

# VARIETY®

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By Steven Oxman

A kinetically choreographed, ripped-from-the-headlines cautionary tale, "The Stones" tells the story of two bored and basically innocent teenagers who end up committing a terrible offense. Targeted to a teen audience, and produced by the youth theater division of the Center Theater Group, the show's a crude but well-crafted and provocative after-school special of a play, lifted a solid notch up the artistic ladder by its theatrical physicality.

The two talented performers onstage at the Kirk Douglas Theater -- Joe Hernandez-Kolski and Justin Huen -- barely stop moving during the hour-plus show. On 's urban playground of a set -- composed primarily of two steeply sloping ramps that can be wheeled into all sorts of imaginative configurations -- the actors bike and skateboard around, and when they're not doing that, they hurl themselves up and down the ramps on their backs and bellies.

The idea here is to capture the feeling of boys at play, and it works. Jacques Heim's choreography is impressive for its lack of self-consciousness: The two adult actors playing teenagers crawl all over the set, and all over each other, with a reckless abandon that feels far less controlled than it really is.

The unnamed teens in this story, a 13-year-old (Huen) and a 15-year-old (Hernandez-Kolski), spend their free time unsupervised by adults. It's also implied that they're not the popular kids -- the younger one is shy, the older one a bit bulky and not especially bright. It's believable they would be drawn together; they have an obvious if immature bond and, typically, the older one can talk his younger companion into doing all the dirty work, such as crawling into the sewer to gain access to an auto warehouse.

But their antics escalate. When they find a collection of large stones, the boys think they're a cool discovery but aren't quite sure what to do with them. Carrying them to some vague destination, they start tossing them off a freeway overpass, as blank to the potential consequences as if they were skimming small rocks on a lake. The inevitable effect of their actions really is cringe-inducing.

In addition to the boys, Hernandez-Kolski and Huen portray the police who take the teens' confessions, conduct the interrogations and supervise them during their trial.



Horrified by what the boys have done, these characters also recognize that the adolescents are hardly cold-blooded murderers. In a contrived but necessary scene that seems very much intended to be the topic of after-show discussions with teen auds, the two policemen get into a slightly drunken fight as they quarrel over what should happen to the kids.

While playwrights Tom Lycos and Stefo Nantsou don't provide any easy answers, they also don't provide a whole lot of depth. That gives "The Stones" a strong focus but also a sheen of vagueness and predictability. An ability to surprise us, and to take us a bit deeper into issues of character and causality, would make this something more than a straightforward cautionary tale for adolescents.

But "The Stones" is still a good example of theater with an educational purpose. Worthwhile for its physical energy alone, it's hard to imagine anyone not being moved by the haunting scene -- creatively staged by director Corey Madden -- of the 13-year-old tossing and turning guiltily in his bed, trying as hard as he can to deflect the blame from himself.