Sucker Punch
by Roy Williams

BACKGROUND PACK

CONTENTS

1. About The Production
2. About The Writer
3. Synopsis of Suckerpunch
4. About the Set Design
5. Researching the 1980's
6. Fight Training
7. Interview with the Director
8. Interview with the Production Manager
9. Classroom Activities
10. About Royal Court Education

1. ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

The Royal Court Theatre presents

Sucker Punch

By Roy Williams
First performance at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs, Sloane Square, London, on Friday 11 June 2010

Cast

Charlie	Nigel Lindsay
Tommy	Jason Maza
Leon	Daniel Kaluuya
Troy	Anthony Welsh
Becky	Sarah Ridgeway
Squid	Trevor Laird
Ray	Gary Beadle

Creative Team

Director	Sacha Wares
Designer	Miriam Buether
Lighting	Peter Mumford
Sound	Gareth Fry
Choreographer	Leon Baugh
Boxing Trainer	Errol Christie
Casting Directors	Amy Ball & Julia Horan
Production Manager	Paul Handley
Stage Manager	Ben Delfont
Deputy Stage Manager	Tamara Albachari
Asst Stage Manager	Lindsey Knight
Costume Supervisor	Jackie Orton
Dialect Coach	Majella Hurley
Stage Management Work Placement	Kimberley Brewin
Set & Auditorium	Weld-Fab Stage Engineering Ltd & Object Construction

2. ABOUT THE WRITER

ROY WILLIAMS

Photograph: Graeme Robertson (The Guardian, 7 June 2010)

Biography

Previous Plays by Roy Williams for the Royal Court: Lift Off, Clubland, Fallout

Roy's other theatre credits include: No Boys Cricket Club (Theatre Royal Stratford East); Starstruck (Tricycle Theatre); Local Boy (Hampstead Theatre); The Gift (Birmingham Rep); Souls (Theatre Centre); Days of Significance (RSC); There's only One Wayne Matthews (Polka); Angel House, Little Sweet Thing (Eclipse Theatre Tour); Night & Day (Theatre Venture); Josie's Boys (Red Ladder); Sing Yer Heart out for the Lads, Baby Girl, Slow Time (National Theatre); Absolute Beginners (Lyric Theatre Hammersmith); Joe Guy (Titata Fahodzi/Soho Theatre); Out of the Fog (Almeida Theatre); Category B (Tricycle Theatre).

Television includes: Offside, Babyfather 2 (BBC TV); Fallout (Channel Four); Ten Minute Tales (Sky One).

Radio inlcudes: Homeboys, Tell Tale, To Sir with Love, Westway, Choice of Straws (BBC).

Awards: 31st John Whiting Award, Alfred Fgaon Award 1997, 1999 EMMA award, all for Starstruck. The George Devine Award 2000 for Lift Off. Evening Standard Charles Wintour Award for most Promising Playwright 2001 for Clubland. 2004 South Bank Show Arts Council Decibel Award for Fallout.BAFTA Award 2002, for Best Children's Drama for Offside. 2008 Screen Nation Award for achievement in screenwriting for Fallout. Awarded an OBE by her Majesty's the Queen for services to Drama in 2008.

Extract fromInterview with Roy Williams by Simon Hattenstone, The Guardian Monday 7 June 2010

Roy Williams: Confessions of an Uncool Kid

Roy Williams was rubbish at sport, shy with girls and a Bergerac obsessive. As his new play opens, he tells Simon Hattenstone why it made him the writer he is today.

When Roy Williams realised that his childhood had already become history, he decided it was time to turn it into drama. As a visiting playwright, he found himself talking to school pupils about the 1980s, the race riots and the Sus law, whereby police would stop and search black people pretty much on suspicion of being black and no more, and he realised they didn't have a clue what he was talking about. "I thought, 'They are so swamped with American culture, American music, American clothes, the whole gangsta rap thing, but they know nothing about the Britain I grew up in.'" So he set to work.

His new play Sucker Punch is set in 1985, on the night of the Broadwater Farm riot, when Britain's simmering racial tensions boiled over into all-out war between police and the local community in Tottenham, north London. The drama centres on two aspiring black boxers, Leon and Troy. Leon believes he can happily assimilate; Troy thinks he's naive, and contemptuously dismisses him as a "white man's bitch". Williams depicts 1980s Britain with gritty eloquence: this is a country where black boys rise from the ghetto through football or boxing, not education; where the white coach, Charlie, is a mentor and surrogate father to his boxing prodigy Leon – so long as he doesn't go near his daughter. It's not quite the "no blacks, no Irish, no dogs" generation, but it's not far off.

