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Dramatic Publishing



FIGHTING WORDS

By
SUNIL KURUVILLA



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • London, England • Melbourne, Australia

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The Joyce Ketay Agency, 630 Ninth Avenue, Suite 706,
New York NY 10036 – Phone: (212) 354-6825

ISBN: 1-58342-185-8

Review Quotes:

“*Fighting Words* keeps its audience on its toes. Most wonderfully, its sneaky left hook of a punch lingers on the soul well after the final round.”

New Haven Register

“There’s no denying [Kuruvilla’s] ability...to create rich women’s roles.”

Variety

“...takes you from life to art then back to life.”

New York Times

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Acknowledgments:

Mom, Dad and Dee.

Mervin Antonio, Linda Bartholomai, Martin Benson, Mark Bly, Scott Bolman, Emma Bowers, Meg Brogan, James Bundy, Jason Campbell, Rob Coelho, Lynn Cohen, Marie Davis-Green, Liz Diamond, John Dias, Rosemary Dunsmore, John Glore, Anna Gupta, Mandy Hackett, Amy Handelsman, Amir Haque, Jayne Houdyshell, Joyce Ketay, Jennifer Kiger, Brian Kulick, Alistair MacLeod, Karl Mansfield, Anthony Minghella, Chiori Miyagawa, Meredith Pallin, Robin Pitcher, Sharon Pollock, Jean Randich, Lisa Rodrigues, Edwin Sanchez, Kim Selody, Far Shariat, Beverly Simons, Rebecca Taichman, Pier Carlo Talenti, Chuck Thompson, John Turci-Escobar, Iris Turcott, Joe Varkey, Mac Wellman, Chay Yew, The Canada Council for the Arts, The Ontario Arts Council.

* * * *

Production History:

Fighting Words had its world premiere at the Factory Theatre, Toronto, Ontario, in November 2001, directed by Rosemary Dunsmore.

Fighting Words had its American premiere at the Yale Repertory Theatre, New Haven, Connecticut, in November 2002, directed by Liz Diamond.

Johnny Owen, the Merthyr Matchstick, won the Welsh, British, Commonwealth and European bantamweight championships before challenging Mexican Lupe Pintor for the world bantamweight title at the Olympic Auditorium in Los Angeles on September 19, 1980. Although Owen took the first four rounds, Pintor's overwhelming power soon began to speak. In the ninth round Pintor knocked Owen down—the first time Owen dropped in his entire career. An all-too-familiar story unfolded from there until Owen was knocked unconscious in round twelve. The ringside reporter Hugh McIlvanney wrote: "The extreme depth of his own courage did as much as anything else to take him to the edge of death (in the ring). This calamitous experience could only have happened to an exceptionally brave fighter because Lupe Pintor...had landed enough brutal punches before the twelfth and devastatingly conclusive round to break the nerve and resistance of an ordinary challenger. The young Welshman was, sadly, too extraordinary for his own good in the Olympic Auditorium." After a brave, final struggle for his life, Johnny Owen died from his injuries seven weeks later in a Los Angeles hospital.

Boxing, the most fundamental form of competition, has fired up the imagination of writers for the past 3,000 years beginning with Homer and his heavyweight Epeus. There is good reason for that. The metaphors that can be drawn between life and boxing, theater and boxing, are almost too perfect. The Aristotelian unities of time, place and action are perfectly observed in a boxing contest. Time is the ultimate enemy: a boxer will at some point confront another who is quicker, stronger and younger. Boxers are trained to fight until the bitter end. If knocked down, they get back

on their feet no matter how painful—a lesson learned all too well by Johnny Owen. In the same way, actors must go on. There are no “second takes” in the theater. Mortality is present in the ring, in the theater, in life. But to reduce boxing to a metaphor is a cop-out. Joyce Carol Oates writes in her book *On Boxing* that life may be a metaphor for boxing, but boxing isn’t a metaphor for anything. It just is. Sunil Thomas Kuruvilla’s play isn’t a metaphor. *Fighting Words* just is.

— Linda Bartholomai, Dramaturg,
Yale Repertory Theatre’s production of Fighting Words.

FIGHTING WORDS

A Full-length Play
For 3 Women

CHARACTERS

PEG. 25. Single. Wants to be a boxer.

NIA 30. Peg's sister. Married. Wants to be a radio announcer.

