



THEATER REVIEW | 'YEAR ZERO'

Finding America, Searching for Identity

By DAVID ROONEY Published: June 3, 2010

The case has been amply stated that "Superman" is the quintessential immigrant story. Born on an alien planet, he grows stronger on Earth but maintains a secret identity tied to a homeland that continues to exert a powerful hold on him even as his every contact with those origins does him harm.

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Mason Lee in "Year Zero."

Michael Golamco neatly incorporates that thesis into "Year Zero" to show that all stories of immigrant identity struggle are part of the same story. But it takes time for the brother and sister at the center of this tenderly observed play, produced by Second Stage Uptown at the McGinn/Cazale Theater, to realize that they are not alone.

Vuthy is a 16-year-old Cambodian-American in Long Beach, Calif., whose mother fled the Khmer Rouge in the 1980s and has recently died. Played with goofy vulnerability by Mason Lee (son of the film director Ang Lee), Vuthy is a high school outcast: "I'm too Cambodian for the black and Latin kids, and I'm not Cambodian enough for the Cambodian kids."

His older sister, Ra (Maureen Sebastian), is a student at Berkeley whose clear-cut path now seems less certain.

Her well-meaning boyfriend, Glenn (Peter Kim), a Chinese-American doctor, may be too far up the "Asian hierarchy" to understand her. She is increasingly drawn to Han (Louis Ozawa Changchien), the muscled bad boy who grew up next door and knows more about their mother's past than Ra or Vuthy.

These characters are cut from familiar molds, but Mr. Golamco and his appealing cast bring fresh nuances, tempering the earnestness with unassuming charm. Will Frears's brisk production balances minor-key comedy and affecting drama.

There are contrived touches, like Vuthy's speeches to a skull he keeps in a cookie jar. But the play draws a delicate line connecting painful memories of a country left behind to the conflicted feelings of assimilated first-generation immigrants whose knowledge of that world is mostly secondhand.

Like other recent plays — "Yellow Face," "American Hwangap" — "Year Zero" explores Asian identity issues with humor and sensitivity. Mr. Golamco views all four characters with equal compassion, coaxing his orphans to move forward by looking back.

"Year Zero" continues through June 13 at the McGinn/Cazale Theater, 2162 Broadway, at 76th Street, fourth floor; (212) 246-4422, 2st.com.

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