone it was experienced in). Charlie's investment in 'good old Maggie' and his belief that he shares the values of, and indeed is valued by, the country's political elite is punctured by financial ruin, the loss of his beloved gym and a place on the 'scrap heap' (p. 106).

Perhaps the most personally felt aspect of the play's depiction of the 80s is its depiction of Leon's desire to be accepted by Charlie, ostensibly as a boxer but clearly on a deeper level too. The fact that he is willing to forgo his relationship with Becky (despite the on-going feelings for her which are evident as the second act develops) underlines his deeply felt desire for Charlie's approval. Asked what drives this, Williams responded:

That's to do with lack of a father figure, and he attaches himself to him. Charlie is, in Leon's mind, everything that a father should be, and he's drawn to that. And that's based on a lot of my experiences, growing up – Charlie is an amalgamation of a lot of dads... my mates' dads, all white working class men, and I kind of looked up to them.

Seen in this light, Leon's desire to be accepted speaks of a deeply felt emotional need which must be considered in relation to his father, Squid, who is a gambler and

womaniser who sporadically appears trying to cadge money. At the same time, Charlie, in his status as a prospective surrogate father for Leon, might be thought to stand for white society generally.

At the start of Act Two, Charlie forcefully and hurtfully refutes the idea that he can be any kind of father to Leon, and this is a scene that Williams can personally relate to:

There's a really powerful moment in the play, loosely based on something that happened to me - not literally, it's fictionalised heavily in the play – when Charlie lays it on the line for him, 'I can't be your dad, I'm not your dad, don't put me on that pedestal, it's not me'. He says awful things to him, I don't think he means it, just to ask Leon to understand, 'I'm not your father'.

Ultimately the play argues that the kind of acceptance for which so much must be sacrificed, the kind of acceptance which is so strictly qualified, is not worth having. This is something Leon painfully learns from his experiences over the course of the play, but which Troy seems to feel instinctively from the start. Ironically, however, by the play's end, Troy has found himself in a similar position to Leon, with the difference that for him it is the approval of Ray, an African-American, for which he has sacrificed his autonomy. As Williams comments, Troy 'becomes the thing that he mocks Leon for'.

The figure of Charlie is an interesting one – not a straightforward, unmitigated racist, but a racist nonetheless. His relationship with Leon is not without what seems to be genuine affection and respect, and his ultimate downfall at the hands of Thatcherite economics might seem to position him as just as much a victim of a hostile, duplicitous society as Leon himself. However, while the play invites us to understand Charlie, and even to pity him, we may also ultimately judge him. As Williams commented, 'You understand him, I don't know if you forgive him. I mean racism, no matter how casual, is difficult to forgive'. He recalled a moment from his childhood when he overheard a friend's admired father make a racist comment:

That was like being told Father Christmas is not real. It completely shattered me, hearing him say that, and I never saw him the same way ever again.

Growing up I like to think that I understand that generation more than I did then – but, if he walked into the room right now and say, ‘Roy, forgive me’, I don’t think I could. I’d say, ‘No. I understand where you’re coming from – but you and I are not gonna be friends.’

Hope for the future, then, does not come from any personal redemption of Charlie, though some optimism may be taken from the fact that his attitudes have not been passed onto his daughter. Becky, unlike her father and the slightly older Tommy, is at ease in a multi-racial society. Were she a real person she would now be the same sort of age as the mothers of younger audience members; it seems unlikely, though nothing can be ruled out, that she would be a UKIP voter.

4. *Sucker Punch* and Boxing

Theatre and sport are not always thought to go hand in hand, though theatres report a noticeable decline in ticket sales during major sporting events (such as the South Africa World Cup that took place during the London run of *Sucker Punch*). As a fan of both theatre and sport, however, Williams argues they have more in common than is often thought:

I think the kind of feeling you have when you go to a sports event, particularly football, and theatre – there are similarities. You go and see a great football match, or you go and see a really good play, it’s exciting, unpredictable, the structure’s kind of similar – two halves, you’ve got 45 minutes, interval, next 45 minutes– and you’re on the edge of your seat. That’s ideally what you want from a good football match *and* from good theatre – doesn’t always happen, but that’s what you’re aiming for.

As mentioned earlier, *Sucker Punch* is not the first of Williams’s plays to engage with the world of sport. Most notably, in *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads*, Joe Guy and *There’s Only One Wayne Matthews* Williams has drawn on football as a sport that seems to promise much both to those who follow it and to those who play it. To Barry in *Sing Yer Heart Out*, following the England football team appears to offer the

prospect of inclusion and belonging, and to Joe in *Joe Guy* success as a professional footballer is a crucial part of repudiating the African identity he is keen to disown. In both cases, however, the idea that sport offers a space that floats above the complications and difficulties of living in society is shown to be illusory – indeed, football in both plays epitomises troubling aspects of British society, whether that be prejudice or materialism. Arguably, boxing has a similar function in *Sucker Punch*, offering Leon a way of ingratiating himself with white working-class society, but ultimately serving as the vehicle for his humiliation in front of it.

