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“The Stones” a cautionary youth tale that’s rock-solid

By Jeff Favre

In this society it's safe to say that practically every adolescent boy – and many young girls – have at least one moment where their actions could cause harm to an innocent person. Most youths escape serious consequences, and years later realize the error of their follies. Others aren't so lucky.

"The Stones" is based on the latter group. Written a decade ago by Australians Tom Lycos and Stefo Nantsou, this one-hour piece was inspired by a case in Melbourne in which two bored, rambunctious teens, ages 15 and 13, threw several rocks from a freeway overpass.

One rock went through a windshield and killed a driver.

Lycos and Nantsou have performed the piece worldwide. For this production at the Kirk Douglas Theatre in Culver City, director Corey Madden set "The Stones" in present-day Los Angeles to better connect with young local audiences.

Madden, teaming with Jacques Heim, artistic director of the acrobatic dance company Diavolo, has crafted an emotionally powerful, honest and at times entrancing theatrical experience. Her efforts wouldn't work without the talented two-man cast of Joe Hernandez-Kolski and Justin Huen. Tackling dual roles, they display a combination of acting and athletic skills that few performers can accomplish.

The result is that "The Stones" succeeds as a memorable cautionary tale without become preachy or talking down to young audiences.

The opening segment puts in motion actions that gradually drift from rebellious to dangerous. Yahoo and Shy Boy (Hernandez-Kolski and Huen) spend a Sunday afternoon skateboarding and bicycling through a desolate L.A. warehouse district. Their boredom breeds mischief, and the pair breaks into a building filled with fancy cars, attempting to steal an emblem from a sports car.

The boys later find a stash of hefty stones as well as a passage to a freeway overpass. Playful attempts to hit truck roofs leads to tragic consequences. The remainder of "The Stones" flashes between the boys' lives after that fateful day, and with police officers Russo and Quinn (also Hernandez-Kolski and Huen) who disagree on the court's decision to try the youths as adults for second-degree murder.

Madden effectively creates a humorous, innocent tone during the opening segments. The dialogue is little more than the boys trading insults. But the action is dynamic, with Hernandez-Kolski and Huen diving, sliding and rappelling on 12-foot curved skateboard ramps.

Even if you're aware that these characters are headed toward disaster, it's hard not to laugh with recognition at their behavior. They are up to no good, but it's clear that they aren't "bad kids."

The sharp shift midway through is echoed by Heim's moody choreography -- highlighted by the actors twisting precariously, with their bodies wrapped in long elastic bands -- as they recount in childlike language what transpired.

Hernandez-Kolski and Huen are equally believable as teens as they are hard-nosed cops, and their quick transitions from one character to the other is seamless.

Unlike much political theater, "The Stones" invites debate without taking a stand as to whether these boys are guilty of murder or if they simply made a mistake.

Too often, youth-oriented theater doesn't connect with its intended audience, nor does it have enough depth to entertain adults. "The Stones" works on both levels, and for that it deserves high praise.