Fights aren't settled in the gutter when you're the center of a growing financial empire. One's cut to ribbons without blood being spilled. It's done with invective and innuendo - not bricks - but skewered as surely as the end of one of Cyrano's couplets.

So, a recent press conference at the Regent Beverly Wilshire Hotel, facing "The Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" on Rodeo Drive, couldn't have been a more appropriate setting for Golden Boy Promotions to trumpet it's July 16 HBO Pay-Per-View showcase for company-partner, and jewel-in-the-crown, Bernard "The Executioner" Hopkins, defending his undisputed middleweight championship for the 21st time against Jermaine "Bad Intentions" Taylor at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas.

The marketing angle seemed a natural: aging veteran gives undefeated deserving kid a shot at the crown…Promising…but not surefire like Vargas against De La Hoya, when the faithful counted the hours.

But, seething beneath the surface, Hopkins has 610,000 reasons to not only want to beat Taylor but to destroy his promoter. That's exactly how many dollars Lou DiBella was awarded in a libel judgment against him.

So in this Theatre-of-the-Absurd, Hopkins doesn't exact street justice, he shares the stage civilly with DiBella to make the PPV a bonanza and his revenge all the sweeter. *"What a tangled web we weave."*

The ultimate oxymoron was a line in the press release: Golden Boy Promotions in *association* with DiBella Entertainment . . . There couldn't be anyone Hopkins would less like to associate with.

With that as a subtext, just before noon, I went up the red-carpeted spiral staircase to the Champagne Room, where the press conference was held.

The ballroom had hints of the Palace of Versailles: chandeliers, and mirrors all around – more a place for a duel of words than a brawl. The empty stage at the front was set for GBP on one side and DiBella's team on the other.

Oscar De La Hoya, conferring with an associate, waited down the hall, his back to the media spilling into the ballroom. This wasn't prizefighter De La Hoya; it was magnate DLH in a tailored pinstripe suit. His tousled black hair tumbled over his collar. He looked like an obscenely paid motivational speaker revving-up for an hour's pep talk before jetting away.

There was a clear caste system among the media. The beat writers for the dailies were well-groomed and nondescript. The Internet was represented by bloused shirts, sneakers and baseball caps off to one side. They looked pleased to be grazing at the buffet table; eating

better than they normally would and getting validated parking.

De La Hoya joined the group, beaming, and shook hands and autographed whatever was put in front of him, and posed for pictures with press who wouldn't let it color their stories.

Before De La Hoya spoke, a hush descended. One expected footlights to come up. Both fighters' teams took seats at the dais like actors waiting for the curtain to rise.

The surroundings stifled the usual din. De La Hoya surveyed the room and welcomed all from the podium with a cloth banner, reading: "NE***X***T IN LINE. If Oscar's fists were as slow as his opening remarks, he'd never have won all those titles.

The tension was building, like hearing Don Corleone say, "I didn't know until this day that it was Barzini all along."

DiBella stood and glanced at Hopkins, "Remember, Bernard, *this side* of the table is undefeated against you," rubbing salt in the wound. "Hopkins," DiBella went on, "is probably one of the five greatest middleweights ever, but on July 16 we're going to
stay
undefeated against you. The Executioner is going to get
executed.
Hopkins stared straight ahead.

It was smash and volley at Wimbledon; the audience craned from one to the other.

Pat Burns, Taylor's trainer since he turned pro, lightened the mood, reflecting on Hopkins's age: "I'm not fooled by that age. 'Many a good tune in an old fiddle,' I tell my wife. I'm not as good as I once was, but I'm as good as I was *once*. The laughter exploded and built. "I'm gonna use that," Hopkins grinned at Burns.

Burns continued: "Hopkins doesn't have a Masters Degree; he has a PHD. We could call him Dr. Hopkins. Jermaine Taylor may be the student, but he's about to graduate. All good things come to an end. July 16, there's a new sheriff in town."