I meet Williams in the cafe of the Royal Court, where the play will premiere. Williams, who is 42 and lives in London with his girlfriend, is drinking a glass of cider and reflecting on his past. In his childhood, he says, every experience was refracted through race. "It was very much in your face. I had a lot of white mates when I was growing up, and he was my 'white mate' and I was his 'black mate', and I was allowed to stay on and sometimes have dinner with his family. In a weird way, though I'm not condoning it, you knew where you stood." There was a Charlie in his life: young Roy fancied a white girl, and she told him she would have gone out with him, but her father would have killed her. What was her name? He shrugs. "No, I can't. I don't want to embarrass her. No!"

As much as anything, Williams wanted to capture the selfishness of the Thatcher era. Every character betrays somebody close to them. "They're all dispensable at some point. This is what the 1980s did to people. It made them behave that way." He doesn't do heroes and villains; he prefers the grey areas. So Charlie, who walks out on Leon when he discovers he is going out

with his daughter, is basically a good man, struggling with changing times. In his 2002 play Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads, Williams even gave an incendiary white supremacist some charm and a load of intelligence. "I wouldn't know how to write a hero," he says. "I wouldn't know where to start. I'm certainly no hero. I've done my share of stupid things."

… Despite the anger in Williams's plays, humanity tends to win out – even if it's a desperate, bruised kind of humanity. In person, he seems more optimistic than much of his work. He laughs a lot, and has a likable, shambling presence. He thinks there is much to celebrate about today's youth. "It's easy to say, 'Don't carry guns, don't carry knives', and of course you shouldn't, but there's an understanding and compassion that our generation didn't have. They've got bags of compassion."

Where did he get his compassion from, then? He huffs and puffs and doesn't really answer. But a short while later he reveals more about his childhood, which acts as a pointer. I ask him whether he was a good sportsman; cricket, football and now boxing have served as backdrops in his plays. No, he says: hopeless. He was once in a five-a-side football squad but rarely played. "They only put me in because they felt sorry for me. They would give me a run-out for the last two minutes if they were, like, 5-0 ahead." The thing is, he says, even though he was rubbish, he was desperate to be good. "Because to be a footballer then was the only thing black kids had going for them, and all my other black mates were really good at sports. I felt left out. "

But his friends knew he liked to write and encouraged him. "They were like, yes, that's the one thing Roy's good at. Roy can't play football, but Roy, he can write a story."

Was he confident with girls? He shakes his head. "I was a bit of a shy kid when it came to the ladies. And even when I started becoming more confident, my mates always seemed to be way ahead." How old was he when he first went out with a girl? "Oooooh! Eighteen. Sharon, I'll tell you her name, I really liked her."

Perhaps not being cool or sporting made you a better writer, I say. He smiles. "Very much so. It made me more observant of the rest of them. If I had been as good as them, I don't think I'd be here talking to you now."

3. SYNOPSIS OF SUCKERPUNCH

Roy Williams' energetic new play ***Sucker Punch*** tells the story of two young black teenagers, Leon and Troy, against a backdrop of Thatcherite politics and the simmering racial tensions prominent in the 1980s.

Set in a South East London boxing gym with the majority of the action taking place on a genuine 80's boxing ring, the beginning of the play sees Leon and Troy cleaning the gym as punishment from abrasive white trainer and gym manager, Charlie, after they were caught breaking in. Tommy is the third young white boxer who Charlie is training. Tommy, well on his way to becoming a professional boxer, throws racist comments at Leon and Troy while Charlie's back is turned. As derogatory jokes are shared Tommy attempts to wind Leon up by practicing some of his boxing moves on him. Leon is taking jabs from Tommy, but retaliates and slaps Tommy in the face, a move that confirms Leon's potential as a boxer. Charlie hands him some gloves and points to the ring. As the spotlight lands on Leon, and the atmosphere intensifies, he delivers his first fight for the audience.

Leon's relationship with his father, 'Squid', is unfulfilling, based around gambling, money, and women, while a final confrontation with Troy occurs when Leon abandons him resulting in Troy getting beaten up by the police returning to the gym bloodied and bruised. Leon has to decide whether to stay with Charlie in the gym or leave with Troy. Leon makes his choice and Troy leaves for America to live with his dad.

As things progress for Leon, he faces many obstacles in his pursuit to become a professional boxer, and the nation's favourite. He falls for Charlie's 'fiery' daughter, Becky, and they begin a relationship behind Charlie's back, under the watchful eye of Tommy who does not approve of the mixed racial relationship. After losing a big fight to Leon he decides to tell Charlie about the secret relationship between Becky and Leon.

The audience watch as Leon grapples with the racism, fame, competition and the difficult choices he has to make between friendship, love and boxing, as the play moves through the 80s fight by fight in a slick, fast-paced sequence.

Now at the height of his boxing career having secured Charlie as his trainer and beaten Tommy in a major fight, he faces a major confrontation: the final showdown, with Troy. Returning from America with a newly adopted American accent, Troy has been propelled to boxing stardom after being found at a gas station by an American boxing agent, returning to London to face Leon for the first time since his departure. Winning this fight is not only pivotal in securing Leon's championship but also the survival of the gym where he started.