MRS. DAVIES. 55. Married. A midwife.

In September 1980 in Los Angeles, Welshman Johnny Owen challenged Lupe Pintor for the Mexican's 118-pound world title. This play is set in Owen's hometown of Merthyr Tydfil, Wales.

It is Johnny Owen's tragedy that he found himself articulate in such a dangerous language.

— *Hugh McIlvanney*

FIGHTING WORDS

SCENE: *Two days after the Johnny Owen-Lupe Pintor fight. A boxing gym. A television sits in the middle of the room. On the ground: tissues, empty pie plates, disposable cups, cutlery, and plates—the remains of a party. MRS. DAVIES and NIA sit on corner stools eating Bara Brith, a Welsh teacake, and drinking milk from large glass jugs. Every three minutes a buzzer sounds in the gym, signaling the end of a training round.*

NIA. I feel awful.

MRS. DAVIES. Force it down. *(NIA eats cake.)*

NIA. I feel sick.

MRS. DAVIES. Try the milk.

NIA. Has it turned?

MRS. DAVIES. No. *(NIA drinks milk from the jug.)*

NIA. There's no circulation. The room stinks like men.

MRS. DAVIES. Plug your nose. Breathe through your mouth.

NIA. And taste that smell?

MRS. DAVIES. Use your nose then.

NIA. And smell that smell?

MRS. DAVIES. Nose or mouth, Nia, it's one or the other.
(Silence.)

NIA. I'm dying in here. *(NIA sniffs the cake.)* The cake's soaking up the stink. Smells like George. *(NIA gestures*

to all the pastry around the room.) I told you we made too much. I kept telling you.

MRS. DAVIES. Don't get rude. We made the right amount. The women lost their appetite.

NIA. I'm sorry, Mrs. Davies. *(Silence.)* Talk, Mrs. Davies.

MRS. DAVIES. I don't have anything to say.

NIA. Say something nice. *(Silence.)* Try.

MRS. DAVIES. I'm going to the hospital tomorrow. There's a new woman in town. She's having a baby and heard I'm a midwife. I'm meeting her tomorrow. She and I are going to have a lovely talk. *(Beat.)* She's new in town and heard I'm a midwife. She's having a baby. I'm meeting her tomorrow. She and I are going to have a lovely talk.

NIA. How far along is she?

MRS. DAVIES. Three months. She was here. Did you see her?

NIA. I think so. Green dress?

MRS. DAVIES. I think so.

NIA. She came in right before the fight—

MRS. DAVIES. Yes.

NIA. Brilliant.

MRS. DAVIES. Good. *(Silence.)*

NIA. Did Mr. Davies call? *(Silence.)* What about George?

MRS. DAVIES. I haven't been home.

NIA. Where have you been?

MRS. DAVIES. Johnny's house.

NIA. What was that like?

MRS. DAVIES. Fine.

NIA. Are you all right?

MRS. DAVIES. Yes. *(Silence.)*

NIA. When are the men coming back?

MRS. DAVIES. I don't know.

NIA. You said Johnny's mother and sister are going to Los Angeles. What will they do with their shop?

MRS. DAVIES. Don't know.

NIA. Where will we buy our groceries? (*A buzzer sounds.*)
I'll go to the shop and look through the window. I'll look at the roast. And the cheese. And the pudding. The plums. What about you? What will you miss?

MRS. DAVIES. Nothing.

NIA. Think.

MRS. DAVIES. No. (*Silence.*)

NIA. You'll miss your crackers. (*Silence.*) Yesterday I went up into the hills. Today I came back to the gym. I can't go home. (*Silence.*)

MRS. DAVIES. Thank you for going on the roof.

NIA. My pleasure.

MRS. DAVIES. You did a fine job. (*Silence.*)

NIA. All of you inside watching the telly. I didn't mind being on the roof. It wasn't a sacrifice. Someone had to hold the antenna. (*Silence.*) I keep thinking about Peggy. What was it like for her? To be there alone with all the men.

MRS. DAVIES. She stopped talking.

NIA. What do you mean?

MRS. DAVIES. George called Johnny's house. He said she hasn't spoken since the fight. Let's sit quiet.

NIA. You could ask me about my audition.

MRS. DAVIES. Your audition—I forgot. (*Silence.*)

NIA. Your turn. Talk.

MRS. DAVIES. No.

