

SYNOPSIS: Champion (Terence Blanchard)

in English with subtitles

ACT I:

A nursing home on Long Island. An elderly Emile Griffith struggles to get dressed, requiring the help of his adopted son and caretaker, Luis. Emile is suffering from dementia, an illness affecting memory and cognition, and Luis reminds him that today he is going to meet with Benny Paret, Jr., the son of a boxer Emile fought decades earlier.

We flash back to the 1950s. A young Emile has just arrived in New York from St. Thomas, one of the U.S. Virgin Islands. He has come to join his mother, Emelda, and to make it big in America as a singer, baseball player, and hat designer. Emelda can't remember which of her seven children Emile is, but she is glad to see him nonetheless and helps to get him a job. He meets Howie Albert, a hat manufacturer, who notices Emile's strength and physique. Rather than boxing hats, Howie suggests, Emile should take on a different kind of boxing and train to become a prizefighter. Emile soon becomes a welterweight champion, but he is lonely and confused by his success. One night he makes his way to a gay bar in Manhattan finds a confidante in the owner, Kathy Hagen. He shares with her cruel details of his childhood when he was punished for his sexuality. It is 1962. Emile meets Benny "Kid" Paret in the ring. At a weigh-in before their fight, Paret taunts him, calling him a Spanish slur for homosexual. Emile is enraged. He tries to explain his anger to Howie but struggles to make his coach understand. Left alone, Emile reflects on what it means to be a man. As Emile and Paret prepare to fight, Paret continues to taunt Emile. Driven to the edge, Emile delivers more than 17 blows in less than seven seconds, leaving Paret in a ten-day coma from which he will never recover.

ACT II:

Back in his present-day apartment, Emile is haunted by Paret's ghost. Another flashback brings us to the mid-1960s. Emile is a successful fighter winning titles and trophies around the world. Yet he remains troubled by Paret's death. He tries to distract himself by enjoying life. He denies his romantic feelings for men and takes a young bride named Sadie, a decision everyone, including his mother, warns against.

It is now the early 1970s. After his marriage, Emile's luck has changed, and he now finds himself on a losing streak. He has also started to display signs of trauma-related dementia. Howie tries to console Emile, but Emile rejects him and everyone else around him. Emile returns to Kathy's bar to find comfort, but outside in the street he is taunted by a group of kids who beat him violently, exacerbating his pre-existing brain injuries.

Back in the present, Emile relives the attack and Luis tries to comfort him. Emile asks Benny Paret, Jr. for forgiveness when they meet in a park in New York City, but Benny Jr. explains that Emile must forgive himself. Back at home, the torment of his past begins to subside, and Emile is able to finally live one day at a time.

REST OF SEASON:

Don Giovanni (Mozart) Sun 25 Feb / Die Zauberflöte (Mozart) Sun 10 Mar 24 / Eugene Onegin (Tchaikovsky) ENCORE Sun 31 Mar