

ENTERTAINMENT

freetime

On the ropes

Marion Duggan's play about boxing is not only set in a ring but it's being performed in a gym used by pros. She talks to Nick Elvin

STAGE

TO some, boxing is a noble art, a sport of skill and strength. To others, it is a brutal spectacle, a dangerous and savage activity that should be banned.

But whatever your views on the sport, boxing has long been a part of British culture, and the stories behind those who take part can be just as dramatic as the action inside the ring.

One theatre group is bringing some of those stories to the heart of east London, an area that has spawned many champions, in a play staged inside a real boxing ring.

Ragroof Theatre Company's *Gloves On* will be performed in Canning Town at the Peacock Gym, a facility that has been used by the likes of Lennox Lewis, Chris Eubank, Naseem Hamed, Ricky Hatton, Amir Khan and the Klitschko brothers, as well as countless local contenders.

Marion Duggan, performance director of *Gloves On*, says she has heard of other plays being set in a boxing ring, but never one actually taking place inside one. She says research for the play was conducted through interviews.

"This is more about the personal stories of boxers and their families," says Marion. "There's not a clear storyline, it's more a series of vignettes. It starts with fairground boxing. There's also a woman who's hanging out the washing on the line while talking about what it's like having a son who's a boxer.

"It goes through to a retired boxer and what life's like, and the loss they feel when something so important has gone from their lives. That's a question on a much broader scale about life in general –



A scene in *Gloves On*

about something you've worked for all your life."

Gloves On was the idea of Ragroof's artistic director Luan Blake, whose father was a boxer. He retired to become a trainer, and as a child, Luan used to go to the gym and watch him train young boxers. Seeing their passion and dedication left a lasting impression.

The play also celebrates the work of the Peacock Gym. Ragroof Theatre is working with a group of young boxers from the gym, as well as from Fight for Peace in Woolwich, and members of both groups

will be appearing in a scene in the play.

The play also features female boxers – significantly, the 2012 Olympics, taking place in east London, will be the first Olympics in which female boxers will compete.

Two of the actors taking part in the play trained as boxers, one who boxed as a young boy at a club in Shoreditch before going to RADA, while the other participates in white collar boxing. There is also a boxing coach on hand to instruct cast members, so the pretend boxing will look as real as possible.

And things are bound to become quite raucous, especially with the addition of a booming original soundtrack.

"We want the audience to interact and choose which boxer to cheer on," says Marion. "It can get quite loud."

So does the play glorify boxing, or raise questions about the morality of the sport?

"We leave the decision in the hands of the people who've come to see it," says Marion. "It's not an advert for boxing."

Gloves On is part of the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT), an event which brings in artists from across the world to find new ways of seeing the city.

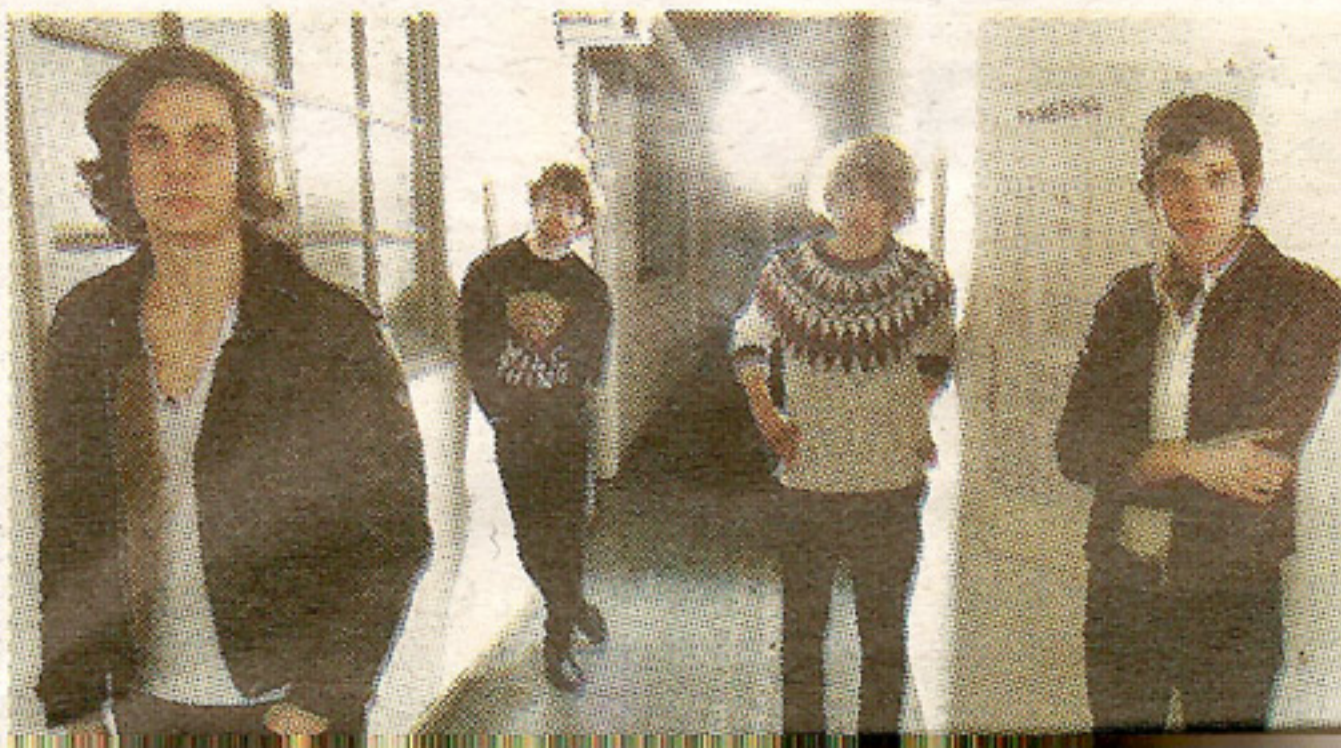
● **Gloves On, Sunday, June 27, 5pm and 8pm, at Peacock Gym, Peacock House, Caxton Street, Canning Town. Tickets: 020 7093 6349, www.liftfest.org.uk**



A blues band that has 'cool' in its name

Music

WITH a name that sounds like something you'd find on the side-menu of a Mr Whippy van, Ice Black Birds will be performing their blues-inspired rock at Shoreditch's Old Blue Last next Monday, June 28.



small blackbird flew into the freezer at a bar where we happened to be drinking. It instantly froze, but in the last second of its life it gave us a wink and bang we had our band name. (Actually, that's a lie.)

Describe Ice Black Bird's sound?

People have referred to the music we create as 'Dance Blues'.

Tell me about your fans