Boxing, of course, is a very particular kind of sport – violent, some would say brutal, and acutely focused on the contest between two fighters who may represent much more than themselves as individuals. As Kasia Boddy writes in *Boxing: A Cultural History*:

More than anything, the boxing match has served as a metaphor for opposition – the struggle between two bodies before an audience, usually for money, representing struggles between opposing qualities, ideas and values.¹⁰

The history of boxing can be traced at least as far back as the third millennium BC, but its modern history as a mass spectator sport began in seventeenth century London and is closely bound up with the emergence of the urban working class in the industrial and post-industrial age. It is a sport through which questions of racial and cultural identity have often been focused: Boddy describes how different groups in society have been represented by the successful boxers they have boasted, pointing, for instance, to the success of Jewish-American and Italian-American boxers in early twentieth century New York as central to a collective assertion of each group's emergent American identity. She also tells the story of the 1810 bout (and 1811 re-match) between English champion Tom Cribb and Virginia-born former slave Tom Molineux. While Cribb won both matches in somewhat controversial circumstances, Boddy shows that the bravery with which Molineux was perceived to have fought ('though beat, he proved a man my boys') led to his adoption by some as an honorary Englishman.¹¹ Such events provide clear historical parallels to Leon's efforts to assert himself within the boxing industry and, in particular, to be accepted by Charlie, his white trainer, in *Sucker Punch*.

More broadly, it is easy to see what appealed to Williams about a sport which has produced so many iconic black sportsmen: in the 1960s and 70s, Muhammad Ali became a symbol of empowerment; in the 1980s Mike Tyson was an equally iconic, if less positive figure; and in Frank Bruno the UK could even boast its own international boxing star. Williams himself has written of the way in which 'black sporting figures were the strongest role models a black boy like me could find'.¹² However, rather than simply celebrating boxing as a way for black men to achieve prominence in a society stacked against them, *Sucker Punch* is infused with an understanding of the negative aspects of black sporting success. In particular, Williams highlights the way in which a black boxer can not only become the focus for black pride, but for its opposite – racist hatred. This is seen during Leon's bout with 'white hope' (as Squid dubs him) Tommy before a largely white crowd:

All these crowds, all white, pale faces, It's spot the darkie. They're cheering Tommy on, telling him to bury me. That's what they want, ever since the Brixton Riots, Broadwater Farm, they wanna see a *fucking wog* buried, put in his place. I'm the main course and they are serving me up! (p. 70)

Tommy tries to use the crowd's hostility to his advantage, sending racist taunts Leon's way, but all of this only adds to Leon's determination to win and adds savour to his decisive victory:

So what was that then, Tommy, you ain't losing to a black man? This black man here, the same black man who's giving you a proper spanking, you, right now? Oh my dear! (p. 71)

Although ironically expressed in the white working-class idiom Leon is mocked by Troy for adopting, Leon's triumph over Tommy would provide an upbeat conclusion to the play's first act – were it not immediately followed by Charlie's rejection of his new prizefighter when the manager learns of Leon's inter-racial relationship with his daughter.

In the second act, Williams shows how the racial politics of boxing can be problematic even when both fighters are black. In advance of Leon and Troy's climactic bout, Squid offers one of the play's most acute observations:

You can't win, neither of you. Why you think all them white people are gonna be there watching you tomorrow night?... Ca they love nothing better than to see two black men beat up on each other. They too afraid to do it themselves, so they get you to do it. (p. 98)

But there is more to the match between Leon and Troy than this: it comes to embody a contest between two distinct versions of black identity. In the red corner, Leon represents an assimilatory model which has become the focus of criticism from within the black community, while in the blue corner Troy embodies a more hostile, radical position. Significantly, this becomes part of the pre-match build up when Troy calls Leon an 'Uncle Tom' in interviews, not because he wants to advance an argument about black identity, but as part of a revenue-maximising publicity strategy devised by Ray. This time it is Troy who wins the decisive victory, though it is Charlie who throws in the towel while a punch-drunk Leon insists he is undefeated – perhaps the final expression of his questionable equation of the endurance of punishment with success. Even at this point, however, Williams does not allow audiences to draw straightforward conclusions. He makes clear, through the figure of Troy's ruthless manager Ray, that exploitation is not the exclusive province of the white establishment. The play's decisive final moments indicate a categorical rejection of boxing as a positive route forwards for a young black man on the part of Leon and, we infer, on the part of the playwright too.

