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- Stage
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- TV Listings
- Video Games
- Weekend
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HEDY WEISS

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'Zero' in adolescent pain, goofy charm

REVIEW | Golamco captures quest of immigrant kids to just fit in

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September 23, 2009

BY HEDY WEISS Theater Critic/hweiss@suntimes.com

You don't have to be Hamlet to talk to a skull. No, you can be Vuthy Vichea, the bespectacled, cereal-munching, graphic novel-obsessed, 16-year-old, Cambodian-American boy who lives in Long Beach, Calif., and is the central character in Michael Golamco's often surprisingly funny, invariably touching play, "Year Zero."

Now in a beguiling world premiere at the Victory Gardens Biograph Theater, the play, expertly directed by Andrea J. Dymond, is both the inaugural production of the theater's comfortable and inviting 120-seat upstairs studio space, as well as one of the two top picks (from 120 entries) in its new Ignition project, a competition designed to showcase the work of gifted writers of color under the age of 40.

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Joyee Lin (left) is Vuthy and Jennifer Shin portrays his sister Ra in the world premiere of "Year Zero" at Victory Gardens.

Golamco, who grew up in the Bay Area, is of Filipino and Chinese heritage, and his plays and screenplays already have established him as a talent to watch. "Year Zero" suggests he is a whole lot more than "promising."

But back to Vuthy (played by Joyee Lin with a perfect mix of adolescent pain and goofy charm). His mother, a fiercely determined "survivor" of the Cambodian genocide of the 1970s, has just died. And his over-protective, med school-directed sister, Ra (Jennifer Shin, the wonderfully intense actress who starred so memorably in "The Intelligent Design of Jenny Chow"), has just swooped in from Berkeley to take charge.

Meanwhile, Vuthy's neighbor, Han, "the tallest Cambodian man" (played by Tim Chiou, a very polished, easily sexy actor), has just gotten out of prison, and is hell-bent on playing older brother to the boy. Ra still has an enduring case of the hots for this dangerous guy, but her yuppie Chinese boyfriend, Glenn (Allan Aquino is ideal), is determined to hold on to her, and to forge a bond with her kid brother.

'YEAR ZERO' HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

When: Through Oct. 18

Where: Victory Gardens Biograph Theater, 2433 N. Lincoln

Tickets: \$37-\$48

Phone: (773) 871-3000

And oh yes, there are the Samoan immigrant kids at Vuthy's high school who live to beat him up.

Golamco captures the emotionally complex lives of children of survivors who never quite feel "worthy," the often half-revealed stories of their parents, and the lure (and price) of assimilation.

The play might benefit from a trim, but it is filled with so many intimate, beautifully written scenes, and is so bursting with heart, that you can forgive its excesses. In fact, it's worth the price of admission just to catch that moment when Vuthy jumps into Han's arms.

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