



# THEATER LOOP

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BY CHRIS JONES

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September 22, 2009

## 'Year Zero' in the Victory Gardens Studio: Igniting new era at new venue



**THEATER REVIEW: "Year Zero" ★★★** *Through Oct. 18 in the Studio Theater at the Biograph, 2433 N. Lincoln Ave.; Running time: 2 hours; Tickets: \$37-\$48 at 773-871-3000 and [www.victorygardens.org](http://www.victorygardens.org). Joyee Lin is Vuthy.*

Few things stir the Chicago soul like the opening of a new theater with the world premiere of a very smart, sweet, honest and uncommonly moving new play. You'll love the comfortable, 116-seat Studio Theater, newly carved inside the historic Biograph Theater. And you won't be able to watch "Year Zero," a play about Cambodian-Americans that manages to be both arrestingly fresh and comfortingly accessible, without concluding that its 34-year-old author, the Los Angeles-based Michael Golumco, is a significant new dramatic voice.

This is also a significant leap forward for the Victory Gardens Theater, which is diversifying its stable of playwrights by developing scripts and writers through this grant-supported "Ignition" initiative kicking off the 2009-10 season. In the case of the Gardens, where most of the attached writers have reached a certain age, that diversification necessarily includes writers under 40.

In the case of "Year Zero," which focuses on the everyday struggles of the teenage and 20-something children of the Cambodian immigrants who arrived in the U.S. in the early 1980s, following the rise of the Khmer Rouge, the Gardens has found an ideal play to ignite this exciting new initiative.

In many ways, Golumco is telling, with spirit and without preachiness, a traditional American immigrant story. "Year Zero" revolves around such typical flash points as assimilation, economic destiny, cultural memory, the processing of homeland atrocities and the pervasiveness of racial prejudice and hierarchies among immigrants themselves. But Golumco's self-aware characters are smart enough to know they're living the traditional immigrant experience and to probe their places within that narrative. This play also offers an entry into the complexity of the oft-overlooked Cambodian experience, and it is gutsy enough to probe the polarities that mark a community obsessed with both its physical size (or lack thereof) and its low spot on the hierarchical Asian-American totem pole.

In Golumco's always-provocative telling, the two poles of that Cambodian experience are represented by the University of California, Berkeley — the destination of choice for an ambitious Californian of Asian descent — and The Tiny Rascal Gangsters, a Cambodian gang in Long Beach, Calif, that sucks in needy Cambodians and spits them out at deportation hearings.

The teen Vuthy (played by Joyee Lin) in Golumco's story has to decide which has the stronger pull, even as his older sister Ra (Jennifer Shin) and an older friend Han (Tim Chiou) try to pull him in various directions. Meanwhile, Ra, a Berkeley student, has her own set of romantic choices between Han, the sexy, dangerous young man with street credibility and Glenn (Allan Aquino), the upwardly mobile Chinese-American with a fast-track toward yuppiedom upon which a young Cambodian-American girl could jump.

There are a few forced moments in the writing, especially Vuthy's love of yakking with a skull. But I found myself fully compelled by these young, struggling, well-meaning characters and deeply invested in their fates.

But here's the thing Victory Gardens now has to grasp: When you find scripts like this, you can't just do them in the same old way.

Andrea J. Dymond's premiere production, which stars the rich and complex Shin (not seen in Chicago since she blew everyone away in 2007 in "The Intelligent Design of Jenny Chow"), has actors on the verge of really catching fire. And Dymond has a laudable commitment to the truth of the piece.

But you could drive a truck through the transitions and pauses, the setting is needlessly cumbersome and unsubtle, and this visually predictable show so badly needs an injection of zip and zest you can barely contain yourself from jumping on stage and waving your arms around. This is not your father's VG play, and it can't be your father's VG production.

The Gardens has found a terrific new play for an exciting new theater. Now ignite! Ignite!

Posted at 06:08:06 PM in Victory Gardens

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### CHRIS JONES RECOMMENDS

• **"All My Sons" ★★★ 1/2**  
Through Oct. 4 by TimeLine at the Greenhouse Theater

• **"America: All Better!" ★★★**  
Open run at Second City

• **"Cabaret" ★★★**  
Through Oct. 11 at Drury Lane Oakbrook

• **"The Fantasticks" ★★ 1/2**  
Through Nov. 15 at Theatre Building Chicago

• **"Graceland" ★★★**  
Through Nov. 15 by Profiles Theatre

• **"The History Boys" ★★★ 1/2**  
Through Oct. 18 by TimeLine Theatre

• **"Jersey Boys" ★★★**  
Open run at the Bank of America Theatre

• **"The Light in the Piazza" ★★★**  
Through Sept. 20 at the Marriott Theatre in Lincolnshire

• **"Million Dollar Quartet" ★★★ 1/2**  
Open run at the Apollo Theater

• **"Mistakes Were Made" ★★★**  
Through Oct. 31 at A Red Orchid Theatre

• **"Studs Terkel's Not Working" ★★★ 1/2**  
Open run at Second City e.t.c. Theatre