NIA. Keep going.

MRS. DAVIES. I don't want to.

NIA. Try.

MRS. DAVIES. Put the fiddle on the roof. [*Translates: Call it quits.*] (*Silence.*)

NIA. Dead air.

MRS. DAVIES. Quiet, Nia! There's nothing to say so just sit quiet, would you do that please—just— Shut! (*A buzzer sounds.*) I'm sorry. You can talk.

NIA. You want to go home?

MRS. DAVIES. No.

NIA. What should we do?

MRS. DAVIES. Let's just eat. The stupid cake's going to turn. (*They eat cake.*)

* * * *

SCENE: *Two days before the Johnny Owen-Lupe Pintor boxing match. PEG and NIA hang wash on the line. PEG starts to shadowbox with the men's shirts, naming each one, ducking under the line as she proceeds. NIA ignores her sister and just completes the work, hidden behind a huge bedsheet.*

PEG. Jimmy Driscoll. Featherweight. 1908. Freddie Welsh. Lightweight. 1912. Jimmy Wilde. Tommy Farr. Heavyweight. 1937. Gypsy Daniels. Howard Winstone. Eddie Thomas. (*Reaches a large bedsheet. Boxes, casting a huge shadow onto the white.*) Johnny Owen. 1980. Bantamweight. I don't want to jinx him but two days from today—I think Merthyr finally has a world champion.

NIA (*starts to talk from behind the bedsheet*). Wednesday. September 17, 1980. There are no men in the town of Merthyr Tydfil. They left yesterday for Los Angeles to join local boy Johnny Owen. Young Owen has been in

America the last two weeks readying for the fight of his life. In two days he challenges Lupe Pintor for the world bantamweight title. Merthyr Tydfil has bred many outstanding boxers but strangely none has ever claimed a world title. Will Owen reverse a century of bad luck and become this town's first world champion? Owen is pathetically skinny. He stands 5 feet 8 inches and weighs less than 115 pounds. He carries the dreams of his entire town on his narrow shoulders. I'm Nia Parret for BBC Radio Swansea. Your regional news follows in twenty minutes. *(Silence.)*

PEG. I love doing the wash. Bob and weave.

NIA. Sister?

PEG. Jab, right cross. *(NIA pokes her head out from behind the sheet. PEG continues her punching.)*

NIA. How did I sound?

PEG. Feint, hook. Combination.

NIA. Peg?

PEG. Uppercut. Ducking under.

NIA. Peg! *(PEG continues her punching. NIA exits. PEG stops punching and bends at the waist trying to shake off her morning sluggishness.)*

PEG. My body's still asleep. Wake up, Peggy. Come to life!

* * * *

SCENE: *Two days before the Johnny Owen-Lupe Pintor fight. The kitchen. A worried MRS. DAVIES readies the ingredients preparing to bake Bara Brith. NIA enters with laundry to fold.*

NIA. Wednesday. September 17, 1980. There are no men in the town of Merthyr Tydfil.

MRS. DAVIES. Cake.

NIA. They left yesterday for Los Angeles to join local boy Johnny Owen. Young Owen has been in America the last two weeks readying for the fight of his life. In two days he challenges Lupe Pintor for the world bantam-weight title.

MRS. DAVIES. Eggs. Lard. Caster sugar.

NIA. Merthyr Tydfil has bred many outstanding boxers but strangely none has ever claimed a world title.

MRS. DAVIES. Flour. Baking powder. Salt.

NIA. Mrs. Davies has flabby arms and smells like cockles and laver bread.

MRS. DAVIES. Raisins soaked in tea.

NIA. Her skin's wrinkled. Like chicken skin.

MRS. DAVIES. Marmalade.

NIA. She has gray teeth. (*No response.*) She's got a mustache.

MRS. DAVIES. Quiet, Nia!

NIA. Listen to me!

MRS. DAVIES. I feel distressed. I just received some very distressing news.

NIA. What happened?

MRS. DAVIES. It's terrible.

NIA. Tell me.

MRS. DAVIES. It's Mr. Davies.

NIA (*scared*). No.

MRS. DAVIES. Mr. Davies vomited on the plane. (*Beat.*) I feel sick. (*Silence.*)

NIA. That's it?

MRS. DAVIES. He tried closing his eyes but it didn't help. Your husband held the bag for Mr. Davies then he

started throwing up from the smell. The two of them filled up three bags.

