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Foolish decisions but no easy answers

Boys throw rocks with deadly results in "The Stones," but determining their guilt or innocence proves complicated.

By Lynne Heffley, Times Staff Writer

An emotional and visual roller coaster, sadly comic and in-your-face confrontational, "The Stones," which opened Saturday at the Kirk Douglas Theatre, tackles the slippery issue of crime and punishment.

Written by Aussies Tom Lycos and Stefo Nantsou, this thought-provoking work, presented by Center Theatre Group's P.L.A.Y. company, is based on a true case involving teenagers who threw stones at cars as a prank with deadly results.

How to get the point across, that peer pressure, lack of adult interest and an excess of unbridled, hormone-fizzy energy can lead to foolish decisions – and that foolish decisions can lead to life-changing catastrophe – without being pedantic or preachy?

In this sterling production, director Corey Madden, her creative team and the two adult actors playing multiple roles (Joe Hernandez-Kolski and Justin Huen) find the answer in a powerhouse combination: strong dialogue and narrative that pingpongs between the actors, a dark-toned physical production set to a percussive urban beat and aggressive physical choreography.

The latter comes courtesy of Jacques Heim, Diavolo Dance Theater artistic director, who brings a signature daring edge to the play's movement. Sometimes on a skateboard, sometimes with bungee cords, Hernandez-Kolski and Huen slide down, hang from and clamber up curved skateboard ramps, two of which turn to reveal a metal framework for more climbing/ hanging action.

Timing is crucial, and both actors nail the grueling choreography despite the often breakneck pace as 13-year-old Shy Boy (Huen) and 15-year-old Yahoo (Hernandez-Kolski) career between high-spirited kids' play, adolescent aggression and one-upmanship while trying to break into a warehouse.

Bungling the attempt and fueled by boredom and the desire not to appear uncool, the two boys look for

something else to do. Fate provides a found cache of stones and proximity to a freeway overpass. The terrible result can be chalked up to thoughtlessness and stupidity. Or can it?

The actors' dynamic movement, Sibyl Wickersheimer's inventive ramped set, an evocative original score and sound design by Paul James Prendergast and lighting designer Shaun Fillion's stark shadows all serve to reflect the contradictions inherent in the two teens' behavior and in their respective reactions to the tragedy.

At one point, as the boys' trials precede, Hernandez-Kolski and Huen, play police officers on either side of the argument, seamlessly switch-ing between roles.

Hernandez-Kolski demands that the audience vote, by show of hands, on the question of Shy Boy and Yahoo's guilt or innocence. It's a volatile, telling moment. Suddenly, what would appear to be an easy answer is less clear-cut.

Theater for young audiences, just like theater for adults, ranges from the memorable to the painfully bad, with most falling somewhere in between. Rarely is it as arresting and provocative as this.



Justin Huen plays 13-year-old Shy Boy. The actors clamber on skateboard ramps as part of the choreography.