The arena then comes alive with sounds of James Brown, the flashing of photographers, crowds roaring, and gum shields at the ready as both boys appear from the audience in their silk shorts and boxing gloves. Ducking and diving, bobbing and weaving the boys embark on a beautifully choreographed

fight sequence with upper cuts and jabs from all angles, the atmosphere aided by strobe lighting and visceral sound effects. But there can only be one winner. In the final moments of the play, Leon and Troy discover how the fight has changed their lives.

4. ABOUT THE SET DESIGN

Sucker Punch set design, Miriam Buether © June 2010

The Jerwood Theatre Downstairs at the Royal Court has been completely re-configured for ***Sucker Punch***. It's been transformed from a traditional proscenium arch theatre into a realistic boxing arena with the audience encircling the ring. The director, Sacha Wares and the designer, Miriam Buether, felt it was vital that the set worked to re-create the live experience of a boxing match. To capture the visceral excitement of a fight, they wanted the audience to feel part of the action, immersed in the environment of a boxing gym. The designer and director discuss how they worked together in creating the design:

It's important for me as a designer that you create an experience for the audience, rather than letting them just watch the play, You create a different tension. People are far more alert when they're in an unusual space.

–Miriam Buether, Financial Times, 4 June 2010

Most of the work we [Miriam and I] have done together has involved some kind of reconfiguration of the auditorium in order to get the audience into the right vantage point for the play. I'm not interested in the idea that a play starts with the first line; for me it starts at the point that you arrive in the theatre.

–Sacha Wares, Financial Times, 4 June 2010

To achieve the aim for the design, the auditorium has had to undergo a total transformation. The seats in the stalls have been removed in order to create a space in the middle of the auditorium for the boxing ring, and an entirely new balcony for the audience has been built along the back walls of the stage area. This has presented complex challenges for the production team because Miriam's design required major feats of structural engineering. The Royal Court Production Manager, Paul Handley, was responsible for overseeing the construction. In order to keep to budget, he and his team built the set in situ from all raw materials; this labour-intensive approach, though difficult, has had remarkable results. The space is no longer recognisable as a proscenium arch theatre. Instead, it has been become the gritty, authentic boxing arena Miriam envisaged. And the audience experiences the sweat and thrill of being ring-side.

You can learn more about how the set for ***Sucker Punch*** was constructed in the Interview with Paul Handley in Section 8 of this pack.

6. RESEARCHING RACIAL TENSIONS IN ENGLAND IN THE 1980's

Sucker Punch is set at the time of the Broadwater Farm Riots, in which racial tensions between the local community in Tottenham and the police force exploded into a violent clash. When the young actors in the play began researching this important event in 1985, they discovered they knew very little about the riots nor their impact. The need to shed light on this recent history was one of the reasons Roy Williams wrote the play. He and the director, Sacha Wares, wished to ignite curiosity in the younger generation to explore the racial conflicts of the period, which is rarely being taught or examined in schools today.

Broadwater Farm Riots

Courtesy of BBC, 1985

The **Broadwater Farm Riot** occurred on the Broadwater Farm area of Tottenham, North London on 6 October 1985. Substantial damage was caused and a police officer, PC Keith Blakelock, was murdered. It occurred one week after a riot, in Brixton, South London.

On 5 October 1985 a young black man, Floyd Jarrett, was arrested by police, having been stopped in a vehicle with an allegedly suspicious tax disc. Four police officers searched his home. In a disturbance between police and family members, his 49-year-old mother, Cynthia Jarrett, fell over and died almost instantly.

The local council leader, Bernie Grant, later condemned the search and urged the local police chiefs to resign immediately as their behaviour had been "out of control".

Cynthia Jarrett's death sparked outrage from members of the black community against the Metropolitan Police. There was a belief in the black community that the police were racist. A black woman, Cherry Groce, had

been shot by police a week earlier in Brixton. Four years earlier the Scarman Report into an earlier riot in Brixton criticised police.

There was a demonstration the following day outside Tottenham police station by a small crowd of people. Violence between police and black youths escalated during the day. Riot police tried to clear streets using baton charges. The black youths in the conflict attacked using bricks and petrol bombs. The evening TV news showed there were shots at the police, two officers, PC Stuart Patt, another unnamed officer, being treated for gunshot wounds. Three journalists (Press Association reporter Peter Woodman, BBC sound recordist Robin Green, and cameraman Keith Skinner) were also hit. Cars were set on fire and barricades made. There was looting on the estate with police officers and rioters injured and dozens of rioters arrested.

