

Year Zero

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It's tough enough being sixteen, but if you're a sixteen-year-old Cambodian-American nerd growing into manhood in a tough part of Long Beach in 2003, it can be hell. Factor in a mother who's just died, a sister set to move to San Francisco and leave you behind with a neighbor, a one-and-only friend who's moved away, and a high school full of students who consider you "too Cambodian for the black and Latin kids and ... not Cambodian enough for the Cambodian kids" and it's no wonder Vuthy (pronounced Woo-Tee) finds it easiest to talk to a skull.

In fact, our very first glimpse of Vuthy in Michael Golamco's Year Zero is of a shaggy-haired, hugely bespectacled teenager rapping about his life to said skull. "Everywhere I look, all I see is ghosts," he syncopates to the prerecorded beats of a cassette tape. "All around me up in here, all I see is ghosts."

Anyone who knows anything about Cambodia's Killing Fields, where from 1975-1979 nearly two million souls (out of a population of eight million) were murdered by the Khmer Rouge regime, will hardly find it surprising that the son of a Killing Fields survivor feels surrounded by ghosts.

Still, if Vuthy or his 22-year-old sister Ra know anything about their legacy of death, it didn't come from their recently deceased mother, who stubbornly refused to talk about anything that happened before she arrived in the United States, ready to start a new life with a husband she met in the refugee camps and a baby on the way.

If the above description makes Year Zero, now getting a superb West Coast Premiere at the Colony Theatre, sound like more than a bit of a downer, think again. Like any great coming of age story, Vuthy's has more than enough comedy to keep it every bit as entertaining as it is dramatic and thought-provoking.

The catalyst for Year Zero's action is the return to the neighborhood of hunky, tattooed bad boy Han, out of prison for now at least—though if he fulfills the debt he "owes" certain people, this may not be for long. Han's return to Long Beach tempts Ra away from her stodgy, rich-boy Chinese-American boyfriend Glenn while giving Vuthy a protector as well as tour guide into the land of manhood.

Though Year Zero's writer is Los Angeles-based, it's taken a couple years for Golamco's dramedy to make its L.A. debut, having world premiered in Chicago before a well-received off-Broadway run. Barbara Beckley's decision to have it open the 2011-2012 Colony season proves a fortuitous one, both for the Colony and for Los Angeles theatergoers.

Year Zero is not a Cambodian-American play, or even an Asian-American play. It's not even what you might call an "immigrant play," though it will resonate especially strongly with first, second, and third-generation Americans. You need not be any of the above to respond to Vuthy's struggle to become a man in an unwelcoming environment, to Ra's desire to remake herself in a new home, or to Han's hopes for a new beginning and his fears that this may not be in the cards.

Year Zero's most emotionally effecting moments come with Vuthy's and Ra's realization of just how much their mother kept from them about her past, and just how much they need to know this about her, even after her death. If Year Zero doesn't make you cry, I'll be every bit as surprised as if it doesn't make you research the Killing Fields, imagine yourself in its characters' shoes, and think a bit more about the world outside your own life experience.

The 276-seat Colony gives Year Zero its highest-end production so far, reflected not only in its outstanding design, but also in the expertise director David Rose (a Colony member since 1990) brings to the project and the splendid cast assembled for this West Coast premiere.

A character-driven piece like Year Zero benefits enormously from having an actor's director like Rose at the helm, as demonstrated by the cast's powerful performances. David Huynh is every bit as convincing as shy, virginal Vuthy as he was as a swaggering gay teen hustler Neal in East West Players' Mysterious Skin, and if his performance doesn't win you over and break your heart, you're made of much stonier stuff than this reviewer. Christine Corpuz, who played Huynh's best friend and three other characters in Mysterious Skin, does even more powerful work here as Ra, and never more so than when she finally lets down the guard she's put up against learning about her mother's past and begs for the truth. The role of Glenn offers L.A. newcomer Eymard Cabling less to work with, but he gives a charming performance as a young man doing his best to do the right thing for Ra and for Vuthy despite considerable competition from Han. As for that "biggest Cambodian in the world," playwright Golamco gives Tim Chiou, who originated the role of Han in its World Premiere, the kind of charismatic, star-making part the young leading man richly deserves. Speaking in a slangy, black-influenced English and moving with a sexy, supercool street strut, Chiou not only commands the stage, he sets it afire, even as he reveals the doubts and fears behind Han's swagger and the heart of gold that makes us yearn for him to avoid the fate he seems destined to.

Golamco's play presents numerous design challenges with well over a dozen between-scene blackouts, each of which must be accomplished swiftly as props are brought on and off in the dark. Complicating matters are the script's demands that the play's kitchen/living room set be transformed on several occasions into the front seat of a car, a brothel, and the steps of a Buddhist temple. Scenic designer David Potts' imaginative set design accomplishes this brilliantly, though I'll leave it for you to be surprised by just exactly how. Kudos go too to properties designers MacAndME for dressing the set with shelf after shelf of glass figurines and porcelain figures, and dozens of other Cambodian and American knickknacks as well. Composer-sound designer Peter Bayne's excellent original music score sustains emotion between scenes while setting the mood for the next one. Luke Moyer's lighting design (a complex one given the many scene, locale, and time changes) is particularly praiseworthy. Anthony Tran's perfectly chosen costumes complete the design package. Leesa Freed is production stage manager.

At a time when other theaters are cutting back on costs, the Colony has added a sixth show to its usual five-show season. At a time when other theaters are reducing cast sizes, the Colony is doing the opposite. And now, with Year Zero, the Colony reaches out to a wider audience than ever while providing its subscribers with a show they are likely to embrace with open arms. Powerful, moving, and entirely winning, Year Zero opens the Colony's 37th season on a high note indeed.

Colony Theatre, 555 North Third Street, Burbank.
[Click here](#) for current performance schedule, closing date, and reservation line.
www.colonytheatre.org

--Steven Stanley
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