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Year Zero
by Michael Golamco
directed by David Rose
Colony Theatre
through July 3

Rare indeed is the immigrant play with magnetic universal appeal. **Year Zero** is such a play. In Micahel Golamco's view of Cambodian Americans searching for identity in America we see the struggle not only through the eyes of a Cambodian American teenager Vuthy (David Huynh), but also via the older generation. Although his mother is deceased, she becomes the fifth character in the play. From all that is said about this strong woman, we come to know just how much she endured with ferocity, tenacity and grace. Now at the Colony this West Coast premiere **Year Zero** is evocative and thought provoking in its humor packed exposition with electric direction and a remarkable cast.

Vuthy's appeal stems from his similarity to most teenagers irregardless of race. He is motherless, mostly independent due to his sister's absence (Chistine Corpuz), and totally vulnerable to the abuse he gets from Simoan students and the world at large. Could be any normal teen in the same situation! Vuthy desperately needs a father figure, and Han (Tim Chiou), the young man next door, serves as big brother to him when he is released from prison. Han's negative habits, however, threaten Vuthy's upbringing-at least by sister Ra's appraisal. Han has the hots for Ra, who is studying medecine at Berkely and who already has a Chinese boyfriend Glenn (Eymard Cabling) who, despite his constant efforts to befriend the boy, is misunderstood and looked down upon by Vuthy. Ra, Vuthy and Han suffer from the same problem: lack of self-worth. Ra is focused on a career but never really knew her mother and ancestors, and that has left a huge hole in her life. Han knew the mother well, worked in her tiny neighborhood restaurant and helps Ra to better understand her, but he himself is a gang member and needs to break away if he wants to have a life. Change is in the wind for all four - even for the apparently secure Glenn whose relationship with Ra is threatened by her attraction to Han. How the characters affect one another through the process of change is at the heart of the play and Golamco's keen perceptions are highly absorbing.

The cast is outstanding. Huynh is so appealing as the sassy, confused Vuthy. His outbursts in hip hop song and dance are spontaneously hilarious. Corpuz is riveting as Ra, and Chiou makes Han a true enigma. A tower of power on the outside, his loyalties become severely challenged. Obsessed with a caring way for both Ra and Vuthy, he keeps his own hurt subdued, private. An intense performance! Cabling is also wonderful as Glenn, the struggling outsider who really loves Ra.

Golamco's claim that Superman is the definitive story of the plight of the immigrant in America is a brilliant analogy and propels Vuthy in his tenacious quest for self-esteem. Rose makes great strides as director keeping the pacing quick and allowing each character to find his shining moment. The set by David Potts is beautifully detailed with the mother's multitude of tiny figurines adorning wall shelves. The front wall also rises to show an elevated platform upon which exterior scenes are played out, as in a local whore house, a temple exterior and a car interior. It's cinematic, placing us as true observers within the confines of this Long Beach community, kind of like in South Central LA, and works beautifully on the tightly compact stage.

Don't miss **Year Zero**, an extraordinarily perceptive look at the Cambodian American immigrant. It will give new insight and understanding of our neighbors' culture and hopefully instill more tolerance of human nature.

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