At 9.30pm Police and London Fire Brigade responded to reports of a fire on the elevated level of Tangmere House. This block consisted of a shopping level with flats and maisonettes above, the location itself was some distance away from the main body of rioting and as such was being policed by units who were less well equipped and prepared in terms of disorder training. The London Fire Brigade came under attack as did the 'serial' of police, including Blakelock, who were there to assist. The rioting was too intense for police not trained in riot control and they and the firefighters withdrew, chased by rioters. Blakelock tripped, fell, and was surrounded by a mob with machetes, knives and other weapons, hacking him to death as they tried to decapitate the officer. Pc Richard Coombes suffered a serious facial injury from one of the attackers when he made efforts to rescue his colleague. The rioting tailed off during the night as rain fell and news of the death spread.

Police maintained a substantial presence on the estate for several months, arresting and interrogating 400 people. The disturbances led to changes in police tactics and equipment, and efforts to re-engage with the community.

-From Wikipedia

Further References:

- Policeman killed in riot Street violence in Tottenham, North London
- Metropolitan Police history of the riot
- On this day - 6 October. BBC News online.
- Graef (1990). *Talking Blues: Police in their own words*. Fontana Press. ISBN 0-00-637525-1

7. FIGHTING FIT – BOXING TRAINING FOR THE ACTORS

The two actors playing Leon (Daniel Kaluuya) and Troy (Anthony Welsh) began boxing training long before the rehearsals for the play began in May. They started to train in January with Errol Christie, a former national and European Middleweight Champion. They trained three times a week, following a strict diet and rigorous exercise regime. Their fitness improved dramatically and Daniel lost 3 stone in the process! Errol's goal was to bring Daniel and Troy up to fight standard, so they could perform the fight scenes convincingly. In addition to their training, the actors also worked with a nutritionist, an osteopath and a choreographer. With the help of Errol and Leon Baugh, the show's choreographer, the actors were able to develop a very exciting and believable boxing match for the final fight scene. Read more about Errol Christie's work below.

An Extract from an Interview with Errol Christie by Veronica Lee, The Independent, Sunday, 6 June 2010

His life may have been largely spent in what he calls a state of "tormentation", but former boxer Errol Christie certainly makes for convivial company. He's passionate about the sport and is happy to tell stories against himself – "Oh my God, I was so thick in those days" – frequently breaks into loud laughter, but is given to more reflective moments, too.

We meet because Christie, now 46 and 17 years out of the ring, has just published his autobiography, No Place To Hide, a highly readable book written with Tony McMahon. The "tormentation" it charts is the appalling racism he experienced as a child in Coventry, one of eight children of immigrant Caribbean parents.

"I grew up seeing my parents spat at, being treated like dirt," he says. "People would make monkey noises and call us niggers and coons. Skinheads used to chase me down the street. I was kicked, punched, shoved to the floor and I was constantly fighting to protect myself. It was a very hostile environment and it was only when I came to London, where all sorts of people lived, that I started to realise it didn't have to be us versus them [black against white] all the time."

Christie is also eager to talk about a new play, Sucker Punch, by acclaimed playwright Roy Williams, which opens later this month at the Royal Court theatre in London. He is not appearing in it, though you may be forgiven for thinking that; one of Christie's many jobs since leaving the ring was a brief stint as a stand-up comic – "I was terrible," he says with a wince.

The play is about two young, black boxers in the 1980s who choose different paths to fame and glory, and Christie has been training them to fight standard

and advising the playwright on technical aspects of boxing. "I think he's really captured what it was like back then," he says of the script.

Christie is also well-placed to advise on the murkier aspects of the game; though very successful at amateur level, he never made big money after he turned professional in 1983. "It's a dirty sport, always has been," he says. "I loved the game – it's the biggest love of my life really – but I didn't love a lot of the people in it, the managers, the promoters. I hate them. I was too trusting with my management, but boxers are now more attuned to what the sport can bring them, and that's a good thing."

His career, which included an amateur European belt and the captaincy of the England team from 1980-83, seemed destined to culminate in a world title. But then came leg-muscle problems and too many tough fights, not least the infamous loss to Mark Kaylor at Wembley Arena in 1985. Coming one month after the Broadwater Farm Estate riot in Tottenham, in which PC Keith Blakelock was murdered, the contest became a detestable white-supremacy contest for some of east Londoner Kaylor's more excitable fans. Christie's eventual retirement came in 1993.

Always an exciting boxer to watch and light on his feet, he was what he describes as a "dance fighter" and it's no surprise to learn that his hero is Muhammad Ali, with whom he once sparred. "He was a thinker, I tell them [the actors]. They thought boxing was just about throwing punches, but boxers have to be quick-minded and think about each punch. You have to instantly assess each move your opponent makes and decide what you are going to do next. There's a lot going on in a good boxer's head."

