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Cake and punch

Pugilists' housewives get their due in Rivendell's *Fighting Words*

By Kay Daly

Robert De Niro famously trained as a boxer to play Jake LaMotta in *Raging Bull*. While actor Jenny Strubin isn't planning to gain 60 pounds, she's still pulling a De Niro by stepping into the ring to prep for Rivendell Theatre's *Fighting Words*.

Set in a Welsh mining town, Sunil Kuruvilla's play tells the story of real-life welterweight boxing champ Johnny Owen, who in 1980 traveled to Los Angeles to challenge world champ-ion Lupe Pintor. Yet the play doesn't depict Johnny or the men of his town who made the journey with him. Instead, it chronicles the experience of the women who stayed home, including Strubin's character, Peg, a tomboy who idolizes Owen and trains alongside him.

To prepare, first-time director Tara Mallen relied on an old actor's technique: research. She traveled to Owen's hometown, Merthyr Tydfil, Wales, to gain insight into women's lives in a remote mining town, tape-recording locals to study their dialect. To ensure the boxing segments ring true, she sent Strubin to Amber Gideon, a Golden Gloves champ who trains and teaches boxing at the legendary Windy City Boxing Gym on the West Side. And in the name of research and *esprit de corps*, she trained alongside her.

"I told them you can't learn boxing in four weeks, but we can help her look like a professional boxer," Gideon says. "We started with the basics, and now we're narrowing in on the specific move [Strubin] will need to perform." That's meant working the mirror and running drills of punches and combinations. "Chin down! Fists up! Bend your knees!" Gideon shouts during a training session. "Look under your eyebrows, like a mean, ugly boxer."



IN THE CLEARING STANDS A BOXER Jenny Strubin steps into the ring.

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But getting into “boxer shape” is only half the battle. Unlike *Rocky* or *Raging Bull*, *Fighting Words* doesn’t feature a climactic bout or training montages. This is the story of the women who wait on the sidelines while the menfolk take center ring, so Strubin’s boxing is intertwined with housework and everyday conversation. Peg shadowboxes a line of laundry while verbally sparring with her sister over chores.

Gideon has hung a clothesline in the gym, complete with a sheet, and demonstrates how to orient oneself with the line to achieve the proper form for the classic bob and weave. The clothesline also allows Strubin to improvise interactions with Mallen, who stands in for the actor playing her sister. Gideon calls out combinations for Strubin, then sics her on Mallen: “Look at your sister! Chase her again! Hit the laundry!”

For Mallen, immersing herself in the boxing culture of the gym has been crucial to understanding the play and Peg. “Boxing gets you in touch with your own physical power in a really great way,” she says. It’s a key element for Peg, who hides her vulnerability behind a rough-house facade. “You can’t cry in front of your sister,” Mallen barks at Strubin like a drill sergeant. “If you do, what are you? A girl. Are you a tea cake-making girl?”

For the final drill, Mallen and Gideon throw Strubin her biggest challenge yet: a run-through of her monologue recounting Johnny’s fight with Pintor. In it, Strubin must integrate her new boxing skill: with emotional, verbally intricate storytelling—oh, and a Welsh accent.

Mallen guides Strubin through the emotions, and Gideon provides insights that go beyond the proper way to throw a right hook. She deciphers the sometimes cryptic monologue, identifying references to specific boxing moves, and adds a layer of realism to the actor’s performance. “You need an uglier face when you’re talking about a fight,” she tells Strubin. “When you’re describing a fight you’ve seen, it’s not a rush. There are pauses; don’t worry about the pauses.”

By the end of rehearsal, Strubin is exhausted, mentally and physically. Mallen urges her to “push through,” sounding more like a coach than a director. Gideon offers one more insider’s peek into the boxing mind-set: “There’s a desperation when you’re watching a friend get his ass kicked.”

Strubin then delivers her climactic monologue for Mallen, and finds that desperation perfectly.

***Fighting Words* opens at the Viaduct Theater Saturday 25.**