

'Criminal' takes a comic look at social roles

By Sally Cragin

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Can a break-in improve your outlook on your breakup? Absolutely, according to Jane Martin's 1992 comedy "Criminal Hearts," presented by Boston Actors Theater. Here, both thief and victim are women. And as they share their (possibly fictional) life stories, a common bond emerges despite their radically different social class: Both have been ripped off by men.

Boston Actors Theater stages this comedy at tiny Devanaughn Theatre, which features two rows of seats along a wall. This cozy claustrophobia brings a spark to the opening scene, which begins in a blackout. Bo, the thief, has invaded Ata's apartment. When the lights go on, Bo finds nothing but a mattress, empty pizza boxes, and cans of Dr. Pepper.

Criminal Hearts

Play by Jane Martin

Directed by: Danielle Leeber. Set and costumes, Leeber. Lights and sound, David Lucas. Presented by the Boston Actors Theater.

At: Devanaughn Theatre, through tomorrow. 866-811-4111, Theatermania.com.

Ata has already been cleared out by her slimy ex-husband Wib. Soon the tables are turned, and Bo becomes the captive. After Robbie, Bo's confederate, turns up, some amusing commentary about social roles ensues. But the play really takes off when these three decide to seek revenge on Wib.

Director Danielle Leeber has a sure hand with the mechanics of comedy, and she's particularly well served by Jenny Reagan, who is winningly befuddled as Ata. The character is supposed to be a former beauty pageant contestant

who volunteers at a social-welfare organization, and Reagan's comic timing is swift and sure.

Judith Kalaora brings energy to the part of Bo, but she's not entirely believable as a member of the underclass. To be fair, playing a character who's charismatic, sociopathically calculating, and uneducated would be a stretch for most. She shines in a scene where Ata suggests that Bo's profession might have redeeming aspects. "Robbing the rich to give to the poor," Bo barks. "I *am* the poor."

Michael Foster's Robbie is a genial legman, and Chuck Schwager's Wib a supremely unctuous and detestable ex-husband. The playwright takes some easy but mostly enjoyable jabs at the differences between rich and poor. Despite overlong exposition, this play makes a convincing case: Under the right circumstances anyone can have a criminal heart.