Has he also offered Williams advice on how boxers talk among themselves? He bursts out laughing. "Oh man, yeah, there's one word boxers use all the time in the changing room, but I can't say it in front of you."...What does Christie think of today's game? "Boxing should be theatre, but we haven't got any characters around today – we need another Chris Eubank or Nigel Benn. Today's boxers all do the same thing. It's too technical and the flair has gone. You have to blame the trainers; they're making boxers technically good but not letting their personalities come through in the ring."

8. INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR, SACHA WARES

What drew you to the play initially?

Sacha: I first read the play at a very early stage of development. It wasn't in any way the play that is going on now, it was very, very different. Maybe two or three scenes are the same, with a core, two to three characters that are the same. All the other characters are different, so it's changed enormously. What I saw in that very early draft, and is still here now, is the intensity of feeling in the play, and the *purpose* that Roy had for writing the play. He feels very strongly that the Eighties was period of time when growing up as a black man was very difficult, and the choices you had to make were particularly hard. It was a time when people were allowed to be openly racist, in a way that they're not now, in the political sense. So you could be mocked on television – every soap opera had a black character that everyone took the mick out of, and you could be called all sorts of names at school by your teachers and by other pupils. A very hard time to grow up and find your identity.

What Roy and certainly Errol Christie (our boxing trainer, who grew up in the same period, an avid boxer like the characters in the play) both feel is that the Eighties is a period of history that we haven't really dealt with or looked at its legacy. That is very much felt by Roy and Errol's generation. Once political correctness came in, everybody, *everybody* wanted to brush under the carpet what that decade had been like. I think he feels that it's important for his generation to look back on that period but also for the next generation to know what that time was like. That was a very strong impulse in the first drafts and I think is stressed even more greatly now. That drew me in - the total transportation back to that time. Also the challenge of putting boxing on stage, which partly attracted me and partly terrified me!

Obviously there are so many boxing films, and no plays with boxing. It's really hard to do on stage. You can cheat on film but boxing's exciting to watch because it's live, and there is a real risk of injury, and that's what's exciting about watching it. Of course in theatre, it's live, and there's no risk of injury, or there shouldn't be, because you've got to do it every night and you've got to find a way to cheat. And that in a way was what was attractive, just how on earth will you do it, but also daunting: is it possible, and will it always be disappointing in a way that film isn't? And so that is what drew me to it and has been my biggest anxiety through it!

When you were working with the designer, what was the impulse to transform the space as you have?

Sacha: The designer and I know each other really well, and we have a shared obsession really - 'what should the audience's point of view on the play be? what should their experience of the play be?' And for us, to do a play about boxing, we want the audience to feel as if they're going to a boxing match, and that's not an end-on, proscenium arch production – that's a given. We

couldn't get the audience on all sides, because of the width [of the theatre] but we wanted to capture that sense of an arena, that sense of the audience surrounding the action and looking down to the square hotspot of the ring. That was a very, very early decision actually, when I first read that early draft of the play. I said that I would like to direct it, but on the condition that I could reconfigure the stage. I couldn't see that there was any other way to bring it to life accurately. Otherwise if you do it end-on, proscenium, you'd be watching the play like a film. So the only way you can do it is by trying to capture the liveness of it. We wanted to create a space that had that live arena feel.

How are you tackling the fight scenes?

Sacha: Well, we started that way, way, way before rehearsals. We only had four weeks to rehearse the play, and we started rehearsals on May 10th, but the training for the two main characters started in January. They've had about four months of boxing training with Errol Christie who was former British and European middleweight champion, and is now a boxing trainer. He's been training them three times a week since January, and once a week with the choreographer. And they've had dietician support, osteopathy support. They've been, in a way, as if in training for a fight. The main fight of the play was in fact choreographed in advance of rehearsals starting. We were aware of the short rehearsal time and it takes an enormous amount of time to get something that looks exciting and real and is also safe. All of that work was done before we started.

Is it stylised, or are we going to be seeing a real fight in front of us?

Sacha: It varies through the play. There are six sections in the play where a fight is either shown or described. We decided that there should be a progression from the first one which is just a narration, to the sixth one which is a fully fledged, as real as possible re-enactment of a fight.

And that's the fight between Troy and Leon?

Sacha: That's right. That's the sixth one. So between there are stages of realism that are added into each monologue. Some of them are just told, some of them are quite stylised, some of them involve complex skipping sequences and the final one is a five minute long, very complex choreographed fight sequence, based on the reality of boxing, and is made to feel as live and real as possible.

And for the actors to keep that fresh, is the fight rehearsed every day?

Sacha: Actually not today because one of the actors has got a little knee niggle, but it was choreographed, all but one round of it before we started rehearsals, and the first two weeks of rehearsals a lot of corrections…a lot of time was given to it in the first two weeks, correcting and doing that last round. And then since then they've rehearsed it once a day.

What's really fascinating about the play is the relationship between Leon and the trainer, Charlie – how have you worked on that in rehearsal?

