

Play's moral dilemma puts teens in jury box



By Kevin Prokosh

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THE teen audience attending *The Stones* serve as jury in the case of a pair of Australian boys who hurled a rock off an overpass and killed a passing motorist.

The public outcry about the headline-making case inspired an acclaimed dramatization by Sydney-based Zeal Theatre, which has performed the hour-long drama 950 times from Wales to Tokyo, Hungary to the United States. Manitoba Theatre for Young People produced its own version called *Rocks* in 2000 and is hosting the original Zeal Theatre production beginning tomorrow.

The Stones encourages young viewers to draw their own conclusions as to whether the 13- and 15-year-old accused were part of a prank gone terribly wrong or are budding criminals.

In every country company actors Tom Lycos and Stefo Nantsou have travelled, a post-performance poll has found the audience divided between those who think they are guilty of manslaughter, not guilty or can't decide. Only in the U.S., have the young people been more likely to convict.

"We are deliberately trying to create that dilemma," says Lycos, 45. "We could play the kids so the audience would vote guilty in the end or not guilty. We try to play the line so people don't know. I think it's good to create that confusion and debate among the kids themselves."

In real life, the boys were raised to adult court where one trial ended in a hung jury and the second with an acquittal. Lycos and Nantsou interviewed the police investigators who described the boys as unlucky -- the wrong kids in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"They told us not to specify that it's only kids from bad economic backgrounds or from poor areas who do this stuff," Nantsou, 46, says. "It goes right across the board to the wealthiest kids."

"He talked about it more as kids trying to amuse themselves. There is not much organized activities in Australia."

Lycos plays the shy 13-year-old while Nantsou, the "yahoo" older boy. Their stripped-down, actor-based story-telling means they must play all the parts with a minimum of props and costumes.

Nantsou is an imposing 6-foot-4 actor who plays a character a third his age. He switches from punk kid to police officer by unzipping his jacket a few inches to reveal a tie.

"I try to bottle the energy," says Nantsou, the product of Macedonian parents who emigrated to Australia. "I'm going for that wild, unrestrained energy."

Despite their travels, the pair don't have any real answers to questions of how to deal with young offenders. A veteran Aussie police officer they spoke to said he used to have an effective response.

"In the old days coppers would give the kid a slap in the head and scare the hell out of him so much he wouldn't do it again," Nantsou says. "Nowadays that copper would be hauled up in court. A common quote of kids in Australia when they get in trouble is, 'You can't do anything to me, I know my rights.'"

The Stones will be performed for the general public tomorrow and Saturday at 7:30 p.m. at CanWest Global Performing Arts Centre. Tickets are \$13 at the MTYP box office (942-8898).

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MTYP staff are still flying high from the company's recent New York debut with *Comet in Moominland*.

"When Edgar, the cab driver, asked what I was doing in New York, I told him that my company had brought a small show to 42nd Street. His response was: "Fuhggedabouddit, there are no small shows on 42nd Street." says MTYP artistic director Leslee Silverman.

The sold-out run at the New Victory Theatre, which ended earlier this month, was topped by a flattering *New York Times* review that concluded with, "For young audiences it provides a gently charming combination of captivating storytelling and theatrical magic."

Then there were the star sightings.

"I'm still jazzed by running into Elvis Costello, Diana Krall and their twins at Strawberry Fields in Central Park," says Silverman, who added that *Comet* drew interest from theatres from Boston, Arizona and New Jersey.