

Arts Beat



The Culture at Large

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When a Playwright and His Play Are Separated

By THE NEW YORK TIMES

Michael Golamco is a young West Coast playwright whose "Year Zero" has received praise during its run at Second Stage Uptown. ArtsBeat asked him to write about what it's like to drop in from one coast, work with new collaborators, and then leave the play (which closes on Sunday) behind. Here's what he had to say:



Michael Golamco

As a writer, I live a pretty solitary existence. If you shadowed me on any given day in my home in Los Angeles, you would see me roll out of bed, go for a long run by myself, eat a Chipotle burrito, write/pace/write for several hours while drinking numerous Diet Cokes, and then play Red Dead Redemption on the Xbox until I'm unconscious. Repeat day in, day out.

But when I go into production on a play, it literally changes my life. I'm suddenly in a rehearsal room with other people — actors, a director, a creative team — every day. I suddenly have a morning commute. The solitary process of storytelling turns collaborative.

So when I found out "Year Zero" would be going into production at Second Stage I was ecstatic. Five weeks in New York City: Momofuku pork buns! Lamb over rice from Halal food carts! Soup dumplings! Allowing myself to eat like I'm on vacation! But the best thing was knowing that I'd get to be in a room with people, bringing a show to life.

It was a great rehearsal room — really fun and energetic and sometimes raunchy. Every rehearsal room develops a culture of its own. One of our actors (Peter Kim, Glenn in the show) would bake cookies and coffee cake and bring them to every Saturday rehearsal. Louis Changchien (Han) needed to bulk up on muscle for his role, so the guys from "The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity" lent us their Creatine. I took some. It made me sweat a lot and yell at a dude on the train.

Changes to the script were happening rapid-fire — cuts, modifications, making things clearer and more precise. We worked through the story together, taking it from private to public. That's what I'll always love about working in theater: It's a communion of people coming together to bring a story to life. Then an audience comes together to join them in experiencing it. The story originates with the playwright but it becomes a living thing when other people — cast, crew, audience — collaborate to make it live.

Now I'm back in LA and the show is going on without me. I get performance reports by email every night from the stage manager: They're like little letters from summer camp telling me who-did-what and how each show went — which scenes are getting big reactions, big laughs.

For instance: "Show Report for 06/08/2010: Act 1, Sc. 7: Peter said "keep gritting your teeth, you'll make it" differently — it was a little more condescending — got a nice laugh... Act 2, Sc. 8: Mason smiled again after Ra's exit — got a nice laugh — it was a very sweet moment..."

In the meantime, I am running my regular route around UCLA, trying to burn off the weight I gained in NYC. I am back to my solitary existence, pounding out new work.

I don't necessarily feel lonely, but I do miss people. I'll look at my watch every now and then and see that it's just about 4:30 PM, and I know that on the other side of the country my friends are about to go onstage and tell our story.

But then I get back to my work — because I know that they're doing fine on their own, and I'm not needed anymore.