The play's relationship with sport may also be considered from a performance angle. Given the production's attempt to 'stage another kind of event, in this case a sports event, as a contrast to what you expect from a theatre experience', we might ask how the resultant change in dynamic between the audience and performance might affect the way the play is received. Placing audience members in this semi-immersive context, we might think, could lead to their losing themselves in the fictional world of the play, carried away by spectacle and engrossed by the thrilling, bruising physicality of the boxing match. Such a prospect might, in turn, raise

concerns about a resultant lack of critical perspective; indeed we might wonder whether the Royal Court production of *Sucker Punch* might have reproduced the viewing conditions of a genuine boxing match so successfully that it might also have reproduced the problematic relationship between spectators and spectacle that many feel is in place at a genuine boxing match – the baying crowd who have paid to see blood. This possibility is especially troubling when considered in the light of questions that have been raised in relation to the representation of black characters in productions playing to mainstream (i.e. largely white) theatre audiences, and indeed goes to the heart of some of the things that Williams is suggesting about boxing and race in the play.

These are issues that I will engage with in my final section, but for now I'd like to highlight that, in configuring the performance as a sporting event, Beuther was – intentionally or not – fulfilling one of Bertolt Brecht's wishes for the theatre: that it might be experienced more like sport. Brecht, the leading political playwright and theatre theorist of the twentieth century, compared the theatre audience unfavourably to the audience of a football game or a boxing match:

The demoralization of our theatre audiences springs from the fact that neither theatre nor audience has any idea what is supposed to go on there. When people in sporting establishments buy their tickets they know exactly what is going to take place... highly trained persons developing their peculiar powers in the way most suited to them.¹³

Brecht further argued, his translator John Willett tells us, for a “smoker's theatre” where the audience would puff away at its cigars as if watching a boxing match, and would develop a more detached and critical outlook than was possible in the ordinary German theatre'.¹⁴ Needless to say, audiences at the Royal Court in 2010 were not permitted to smoke, but nonetheless looking at the performance from a Brechtian perspective might suggest that the audience dynamic created by the boxing match-style presentation is more complex than might initially be supposed. It is certainly true that Williams's play, like Brecht's theatre, is driven by oppositions, so that we may be rooting for Leon to succeed, but we are also painfully aware of the compromises he has made along the way. It is not straightforwardly clear, therefore,

that audiences will 'support' Leon against Troy in their climactic bout. It might also be suggested that superimposing the trappings of the boxing match onto the theatre experience does not so much erase the conventional experience of drama as add a further layer of artifice to it. At an actual boxing match, it might well be possible to lose one's critical detachment amid the heady, violent reality of the situation, but audiences watching *Sucker Punch*, viewing one kind of spectacle through the prism of another, would arguably be more likely to experience the inevitably and necessarily incomplete illusion as an invitation to consider the dynamics of the boxing match, and the boxing industry, from one remove.

5. Representing black experience in *Sucker Punch*

Over the course of what is now a lengthy career, Roy Williams has consistently used his drama to explore topical issues affecting British society in general and the black British community in particular. He has done so in a largely realistic mode, which is to say that the action of his plays is generally located in recognisable social settings (though these may not be recreated in all their literal detail on stage) and the characters in his plays speak and act as we might expect people in real life to. In particular, Williams's work is notable for a mode of dialogue that uses phonetic spelling to capture a way of speaking English which is particular to young black (but also white) British people living in urban settings. Writing plays in this way might be thought to align Williams to a tradition of western playwriting going back to Naturalistic writers such as Ibsen and Chekhov, active in the late 1800s, who aimed to convincingly recreate the surface texture of their audiences' real lives on the stage in order to offer a more convincing critique of the society they lived in. More particularly, Williams's plays might be thought of as relating to a 'social realist' mode of playwriting associated pre-eminently with the Royal Court Theatre in the years since John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956): social realism being a mode of naturalism that is explicitly concerned with offering political analysis, with special reference to those in society who are discriminated against by the status quo.

Figuring Williams's work as belonging either to a Naturalistic or a social realist tradition of theatre-making, or indeed to both, might be seen as problematic, however. As a black playwright, Williams is representative of a historically

marginalised group in contrast to which these modes of representation are canonical (that is, widely accepted as being of historical value and interest) within a mode of cultural production (British theatre) that is often seen as largely the province of white middle-class people. Such a consideration leads us to one of the major critical issues that has been identified in relation to Williams's work: the relationship between the representation of black lives being put forward on the stage and the wider social reality which that representation purports to reflect. In particular it has been suggested that, in some of his plays, Williams offers an image of black British people and their lives that conforms to a problematic degree with prevailing ideas, preconceptions or stereotypes associated with black British people by society as a whole. That this might be thought to be the case is said to be still more of a concern, it has been argued, because the audiences of some of Williams's plays, especially where they are produced at prestigious mainstream theatres such as the Royal Court or RSC, are predominantly white, with potentially limited first-hand experience of the kinds of people and situations represented.¹⁵

In a nutshell, then, it has been suggested that Williams's plays, at times, seem to confirm negative preconceptions of black people and thus contribute to the very social divisions that they repeatedly explore. Faced with such concerns, Williams is pragmatic:

As a playwright, I zone out at that theory – if I let that bother me I wouldn't be able to write a single word about anything... As a playwright you've got to take criticism and take the knocks, and stand by what you wrote. It's not my intention to reinforce stereotypes; even with *Sucker Punch* that argument came up slightly. But I knew what I wanted to say, what I was trying to say, and I just thought, 'OK, I just need to write the best play I can, and I can't tell future audiences how to respond to it, they've got to make up their own mind'.

