Last weekend was supposed to be a showcase night for junior featherweight champion Juan Manuel Lopez and a comeback for ex-122-pound champion Israel Vazquez, two men perhaps on a collision course, emphasis on the word collision. But instead of a showcase it turned into a near disaster for both; yet in a near disaster in boxing there is profit, unless of course it is a harbinger of bigger disasters to come.

For the 24-year-old Lopez, it was his first appearance at Madison Square Garden and although he was playing the small room, the WaMu Theatre, it was obvious to all that this was to be only the beginning for what promoter Bob Arum hopes is the next great Puerto Rican draw in New York city.

With Cuban defector Yuriorkis Gamboa (16-0, 14 KO) having already done his part for future revenues by blowing the doors off Whyber Garcia (22-7, 15 KO) as expected in four rounds in the semi-main event, Lopez walked in and dominated Rogers Mtagwa (26-13-2, 18 KO) as planned. Unfortunately it was only for half the fight.

After winning the first six rounds, Lopez began to fade and the strength and resiliency of Mtagwa began to show. By the tenth round, Lopez, who is defensively challenged in a way fight fans enjoy, led in a way that only a knockout could reverse but he got clipped solidly in the 10th round and then badly hurt in the 11th as the crowd began to roar. Clearly in trouble when the 12th round began, Lopez knew he needed only to finish on his feet to win but his feet, not to mention his mind, were swimming under a relentless assault from Mtagwa.

In the end, Lopez managed to survive but barely, yet because he did and because he’s 24 and because most Hispanic fight fans favor his kind of brawling machismo, Lopez (27-0, 24 KO) may have benefitted more from the way things went than common sense would expect.

“He was definitely hurting me but I never felt like I was going down,’’ Lopez said after his hand was raised. “The 12th was all heart. A lot of people think I’m Superman but I’m not.’’

Gamboa was the first to agree, saying in the typically dismissive way of fellow Cuban world champion Joel Casamayor, “I don’t think Juan Manuel Lopez is better than me.’’

The whole idea is for him to get a chance to prove it next year after fighting on the same card with Lopez again on the West Coast in their next outing. Lopez’ combination of grit and vulnerability on this night actually could increase his popularity because while people may like to think of him as Superman they tend to fall in love with fighters who live on the edge in the way Arturo Gatti once did for so long.

Lopez has shown a tendency to get hit too much but it has never affected him as badly as it did in New York, but in the end he survived and in boxing that is often all that matters.

That is true unless you are a fading former champion like the 31-year-old Vazquez, whose return to boxing came 19 months and multiple eye operations since his last fight, the third in his stirring trilogy with Rafael Marquez. He returned not with trumpets blaring but with doubts whispering around him.

Even he conceded he was not yet sure how much he had left after a career of nearly 50 fights, too many of them a brawl in which he spilled as much blood as his opponent. It is that warrior mentality that made Vazquez a crowd pleaser to Mexican fight fans who have always held in higher esteem men who paid a high price for glory in the ring.

Although those fans recognize and appreciate the skillful boxer, it is the man who bleeds for his breakfast, and often into it, that they come to adore. Israel Vazquez is such a fighter.

Because of all the difficulties Vazquez (44-4, 33) has had to cope with the past year and a half he was carefully matched for his return against a relatively safe bet named Angel Priolo (30-8, 20 KO). Priolo not only was smaller and lacked the kind of power to cause even a dissipated Vazquez trouble, he had also lost six straight and been knocked out in five of those defeats.

Although Priolo was the definition of the safe side, still Vazquez struggled in ways that have to be concerning to him and the people around him. He was cut over the left eye, although with him the fight really hasn't begun until he's bleeding. The larger concern was that he simply looked shop worn. Uncertain for much of the fight, he struggled to find a way to win. That he ultimately did by ninth round stoppage was more a testament to Priolo's limitations than to Vazquez's assertiveness.

His hand was raised after dropping Priolo three times in the ninth round but by then much damage had been done and Vazquez had erased few of the worries about his fistic future. One is reminded after watching his struggles with a journeyman who was smaller and cursed with a suspect chin that it was nearly two years ago, after losing to Marquez by stoppage, that his then trainer Freddie Roach asked him to retire.

He refused and now is trained by Rudy Perez but not even the two stirring wins over Marquez that followed Roach's departure argued all that forcefully against his well-respected professional opinion and the Priolo fight only served to give rise to it again.

Yet Vazquez insists he will soldier on, looking for a fourth fight with Marquez or a first one with Lopez because there is money to be made in both places. On a night when both the youthful Lopez and the aging Vazquez looked far from their best that pay day probably only increased in value because boxing is a place where vulnerabilities can pay off as long as they are only dark hints of potentialities and not carried to the extreme.

"I was a little rusty but I wanted to knock him out,'' Vazquez said after. "It took me a little bit of time to get my rhythm back but my eye didn't bother me at all. I'm a warrior. I've shown that all along in my career. Now I want the big fights.''

The boxing business being what it is, what happened to Lopez and Vasquez has probably

enhanced the chances of that happening sooner rather than later, although not necessarily against each other. Lopez's youth gives him time and so it seems more likely he ends up facing Gamboa sometime next year while Vazquez may well find himself quickly headed back in the direction of Marquez, an opponent who has already done him great damage but against whom he can make a great amount of money in exchange for lost plasma.

The odd thing was when Lopez said after his brush with defeat that, "it's difficult to fight guys like this because they have nothing to lose and I have a lot to lose'' he could have been speaking for Israel Vazquez as well.