

Theater: Daring Games

3 Characters Play in Triana's 'Criminals'

PHOENIXES, of course, arise from the ashes by definition. However, it might be thought gratifying to note that the Phoenix Theater appears to be well-named, and at present it is most cheerfully kicking around a most lovely lot of ashes.

Last year the Phoenix Theater was associated with the A. P. A. Repertory in its usual season at the Lyceum Theater, which ended in a most regrettable failure. (The season on the whole was bad—but it is, at the very least, unsophisticated to blame an institutional theater for just one bad season. And as audience, as patrons, as critics, we must somehow learn to permit our theater to fail more softly. It is not as though they tried to be bad.) Disaster split the constituents. It is apt to.

A.P.A. struggled on, and now has a very successful production of "Private Lives" at the Billy Rose Theater. The Phoenix now also has come back. The night before last it weighed in with a sure-fire but excellently primed hit, in a starry revival of "Harvey." Last night it completed its gestural double-header with a strange, strange yet strangely effective Cuban play, "The Criminals." It is a very odd work, yet I urge you to see it. It dares, and it dares effectively.

This play by José Triana was first performed by the Havana Theater Studio, and has since been seen all over the world, including Paris, where it was given by the original Cuban group, and in London, where the Royal Shakespeare Company offered it in an English adaptation by Adrian Mitchell. It is Mr. Mitchell's fluently expansive version that is used here. It is a weird, wild play. It held me.

There are three kids in an attic—a boy and his two sisters. They may very well have murdered their mother and father. Equally, they may not have murdered their mother and father. It is possible that they are only plucking up cowardice to kill their mother and father.

They are in an attic. And they are playing games. Terrible, lacerating games. During the course of these games they slip easily between identities, between what they are and what they are acting. At times they have an awful awareness of what they are doing. They try to escape, but their wounded souls are like broken, busted doves trying to fly. They are interesting people—but whoever said whiteness helped a lame dove? They suffer, they gyrate, they grate.



Van Williams

Penelope Allen

The Cast

THE CRIMINALS, a play by José Triana, adapted by Adrian Mitchell. Stagedw by David Wheeler; setting and lighting James Tilton; Costumes by Nancy Potts. Presented by the Phoenix Theater, T. Edward Hambleton, managing director, under the supervision of John Houseman, producing director. At the Sheridan Square Playhouse, 99 Seventh Avenue South.

Lalo Barry Primus
Beba Penelope Allen
Cuca Linda Selman

Who was wrong in the equation of their existence? The parents, obviously, yet perhaps, just possibly perhaps, the parents had their point. The three children, abused and bullied, and yet they too had a rightness.

The ebbs and flows of emotions, the fierce examinations of right and wrong strike hard at the audience. The three kids are playing games—but they play them to a terrifying infinity where the end, and judgment, is never in sight. At one time they will play the accused, then slip with nothing more than a change of vocal tone to being the accuser. They range very simply, and to the audience very clearly, among at least three areas of reality.

Yet the interest of the play—finally—is what happened? These three kids in an attic—who are they? Did they kill? Are they trying to explain their past deeds? Or are they trying to justify their future actions? Why, most of all why, are they locked in this incestuous web of thought?

One fascinating aspect of the play—which I saw at a preview—is the alive and electric staging by David Wheeler—it has the spontaneity of a flash—and the acting of the three criminals, victims or whatever you decide they are. Barry Primus, Penelope Allen and Linda Selman provide three of the very best performances I have seen this season. They are people communicating on a special level of reality that makes most normal acting irrelevant. It is a tough evening—but whoever told you the real theater was easy?

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