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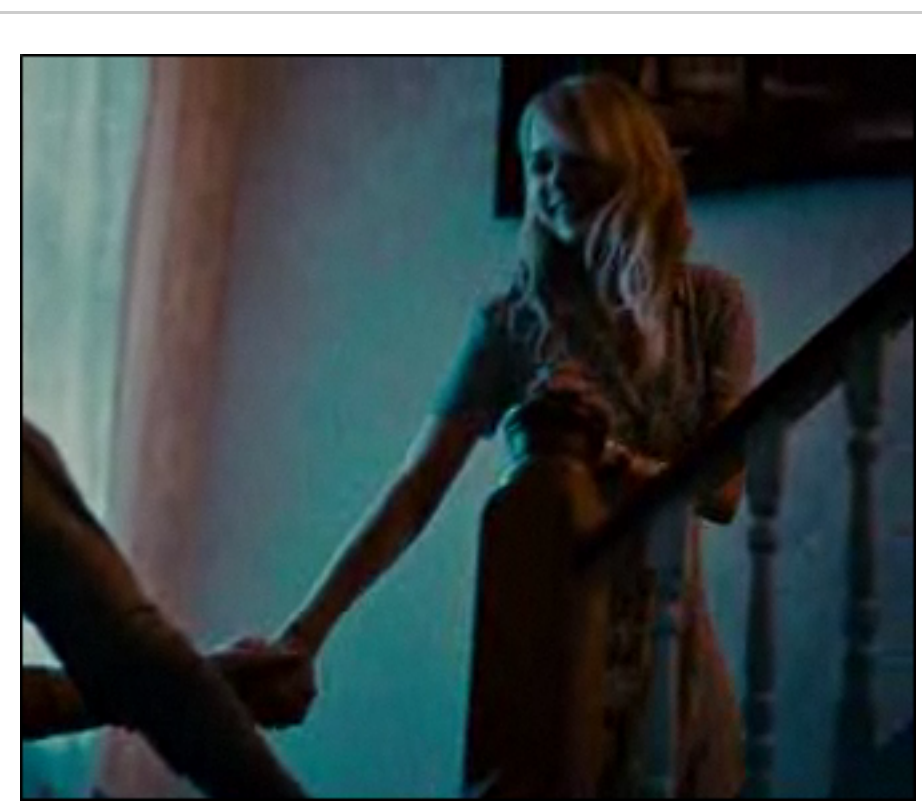
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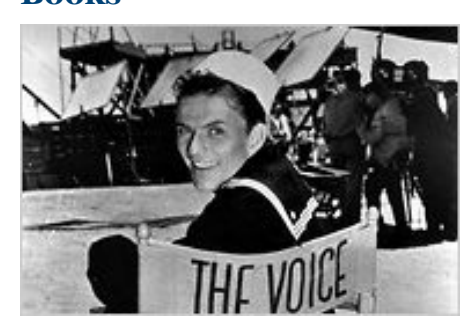
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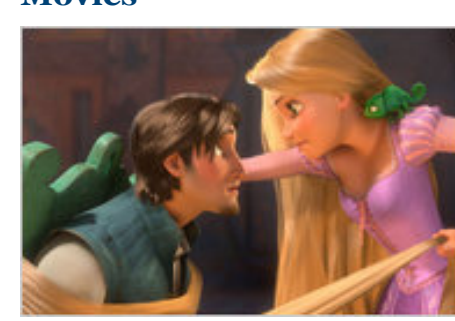
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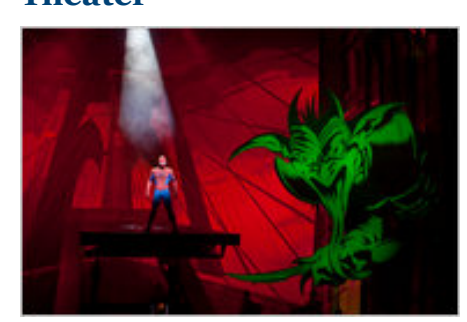
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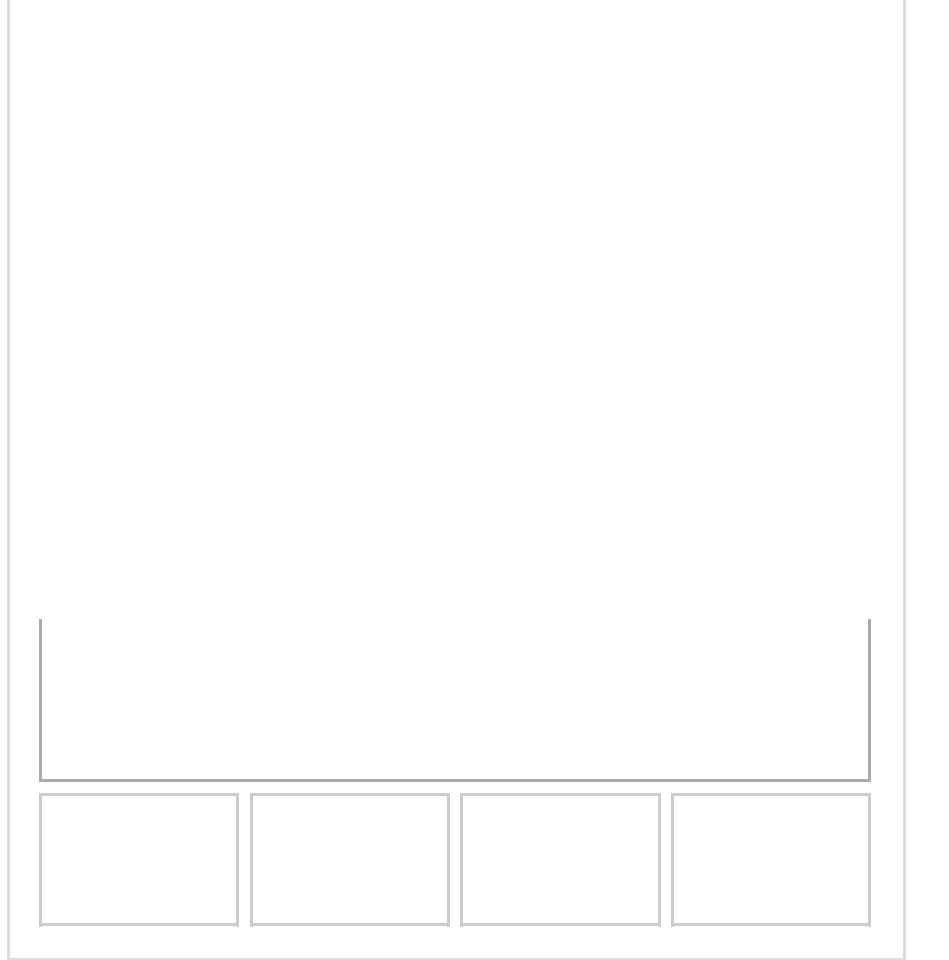
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