Sacha: I think I've worked on it in the same way as I would with any other play. First two weeks of rehearsals, we sat round the table and talked about what the characters want and what they were doing and so on, and in the last week of rehearsals we staged it. Charlie is an interesting character actually – because in many ways you can go the 'hopeless , alcoholic trainer' route – he is a stock character that we have seen in films many times. And it seemed Nigel Lindsay who plays Charlie was challenged to find what's distinctive and particular about that character, from that decade. It's been an interesting journey for Nigel to find the loathing which that character has for black people. It's so far removed from how most of us are living now in this multicultural society. But in the Eighties there was a very particular feeling, and that has really been a challenge for Nigel to get into that mindset. The conflict for that character is, on the one hand he really likes Leon, really wants him to do well, really enjoys his company, and also has his hopes pinned on him, which is going to make Charlie feel like a success. But, at the same time, he has an inbuilt or hereditary problem with his ethnicity. One or the other of those is always going to be in the foreground in different scenes. The difference between sometimes seeing Leon as a person, and seeing him as a tabloid version of a black person - that's been very complex and hard to navigate, and has made a very interesting rehearsal combination.

How did you and Roy work together to make the changes from the early drafts?

Sacha: Roy always says that he works often through many, many drafts. That's how he works. He writes and writes and writes, finds what's interesting and then redrafts. He's written pretty much a draft a month since we started on it and it's a very collaborative relationship. He writes very fast, very intuitively, and then waits for response about what's hitting. So my job was really to be an audience in advance and say, 'this intrigues me, that character's interesting' and then he'd go and come back with a draft that had built on those areas. But it's been really enjoyable, a very long and very collaborative process that we're both very happy with. I think the thing that came last with the drafts was getting the sense of the politics of the Eighties. We always wanted that in, but it was quite late on, when we watched it and realised that a lot of younger people watching it wouldn't have an understanding of the eighties, so we had to build that understanding into the play, references to Maggie Thatcher and the politics of the time and so on.

What have you enjoyed about this particular play?

Sacha: I've enjoyed working with a young company of actors, who have limited experience in theatre. A lot of it is new and exciting to them, and also the energy that they put in, and the total determination, particularly the actors playing Troy and Leon, to change their bodies into the bodies of boxers. Watching that process and seeing how hard they've worked has been a great pleasure. And then seeing those really young actors working alongside

seasoned professionals like Nigel Lindsay and how they are learning from other older actors has also been a real pleasure.

What do you hope the audience will take away from Suckerpunch?

Sacha: I hope for the younger members of the audience it will make them curious about recent British history. The young actors in the play were astonished by what their research on the play has revealed to them about what life was like in the Eighties. A lot of them didn't know anything about that time, and these massive events in British history aren't being taught in schools. As I said before, it's being brushed under the carpet. It's been interesting in rehearsals how interested the actors have been in that history, and how strongly they felt once they did their research. So I would hope that the younger members of the audience will be curious.

It's like with any other play, and Roy says this too, his only hope is that the audience connect with the characters and go on the emotional journey with them, and not just the leading character. It's very interesting to think - can you have sympathy for a character that has racist views, for example. I'd hope that firstly they are engaged and excited by the event, but also that they would come out and feel that they've understood more about those characters at that time, and therefore more about our time now. Because it's very recent history and of course its legacy is still having an impact on how we live now.

9. INTERVIEW WITH PRODUCTION MANAGER, PAUL HANDLEY

When the director and the designer approached you, what was their initial idea?

Paul: Sacha, the director, knew very clearly that she wanted to recreate a boxing arena, and she knew fundamentally – this was before the play was finished actually – that the focus had to be the boxing ring. But not only that there was a boxing ring, but that we could switch between the intimacy of a gym and then expand into this big arena. And hence put the theatre into the round. So weirdly the design came before the final rehearsal draft. Quite a peculiar thing.

So when you realised that you had to create this arena, how did you react?

Paul: Well we knew it was going to be expensive, because of the way that she wanted it done…when we've gone into the round before we've concocted

something with scaffolding and even modular staging that's used in lots of contexts in stage work. Sacha is a person who is singular in vision, always, so she was very clear what she wanted and that was basically to put stalls underneath the circle seating. We knew at that point that it was going to be bespoke and expensive, because we intended to put ninety people up in the air, and then put another ninety people sat underneath them. You just can't mess around with that kind of stuff. You know, that's serious structural stuff. Even the Old Vic when they did their shows in the round, for the Sam Mendes Bridge Project, they didn't have to put so many people up in the air. So, at quite an early stage, we started discussions with the structural engineer, and a structural fabrication company and got the two talking to each other, and had some fairly wild and crazy ideas early on, and that's where all the work was. To create something that was safe.

What ideas that had to be left to one side?