Taylor looked more like 160-pound Herschel Walker, and spoke as humbly as Joe Louis. "You'll never hear me sayin' nothing negative about an opponent of mine, because it takes a man to step in that ring – I don't care if you get knocked out. If you ever been between those ropes, you look at your opponent . . . *It's a helluva feeling*. So I'll never take shots at an opponent." He lowered his voice and said "especially an opponent who's world champion, who accomplished things I can only hope to accomplish in boxing, and in his lifetime, period."

"I'll make you all two promises: When I win – and I will – I will not jump all around the ring, whooping and hollerin', talkin' about, 'I told you so!' 'I shocked the world,' and all this hoopla. I'll still give this man the respect he deserves. He's a true champion. When I'm a world champion, I hope to be half the champion he is."

Hopkins stood and braced both hands firmly on the podium. He sported a diamond-crusted Big Ben on his left wrist – just at DiBella's eye line – that would have drained the treasury of an oil sheikdom. It's a wonder everyone wasn't struck blind.

Hopkins paused for dramatic affect and launched into a soliloquy. Every word meant to turn the knife. "I just got three back-to-back PPV fights, at 40-years-old. I don't think Time-Warner and HBO thought they were being foolish signing an *old man*.

"The record tells you who I am. I'm always in shape," yanking-up his shirt with both hands, revealing a mid-section that could only look that tight with airbrushing. I'm a 40-year-old guy. If there was a scale right here now, I'd weigh 166 pounds. Can Jermaine Taylor say that?

"40-years-old ain't a death sentence, for all people that's lookin' on their shoulder in corporate America, thinkin' that that young Turk gonna take their job. Slow down! Take your Geritol, like I do."

A room full of people over 40 cheered.

"Being old ain't always bad," Hopkins said. "Everybody in this room had to be young before they became old."What can I sell you all? I can't sell you anything but the fight. I can't sell you me; you know me.

"Every person has a motivational experience . . . It goes all the way back before I was an athlete – 18 plus years ago, at a young 22-years-old. I said, 'What'ya wanna do with your life? What're the options?'

"You heard Jermaine Taylor's story . . . It's touching – and I'm not saying something to be smart, or boastin'…Man had to be a man before he became a man.

"But my biggest goal was not being champion when I got out of the penitentiary -- with nine years of parole to walk off, with a GED -- with nine felonies. The odds was against me! – Totally against me. I just wanted to stay out of prison. *Look where I wound up at*.

His voicing rising like an evangelist, "Being considered as one of the five greatest middleweights, looking at DiBella, "from *one of my enemies* … Don't have to like me; Respect me." DiBella acknowledged it with a one-finger salute.

Hopkins ignored it. "Interviewers have said: 'Bernard, you could've took Joe blow, here, Willy Lump-Lump, there, who-the-hell–is-this-guy, here. You took on Jermain Taylor; why?'

"I said I fear no man. I don't believe any fighter can reach the magnitude of mentality in my heart and my spirit – which kept me through this – courtrooms, in the ring, and in my life, personally. You can't reach that level unless you experienced it. Jermaine can't reach that. He has no experience in that – thank God. That's my *edge*."

Hopkins paused. "I got an incentive now."

"It's a little personal with me. You all know what that is – or at least the writers do – You all wrote a lot about it." DiBella's salute remained in the air. "See, I'm the judge and the jury in that ring," he continued. "No objections in this courtroom. The judge won't have to use no scorecards. I have an incentive to win. I knockout two situations: I knockout a company and I knockout a fighter. That's my incentive not to become old July 16.

"Ain't nobody can deny the stats – the consistency…

"*In the ring*," DiBella interrupted. And before Hopkins could continue, he repeated, louder, "***IN THE RING…***
"

"I don't have no *Harvard degree*," Hopkins placed the dagger. "I never cut the man off when he was speaking. Goes to tell you, even with education, you could be a fool."