NIA. Mrs. Davies—you scared me!

MRS. DAVIES. What can we do?

NIA. Your husband's fine.

MRS. DAVIES. No he's not. Where were you? You said you'd help me.

NIA. Upstairs.

MRS. DAVIES. George called. I kept calling you. You must've heard me.

NIA. I was sleeping in. It's the first time in eleven years I've had the bed to myself—I'm flying!

MRS. DAVIES. They landed early this morning. It's eighty-five degrees.

NIA. I want ice cream for breakfast.

MRS. DAVIES. The men are all on the same floor. Fifty rooms, two per room. The hotel put a Welsh flag up out front but it's backwards. Your husband and Mr. Davies are together. I know they had to go, but still.

NIA. All right. What do you want me to do?

MRS. DAVIES. America. I wonder what my husband is looking at right now. There are bars on the windows.

NIA. Mrs. Davies.

MRS. DAVIES. Crack the eggs. *(NIA cracks three eggs into a bowl.)*

NIA. I'm going to the Winston Hotel this afternoon for a scotch and soda.

MRS. DAVIES. I can't do anything this far away. I cut his meat when he eats. I dial when he uses the telephone. I do up his buttons. If I'm not around his trousers would be down round his ankles. His fingers are useless. I told your husband to rub Mr. Davies' buttocks.

NIA. How's that?

MRS. DAVIES. Keeps him from snoring. What are they doing right now?

NIA. I had to leave the house yesterday because of the paint smell. George got it in his head to make a big sign. Did you see it? It says: "Knock him on his ass Johnny Owen." It's so big it's in two parts. "Knock him on" is one part and "his ass Johnny Owen" is the other part. George and your husband are going to stand together at the fight and hold up their sign.

MRS. DAVIES. Fools. Melts your heart.

NIA. "Knock him on his ass Johnny Owen" is the only thing George packed in his suitcase. He didn't take any clothes. He didn't want his sign to get crushed.

MRS. DAVIES. Last week, Mr. Davies decided to work on his footwork. Every morning he put sausages in his back pocket and went behind the shop to get the dogs to chase him. You see them shadowbox every time they walk by a mirror.

NIA. All the men think they're Johnny Owen.

MRS. DAVIES. Sunday after church they were in front of the stained glass boxing all the apostles. The things men do with their time. Mix, Nia. Quick rhythm. *(NIA continues mixing eggs in a bowl.)*

NIA. How much are we making?

MRS. DAVIES. Ten loaves. Ten cakes.

NIA. That's too much.

MRS. DAVIES. No it's not. There's going to be one hundred of us at the gym.

NIA. I still get the paint smell. It doesn't bother you?

MRS. DAVIES. Honey can't use his fingers but he still makes a fist.

NIA. George makes me bend his toes. (*MRS. DAVIES adds sugar to mixed eggs.*)

MRS. DAVIES. They never blame the boxing. Mr. Davies says his hands are broken because of the butcher shop. He talks about selling it and opening a flower shop. He says there's money to be made from all the pain in this town.

NIA. George always talks about quitting the mine. I don't understand it. He and his friends spend their day underground, then at night they go to the gym and try to knock each other back into the dark.

MRS. DAVIES. They need to hit each other. It starts early. The babies I help deliver. Their hands are balled up in a fist, they're angry they're born in Merthyr. I blame the valleys. Everything in this town is uphill.

NIA. Boxing is a stink the men rub onto each other.

MRS. DAVIES. Don't get lumpy. Mix like this. (*MRS. DAVIES takes NIA's hand in hers, showing how to mix faster.*) I told you the first time I met Mr. Davies?

NIA. Your father broke his eardrum, yes.

MRS. DAVIES. Yes, my father was coaching at the gym and he broke this young fella's eardrum. He brought the man home for supper. The whole meal I had to yell at him: PASS THE PEAS! YOU WANT MORE MEAT? Oh was he shy. He hardly said anything but when he did, he bellowed: THIS IS THE BEST BARA BRITH I'VE EVER TASTED—I'M SPEECHLESS! He didn't know he was shouting because of his ears. I laughed at him the whole evening. Five years later I married the man. Mr. Davies. PASS THE PEAS. (*MRS. DAVIES adds to NIA's bowl. NIA goes to the window.*)

NIA. Crazy woman.