

Terence Blanchard's *Champion*

By Carol Crocca

Terence Blanchard's *Champion*, a two-act "opera in jazz" with a libretto by Michael Cristofer was commissioned by and had its premiere in 2013 at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis. The following, from a review of a 2016 production in San Francisco, is a concise summation.

San Francisco, Opera Parallèle & SFJAZZ Seen 2/19/16

Champion tells the story of Emile Griffith, a closeted bisexual boxer who knocked out Benny "Kid" Paret in 1962 after his opponent mocked him as a "maricón" [a Spanish epithet for homosexual] during a pre-fight press conference. This fateful third Welterweight title-match between the two rivals proved fatal for Paret, who died from the beating ten days after the fight. It was also traumatic for Griffith, who would be tormented throughout his life with guilt over killing a fellow athlete. Blanchard's opera introduces Griffith as an elderly man, confused with dementia from years of pugilistic abuse, reliving his inner and outer struggles in a series of flashbacks.

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The two stories intertwined here are Emile Griffith's search for redemption for the savage and fateful beating of his opponent, and his struggle with his sexuality. Griffith was an actual boxer, who went on to win 86 fights and was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame and the World Boxing Hall of Fame. The libretto is not strictly faithful to his personal life experience or the chronology of events in his life; however, such rearrangement is not unusual, and is sometimes a dramatic necessity, when a work is created for the stage.

The following excerpts indicate the change in public attitudes between the time of the story and the appearance of the opera. The contemporary press, according to Con Chapman, artsfuse.org, May 22, 2022, declined to follow indications in Griffith's life — a marriage that lasted only two months, the younger men with whom he went dancing — to draw the conclusion that others might have reached; namely, that he was gay. One suspects that, since acknowledgment of discrimination against homosexuals in popular culture was several years in the future, this was less out of respect for Griffith's privacy and more a refusal to believe that a man engaged in a violent sport was not exclusively heterosexual.



Some 50 years later, with a spate of attacks against gay people in New York City and the N.B.A.'s Jason Collins becoming the first openly gay athlete active in a major American team sport, the opera certainly strikes a resonant chord.

Homophobia in the Ring Delivers Fatal Blows, Vivien Schweitzer

New York Times, June 21, 2013

Blanchard played in the bands of Lionel Hampton and Art Blakey before establishing himself with a group he and saxophonist Donald Harrison co-led in the '80s, and he has since diversified into film scores, writing the music for forty-two movies, and opera. *Champion*, written in 2013, was his first, and *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, based on the memoir by *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow, his second. Cristofer is an actor and playwright whose play *The Shadow Box* won both a Pulitzer Prize and a Tony Award.

Some reviews of the San Francisco production:

Joshua Kosman, SF Chronicle:

What all of this adds up to... is simultaneously an innovative take on the material and a recognizably familiar operatic dramaturgy. The piece's musical language — strong, evocative and varied — may be relatively new to the operatic world, but its modes of storytelling are tried and true.

Steven Winn, SF Classical Voice, *Champion* Delivers Emotional TKO

Blanchard fills the house with the evening's most unabashedly lyrical and expansive music, a chorus of pleas for resolution and release, for forgiveness and coming home. And then, silence. A slowly emptying stage. An embrace, a parting of the ways. Emile is once again alone with his divided self. "Only me, only you," the lyrics go in this heartbreaking and deeply consoling moment, gorgeously captured in Blanchard's music.

sfgate.com, Feb. 20, 2016, Updated: Feb. 21, 2016