



## Year Zero

*Year Zero* is a new play by Michael Golumco, featured in this year's Second Stage Theatre Uptown Series. Vuthy Vichea is a 16-year-old Cambodian American who wears thick glasses, loves hip hop, and plays Dungeons and Dragons. After his mother's death, Vuthy and his sister Ra struggle to reinvent themselves in Long Beach, California where being different can be deadly. *Year Zero* is a moving comedic drama about a young generation paving a new future by remembering its past.

**Keywords:** Play

*Pictured: Mason Lee and Maureen Sebastian in a scene from Year Zero (photo © Joan Marcus)*

### nytheatre.com review

**Victoria Linchong**

May 24, 2010

There is the familiar myth about immigrants coming to America looking for relief from persecution or streets paved with gold (or both), and either finding it or not. Less usual is the immigrant story from the point of view of the second generation, mostly since the assumption is that having been raised in the new culture, they are fully assimilated. But the past is not so easily jettisoned. In Michael Golumco's fresh, funny, affecting play *Year Zero*, a brother and sister are faced with more than the usual loss after the death of their mother, a refugee from Cambodia. Sheltered from the horrors of the Khmer Rouge, they search for a past connection irrevocably lost with her death.



16-year old Vuthy is a social misfit who offers hip-hop couplets to a skull that may or may not be cribbed from the Killing Fields and complains, "I'm too Cambodian for the black and Latino kids and I'm not Cambodian enough for the Cambodian kids." After his mother's death, he hopes to leave behind Long Beach, where Cambodians primarily work dead-end jobs making donuts, and move in with his sister Ra, who is in pre-med at Berkeley. Ra is just starting to build a new life, however, and doesn't have room for her brother.

By positioning the play within the twin poles of Berkeley and Long Beach, Golumco perceptively delves into the divide between model minority and immigrant reality, addressing not only how Vuthy and Ra attempt to fit within mainstream American culture, but also their struggles within the Asian American community. Constantly picked on by Samoan kids at school, Vuthy finds an unlikely father figure in next-door neighbor Han, who was sucked into the ghetto vortex and has just been released from jail. Han happens to be Ra's former boyfriend but Ra has hitched herself on the fast track to yuppie-dom and is now involved with Glenn, a Chinese American doctor, whose family is not exactly thrilled that he is in a relationship with a Cambodian girl, pre-med school or not. "Where are we in the Asian hierarchy?" Ra ponders, "Below Vietnamese, above—I don't know—orangutans?"

With Han's reappearance in her life, Ra finds herself torn between the hopeful future exemplified by Glenn and a rekindled attraction towards Han, made all the more palpable with his deeper understanding of their Khmer roots and his relationship with her mother, a relationship that Ra envies. When she first realizes how much her mother confided in him, she cuts off the conversation, visibly hurt, but she soon is beseeching him, "Tell me about my mother... Was she ever hungry? Was she ever scared?" And even more aching, "My aunts, my uncle—what happened to them? What were their names?" Coming to terms with the void left by this missed connection, Vuthy and Ra are themselves faced with the question of how much of the past needs to be discarded in order to embrace the future.

In the able hands of director Will Frears, the play is a series of unfinished conversations punctuated by Khmer rap. Frears not only makes wonderful use of the McGinn/Cazale Theatre, but also mines the play for both its poignancy and its ample comedic moments. The four actors are wonderfully cast and pitch perfect. As Vuthy, Mason Lee alternates between adolescent sullenness and ingenuous introspection. Maureen Sebastian is a pillar of strength, whose no-nonsense demeanor is belied by a touching vulnerability. Likewise, Louis Ozawa Changchien is disarming as a street-smart tattooed badass with a sweet sensitivity beneath his swagger. But my heart really went out to Peter Kim as the unbelievably upbeat Glenn. Sprinkling around a variety of gifts ranging from kung pao chicken to comic books, his unflappable generosity and equanimity gives way to an infinitely more genuine flash of anger at one point, and is finally revealed as a heartbreaking need for love and acceptance. When one of his many gifts is refused, the audience spontaneously and audibly reacted.

These wonderful actors and memorable characters are only part of what makes the play so satisfying. There is plenty of food for thought, with Golumco mining both Cambodian legends and Greek mythology to explore the nature of memory. I'm looking forward to more work by this smart and insightful writer, whose only previous full production in New York was *Cowboy Versus Samurai* staged by NAATCO. *Year Zero* is an incisive, deeply moving play that gets a ten in my book.

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**McGinn Cazale Theatre**

### OPENED

May 26, 2010

### CLOSES

June 13, 2010

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Tue at 7:30pm

Wed at 2:00pm

Wed at 7:30pm

Thu at 7:30pm

Fri at 7:30pm

Sat at 2:00pm

Sat at 7:30pm

Sun at 3:00pm

### TICKETS

\$50.00

212-246-4422

[Order tickets online](#)

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Students: \$10 rush

### CREATORS & ARTISTS

#### Cast

Louis Ozawa Changchien, Peter Kim, Mason Lee, Maureen Sebastian

#### Author

Michael Golumco

#### Director

Will Frears

#### Lighting

David Weiner

#### Sound

M.L. Dogg

#### Costumes

Jenny Mannis

#### Sets

Robin Vest

#### Stage Manager

Lori Ann Zepp

#### Producer

Second Stage

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