

“Year Zero” Explores the Cambodian American Experience

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SIS Productions presents “Year Zero” by Michael Golanco. Pictured left to right: Christian Ver, Elizabeth Daruthayan, Johnny Patchamatla and Moses Yim. Photo by Rick Wong.

Cambodia’s Khmer Rouge regime fell out of power in 1979, but the atrocities that occurred during their short-lived rule continue to affect multiple generations around the world.

Some of these challenges faced by second-generation Cambodian Americans are the focus of Michael Golanco’s play “Year Zero”, in a newly-revised version to be presented by SIS Productions.

Although SIS Productions has previously produced other work by Golanco, this play presents special challenges for this theatre company.

“We have produced plays about the Korean American, Chinese American, Japanese

American, Thai American, and the Filipino American experience," said director Miko Premo. "But this is our first play centering on the Cambodian American experience and we really wanted to make sure we were as authentic to the experience of Cambodian Americans as possible."

The central relationship of the play is between two siblings, sister, Ra, and her younger brother, Vuthy. They were raised by a mother who escaped the Khmer Rouge, but who chose not to share her traumatic experiences with her children before her death.

"The two siblings grow up in America dealing with problems most teenagers and young adults would go through in America," said Elizabeth Daruthayan, who played the role of Ra. "Fitting in, appearance, school, friends."

But Ra and Vuthy bear the added burden of uncertainty about their mother's past.

"To me, that is what draws me in," said Daruthayan.

In "Year Zero", the siblings begin to learn about their heritage from Han, a convict played by Johnny Patchamatla who returns from jail to share the stories he heard from their mother when she was alive. "The role of Han speaks to me on several levels," said Patchamatla. "Most significantly to my belief in his quest for redemption."

But SIS producer Kathy Hsieh reassures audiences that playwright Michael Golamco deals with this serious topic in a way that is entertaining. "When Michael was first trying to describe the play himself," Hsieh said, "he jokingly referred to it as 'a comedy about the Khmer Rouge.'"

However unlikely, Hsieh reminds us that "in real life, when dealing with the most serious of subjects, the only way we humans can deal with it is to find ways to laugh, and this script is rich in both depth and humor."

To share this multi-dimensional approach toward a traumatic family history, the producers of SIS Productions have stepped up their outreach efforts beyond their usual channels. "We are working to reach out to as many Cambodian community groups as possible to get them involved," said producer Roger Tang. "And we're reaching out to as many businesses owned by local Khmer as we can find out about."

Hsieh reports that SIS is also focusing on the youth audience. "We specifically doubled our team so that we could focus on doing more outreach to teens and college-aged students, since the main characters in this play are a college-aged woman and her teenaged brother," she said.

"We've actually recruited even more (younger) producers to help with this show, plus two interns," added Hsieh. "We honor Teen Tix rates for any performance on a space available basis. And we've created a guide to the play for parents, educators, and students to look at before attending to decide if the material is suitable for different age groups."

Even with the availability of this supplemental material, the SIS producers believe that audiences will appreciate the surprises in Golamco's latest version of "Year

Zero.”

“You get a real sense of place,” said Tang. “The reality that’s established on stage is very much lived in.”

He added, “There are nooks and crannies where you can find unexpected things.”

“Year Zero” runs from September 30 to October 22 at the Richard Hugo House Theatre, 1634 Eleventh Avenue, Seattle.