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THEATER REVIEW

'Full Moon Killer's' Sanctioned Victims

FULL MOON KILLER. Written and directed by Stephan Balint. Stage design by Eva Buchmuller and Jan Gontarczyk. Lighting by Michael Chybowski. Music written and arranged by Roy Nathanson. Sound design by Connie Kieftyka. With Esther Balint, Michael Thomas, Augustin Rodríguez, Kelvin Carvane, Michael Stumm. At The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St., through Jan. 13.

By Jan Stuart

STAFF WRITER

WHenever a rash of related murders breaks out, our response is swift and self-directed: Who are the victims? How vulnerable are they? Last year's zodiac killer incidents were a classic example of a public tragedy pressing private buttons of nervous relief tinged with guilt, since some of the victims were transients and therefore . . . what? Marginal? Disposable?

The three knifing victims of a serial murderer in the Squat Theater's provocative "Full Moon Killer" fall into categories that have long been considered by some, consciously or otherwise, to be disposables: minorities and prostitutes. Their victim status is so ingrained in our culture that we take in these deaths with a sense of inevitability, just as we do the teenage couples making out in the back of a car in grade B slash pictures. You just know they're gonna get it—they have stopped being people and have become a *contention*, so we don't feel anything for them. The questions implicit in "Full Moon Killer" are twofold and troubling: to what extent has our unchanging hierarchy of victims and victimizers deadened our capacity to respond, and is there a way in which the victims participate in that anesthetization?

"Full Moon Killer" is divided roughly into two parts. The first depicts the murders of a white prostitute, a black boy and a black prizefighter by a dark-hooded figure wearing, not incidentally, a very white moon mask. There is also a brief appearance by a young pilot who is accosted by the prostitute; he may or may not be this masked killer, but he is the only one of the quartet who is exempted from the murders, ostensibly because he is white and male.

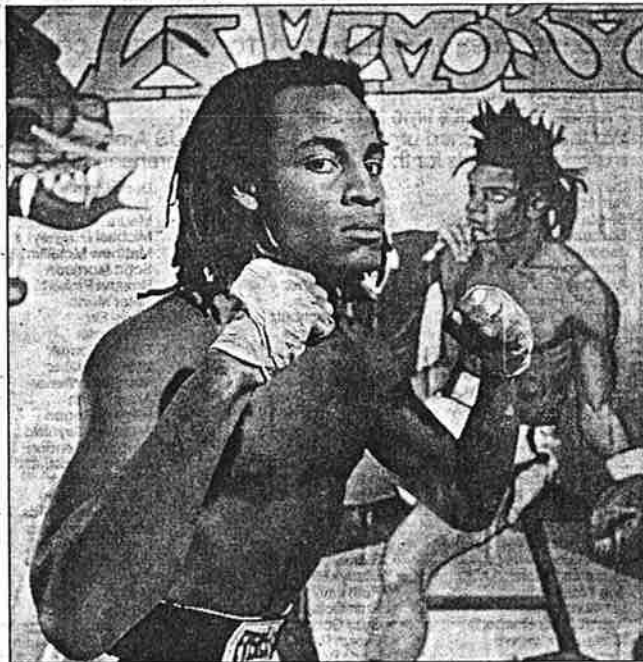
Presiding over these events is a Spike Lee prototype named Spice Lee who speaks from inside a television set and wears a T-shirt newspaper headline that says "Cops Guard Spike Lee." The idea, we are to conclude, is that Lee has transcended victim status by becoming a professional talking head who sends out cautionaries to his African-American brothers. Turn-

ing himself on and off via the TV power button, Lee challenges the boxer's willingness to play the gladiator in a white-engineered arena, represented by an Italian coach who eggs him into the boxing ring by saying "Do the right thing."

The second and longer half is essentially a jailhouse monologue: A Hispanic inmate regales his cellmates with an account of the crime spree that landed him in prison. The cellmates are all minorities—black, Asian and Hispanic—and the storyteller embroiders his tale with swaggering details that feed their machismo.

Every time he seems to have reached a conclusion, the narrator launches in again, egged on by his cellmates. The intention is deliberate: Writer Stephan Balint apparently wants us to experience a sense of the braggadocio's dulling effects upon its listeners, all of whom unwittingly wallow in their own victim status. We are also being given time to allow the prizefighter parallel to sink in: both celebrity boxer and petty criminal are conned into playing roles with glorious facades and quick demises.

Unfortunately, the anesthetization overwhelms the message—we just want the damn story to be over. The static nature of the narrative is accentuated by the seductively inventive first half, chockablock with fun-house theatrics: smoke, clouds cutting across a moon, a green-lit tree, Spice Lee in a TV set and teasing sax music by Roy Nathanson. Additionally, the cavernous Kitchen space creates a chasm between the audience and the actors that requires the action to be very sharply focused. Balint's direction is too fuzzy, leaving us with one too many nagging doubts: Was that pause intentional? Is it over? Do we leave now?



Michael Thomas as a prizefighter and one of the victims in 'Full Moon Killer'

The visuals are swell. In addition to that twinkly tree and cloudy sky, Eva Buchmuller and Jan Gontarczyk have come up with a dynamic backdrop cloth upon which the play's settings are adjacently rendered with the nightmarish surrealism of a circus sideshow. The design furthers an interesting trend, presaged by "The Big Funk" last month at the Public, for literal sets that tell you what is going to happen. Like its design, there is much more going on in "Full Moon Killer" than initially meets the eye, but much less happens dramatically than we would have wished. / ■