Paul: Well you don't really think about it until much later on. I mean the nature of this building is that you're always so busy with the show that's next in line because design deadlines are quite early – Miriam the designer on this gave us the design for Sucker Punch fairly early, but we still had this huge show in-between to do. So the most we could manage was concentrating on the structural elements that were going to ensure audience safety. We left the set stuff for a while. The only thing we had to do straight away was the actual boxing ring because they needed to rehearse with that from day one. So we did some research, we went and looked at a couple of gyms. The creative team and myself all went to a boxing gym in Olympia last Autumn, so we had an idea of what was important and how the thing would look. And then we had to find a ring. I went down to the Repton boxing club in Bethnal Green, which is one of the oldest boxing clubs on London, it's an incredible space and in fact a lot of Miriam's design is based on it. The people that box on that ring there – well they are East End colourful characters. More atmosphere than you can imagine, just remarkable. And fortuitously, it turned out that they were getting rid of their ring after 50 years because the rules have changed, you now have to have four ropes instead of three ropes, so health and safety – sounds ironic for this sport! But we said 'well that's amazing, can we have it?' But then it was such a bulky, awkward thing, and actually our ring had to be smaller than the standard ring to fit in the theatre. So we only used the corner posts and then fabricated the rest of the ring. That's how we did it. And it's remarkably simple actually. We thought it would be very complex, but actually it's a big canvas stretched on a metal frame - that's all it is, really. And so we kept the Repton posts and that's a very big part of London's boxing history on stage, which I'm very pleased about. Sacha wanted to get rid of them at one point and get something much skinnier because she was worried about sight lines but it does feel right. We could have made the thing much more spindly and unreal but there's something very weighty about what we have. And I certainly feel the history when I look at it.

What do you think about the transformation?

Paul: It is the hardest show we've done just for the sheer quantity of work. And the scale of it. I've been working on shows in this building for about twenty years. It's the biggest. It's not the most complex, but I would say in terms of the sheer bulk of stuff coming into the building it's the biggest thing we've ever done. I think it's fantastic! I had moments of being really annoyed with it, with the scale of it. Annoyed with myself for agreeing to do it, annoyed with myself for how much it was costing, and it was just very hard work. The majority of the money was spent on issues of public safety, making the structure safe and a couple of scenic pieces. And the rest of it we just built as an installation. So we had lorry load and lorry load of raw materials coming into the building, and just built it from scratch with our carpenters. But boy, was it hard work. We did it in a very short space of time.

Opening night reactions – was the audience suitably surprised?

Paul: Well I was in the auditorium, because we all were, til ten past seven, because it was not finished! But people were coming in and just going 'WOW!'. That was a relief. If they hadn't noticed…it would be a bit sad!
I think we really achieved it well. In terms of what Miriam and Sacha wanted, we got 96% of the way there really, and with the 4% we ran out of time and money and resources. But we got much further than I had thought that we would. If we'd costed all of that with set builders we wouldn't have been able to afford what we have. So we had to cost it with raw materials and just get labour in and do as much as we could in the time available. So it was a major challenge, everyone was up to their necks in it. There was one day when all of us were just covered in red paint, it was ridiculous. It looked like a horror film. Absolutely caked in red paint. It was sort of wonderful though, it captured the good and bad about the Royal Court. The bad thing is that sometimes it feels like super fringe, in that you just have to give your heart and soul to make things happen, and the resources aren't quite enough to make it straight forward. You are always pushing the limit of what's achievable. And then the huge positive is you always have a huge sense of achievement afterwards. And that first night, that first preview, when we were so tight on time that we had ushers screwing seats down, and the head of lighting putting curtains up, and everyone in the theatre involved one way or another, in such a collective effort. That's fantastic, and that's unique. There's no another theatre like it for everybody pulling their weight. Shame we've got to take it down really!

What do you think about the set design?

Paul: I think it's critical for this play. And for your understanding of this play. Hopefully you feel like you are at a sporting event and there happens to be a play there as well. I think the audience's relationship with the stage and what's going on is hugely important. If the whole thing was end on and in a proscenium I think it would have felt very distant and slight in a way, perhaps. Whereas it really is a visceral experience, being able to see the fight. And they're so close up as well, in fact more so than they normally would be. You've got all that intimacy of a studio play, but on a grand scale.

10. CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

The director Sacha Wares uses this exercise to explore the power-play between two characters in a scene. It can help actors discover how to play significant shifts in each character's status.

The Sliding Scale

Using the ***Sucker Punch*** extract below, ask one person to play Leon and the other to play Becky. Give the two actors 10 sheets of A4 paper which have been numbered 1 to 10. Ask them to lay the sheets in number order down the length of the room, creating a giant number line from 1 to 10.

Ask the person playing Leon to stand on one side of this number line and the person playing Becky to stand on the other side.

When they start the scene, each one must choose the number they would like to stand alongside according to how high they think the character's status is at the opening moment of the scene. Ten is the highest status and one is the lowest.

They then work through the scene. When each character says a line they must move up or down the number line to reflect his status at that given point.