Fundamental to Williams's view of himself as a writer is the idea that there is an objective, and often unpleasant, reality to be represented and thereby considered; central to criticisms of his work is the idea that such representations may not only be subjective, distorted or misleading, but that they may affect and indeed create reality by confirming and re-inscribing pervasive and corrosive misunderstandings and

divisions. For Williams this is ‘the risk I have to take when I’m writing plays’; representing that which has been under or misrepresented is at the centre of his motivation to write, and this is something that cannot be done by a writer who is reluctant to enter into controversial territory.

That his plays might be part of the solution rather than part of the problem, it should be made clear, is far from being the view of Williams only. There are many commentators who would argue, like John Stokes, that while Williams may confront controversial issues in a way that is sometimes blunt and direct, it is always the contradictions and complexities that lie beneath the familiar tabloid formulations that he seeks to expose and explore.¹⁶ As Michael Pearce writes of Williams’s 2003 play *Fallout*:

Through his representation of black characters Williams presents and simultaneously undermines black and white stereotypes through complex characterizations, which fly in the face of representational expectation and complicate critical generalizations.¹⁷

By confronting audiences with their existing beliefs and providing reasons to see these as simplistic and inadequate, those who argue in his favour would assert, Williams’s work urges an active, questioning attitude to the problems that surround us and encourages audience members and readers to take on a degree of responsibility, to work towards their solution.

The reader of *Sucker Punch* may consider for him or herself the balance that is struck in the play. To what extent can it be said that Williams is presenting a recognisable, familiar and thereby problematic picture of black people and their relationship with wider (white) society? If this is what he is doing, how far is that justified by the way the play encourages audiences to work towards a more fundamental understanding of that relationship which exposes the structures and conditions that affect black and white people alike? Whatever view of this question is taken, however, there should be little doubt that Williams’s work represents a significant contribution, not only to the canon of 21st century British playwriting, but to

our understanding of the developing relationship between the black British community and the wider society of which it is an increasingly integral part.

¹ All references to the reviews of *Sucker Punch* are taken from *Theatre Record*, vol. XXX (18 June – 1 July 2010), pp. 697-700.

² Roy Williams, 'Introduction', *Plays: 4*, London: Methuen, 2013, p. x.

³ See <http://www.offscreenmagazine.co.uk/feature-interview/sucker-punch-and-more/>

⁴ Susan Davidson, writing for *Curtain Up* - see <http://www.curtainup.com/suckerpunchdc.html>.

⁵ See <http://dctheatrescene.com/2012/04/02/studio-theatre-extends-sucker-punch/>.

⁶ Peter Marks, 'In 'Sucker Punch' at Studio Theatre, young actor packs a mighty wallop', *Washington Post*, 05.03.12, at http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/in-sucker-punch-at-studio-theatre-young-actor-packs-a-mighty-wallop/2012/03/05/gIQAx67StR_story.html.

⁷ See <http://brightestyoungthings.com/articles/play-dc-sucker-punch-the-studio-theatre.htm>.

⁸ Roy Williams, *Plays: Two*, London: Methuen, 2004, p. 235.

⁹ Quoted in Simon Hattenstone, 'Roy Williams: Confessions of an uncool kid', *Guardian*, 07.06.10, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2010/jun/07/roy-williams-sucker-punch-interview> (accessed 07.08.14).

¹⁰ Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History*, London: Reaktion, 2008, p. 7.

¹¹ See Boddy, pp. 44-6.

¹² *Plays: 4*, p. xi.

¹³ Brecht, writing in the *Berliner Börsen-Courier* in 1926, quoted in Willett (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 6.

¹⁴ *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 8.

¹⁵ For a full account of these debates, see Deirdre Osborne's chapter on Roy Williams in Martin Middeke, Peter Paul Schnierer and Aleks Sierz (eds), *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary British Playwrights*, London: Methuen, 2011, pp. 487-509.

¹⁶ See John Stokes, 'Unofficial rules of the game', *Times Literary Supplement*, 06.11.09.

¹⁷ Michael Pearce, 'Roy Williams', in Dan Rebellato (ed.), *Modern British Playwriting: 2000-2009*, p. 161.