

A *CurtainUp* Los Angeles Review
Hyenas

By [Laura Hitchcock](#)

I am different; therefore, I am guilty.

Paul Verdier is back in town, bringing his special blend of international slash and burn to the Stages Theatre Center in Hollywood which he founded 22 years ago. Currently on stage, co-produced with Circle X Theatre Company, is the English world premiere of *Hyenas*, or the monologue of Theodore-Frederic Benoit by award-winning French playwright Christian Simeon, based on a true event in 1832 Paris, is performed by Eric Szmanda.

Benoit was convicted and executed for the double homicide of his mother and his lover. He gives us details of how the mother disdains her son's small stature and constant touching, and how Benoit makes aggressive physical love to the young man, Josee. Josee's employer gives the police a blackmail letter, purportedly from Josee to Benoit, but Benoit denies its validity. Then there's the matter of the 6000 gold coins which Benoit says he found in his mother's closet and which the police say he stole after murdering her. There's also young cousin Louise who the mother uses as a housemaid and who initiates Benoit into sex. "I didn't enjoy it very much, at least with her," he snarls. But Louise's bed was not slept in the night of the crime and she is suspected of letting her lover into the house. Which lover? Benoit doesn't elaborate, though he admits to abandoning Louise to the streets of Paris.

As Benoit first confesses, then denies his guilt, Simeon doesn't simply display the pros and cons. His play is not about a verdict, nor does he make the audience the judges. To him, and to Benoit, they are the hyenas, circling with avid curiosity this bizarre, wounded creature.

The play builds to a ghastly climax as Benoit describes in detail the execution awaiting him the next day and how he will feel every moment of the way. His purpose throughout the play is to weave a bond between himself and the audience, "to make my execution unbearable to you." He achieves this by addressing and including the audience repeatedly and intimately. If we were hearing this in the original French, he would probably use "tu", the intimate form of the second person. He treats the audience, the hyenas, as lovers.

Szmanda's Benoit comes from vacancy, with gaping mouth and empty eyes that fill with sly malignancy, as the actor projects a sense of danger. Under the silken direction of Paul Verdier, who also adapted the play, Szmanda never makes the clichéd mistake of playing vulnerable, or asking the audience for anything. It's a wooing with hauteur, successful as the hard-to-get technique. The shattering pain of his impending execution climaxes a riveting performance.

Jim Sweeters' stark scenic design benefits from Kathi O'Donohue's astute lighting design.

HYENAS
Playwright: Christian Simeon

Adapted and Directed by Paul Verdier

Cast: Eric Szmandas (Benoit)

Set Design: Jim Sweeters

Lighting Design: Kathi O'Donohue

Costume Design: Larissa Williams

Sounds & Music: Hayley Moss

Running Time: 90 minutes, no intermission

Running Dates: October 16-December 4, 2004.

Where: Stages Theatre Center, 1540 N. McCadden Place, Hollywood, Ph: (323) 465-1010

Reviewed by Laura Hitchcock on October 31, 2004