Once the actors have finished working through the scene in this way, the group can discuss what discoveries were made about the relationship between the Becky and Leon.

Sucker Punch Extract – From Act Two: Leon and Becky

Leon is back in the gym with Becky,

BECKY: You have to stop this, Leon.
LEON: Told you already girl, I don't know what you're talking about.
BECKY: I know it's you.
LEON: Becks, believe me.
BECKY: Calling me all the time, hanging up when you hear my voice, was annoying.
LEON: Not me.
BECKY: Insulting my boyfriend when he answers the phone, was just plain childish.
LEON: Not me!
BECKY: Now you're stalking me?
LEON: No.
BECKY: This stops now. Are you listening?
LEON: What makes you think it's me?
BECKY: One of my neighbours saw you lurking around earlier. *Black kid, he looked just like Leon Davidson,* she says.
LEON: Nice!
BECKY: She wanted to call the police. Now she wants an autograph. (*Leon chuckles)* Why are you doing this?
LEON: If it was me, did you ever think that maybe it was because I'm looking out for you? It's a rough area you are living in, Becks.
BECKY: I've got Simon looking after me.

LEON: He looks like a bender.
BECKY: Leon, what is going on in that head?
LEON: Like I got time to be chasing after you.
BECKY: This stops, right now.
LEON: Too busy larging it in the West End to chase after you.
BECKY: Do you understand me?
LEON: I'm one of the faces, girl.
BECKY: No more.
LEON: Voice down. Unless you want Charlie coming out.
BECKY: It's like I'm talking to a total stranger. I'm going.
LEON: Meeting *Simon?*
BECKY: Yes Leon, I am meeting *Simon.* We are having dinner.
LEON: How posh.
BECKY: Its only a pizza.
LEON: It's the way you say it.
BECKY: Good bye , Leon.
LEON: Look it's getting dark now. Bus will be ages. How would you like to have the great honour of being the first to ride in my spanking new car outside.
BECKY: I thought it might be yours.
LEON: Did you think it was Charlie's?

Becky smiles at the thought

LEON: There it is. You know your smile just lights me up, whenever I see it. it always did, you know that? So, you like it then, the motor?
BECKY: It's nice.
LEON: It's an Aston Martin. You know, like *James Bond.*
BECKY: Yes I know. Expensive.
LEON: I can afford it now.
BECKY: As long you are being careful.
LEON: Of course. Charlie's investing my money. Looking after it.
BECKY: Charlie? Bit risky isn't it?
LEON: Why?
BECKY: This is my Dad, we're talking about.
LEON: If I didn't know any better, I'd say, *Rebecca*, that you were caring about me.
BECKY: It's your money.
LEON: Trying to ruin my fun.
BECKY: Forget it.
LEON: I know what I'm doing.
BECKY: Sorry!
LEON: Cos it was the best feeling in the world when I walk right into the dealers shop. I slam the money down and I goes *That one, I want that one.* You like? You wanna?
BECKY: I am really happy for you.
LEON: So let me take you for a spin in it.
BECKY: I thought you were just going to drop me home?
LEON: We'll take a nice drive over the bridge.
BECKY: Will you stop?
LEON: Stop? Stop what?
BECKY:. You broke my fucking heart.
LEON: Calm down girl.
BECKY: Strutting around like it was nothing. You're not even sorry for what you did, are you?
LEON: You don't want a ride, cool. That is fine. I got smart shoes, pukka suits. New Tele with a video. What I need you for?
BECKY: Exactly.
LEON: Page Three girl with a fine pair of *Bristols* is what I need.
BECKY: *(Takes out a piece of paper from the bag)* Could you sign this please?
LEON: What is it?
BECKY: Autograph for my neighbour, remember.

11. EDUCATION AT THE ROYAL COURT

As the Royal Court is a centre for excellence and innovation in theatre-making, the Education Department aims to stimulate and inspire students of all ages, encouraging learning and participation in every aspect of the theatre's work, from the process of writing plays to pioneering rehearsal room techniques.

We offer a wide-ranging programme of work designed to open up and de-mystify the craft of making theatre. Royal Court Education activities include:

Workshops for productions
INSET workshops for teachers
Education Matinees
Post-show talks
Royal Court in a Day Study Day
Drama School in a Day Study Day
Performing Arts Business Study Day

A full description of all education events can be found on the education pages of the Royal Court web-site, www.royalcourttheatre.com. If you would like more information, please e-mail Lynne Gagliano, Education Associate, at lynnegagliano@royalcourttheatre.com or phone 020 7565 5174.

For more information about Royal Court productions and the Young Writers Programme, please visit our web-site, www.royalcourttheatre.com.

Sucker Punch Background Pack compiled and written by Philippa Crossman and Lynne Gagliano. Production and Rehearsal photographs by Chris Nash © June 2010.