

# Year Zero

Reviewed By: **Dan Bacalzo** · May 27, 2010 · New York

In Michael Golamco's keenly observed drama, ***Year Zero***, being presented by Second Stage Theatre at the McGinn/Cazale Theatre, Ra (Maureen Sebastian) and her teenage brother Vuthy (Mason Lee) struggle to adjust to the sudden void left in their lives due to the death of their mother. They're packing up the house in which they lived in Long Beach, California, but both their futures are filled with uncertainty.

Vuthy, who is still in high school, wants to come live with Ra, who is going to college in Berkeley. She doesn't think that's such a good idea. Making the situation more complicated is the arrival of both Ra's former lover Han (Louis Ozawa Changchien), newly released from prison, and her current boyfriend Glenn (Peter Kim). Whether they mean to or not, these three men place a large number of demands upon Ra, who is at a particularly vulnerable point in her life.

One of Ra's major regrets is that she never really asked much about her mother's past. She knew her mother fled Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge regime, but didn't press for details. Han seems to have the answers to at least some of Ra's questions, as he was a child survivor of the Killing Fields, and that common bond allowed Ra's mother to confide in him stories that she did not pass down to her children.

Sebastian delivers an emotionally rich performance, filled with subtle, yet strong choices. Lee nicely captures the awkwardness of adolescence, mining the humor of his role without ever veering into caricature. Changchien presents a well-rounded characterization that defies a lot of stereotypes about gang members, and he and Sebastian generate a steamy onstage chemistry. Kim's character is often used for comic relief, and the actor has a goofy charm that lends itself well to such situations.

Robin Vest's set is primarily a naturalistic domestic interior, but the designer incorporates some clever set pieces to mark changes in location -- most notably in scenes that take place in Han's car. Lighting designer David Weiner also does some good work, particularly when capturing the time of day or night in Ra and Vuthy's home, which includes a large sliding glass door that allows sunlight to come streaming in.

*Year Zero* shares a number of common themes with dramas about Holocaust survivors, as well as plays about immigration and identity. And in that sense, some of the material might seem overly familiar, and its ultimate message unsurprising. And yet, Golamco has crafted a strong, character-based piece that has moments that sparkle with originality.

For example, early on in the play, Vuthy performs a self-penned rap to a human skull (possibly taken from the Killing Fields) as an offering so that his recently deceased mother might find her ancestors. The moment is so absurd, and yet performed with such conviction, that it ends up being strangely moving.



Maureen Sebastian and Louis Ozawa Changchien in *Year Zero* (© Joan Marcus)

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