

How Mom and Dad Met, With Ninjas

By Diep Tran

Oct. 5, 2016

On a sunny Southern California day in the spring of 2015, a full house showed up to attend not a play, but a reading of a play: “Vietgone” by Qui Nguyen. It was the last day of the Pacific Playwrights Festival, hosted by the local South Coast Repertory theater. “Vietgone” was the final presentation, a two-and-a-half-hour piece about a complicated event: the Vietnam War.

“Mamas, don’t let your babies grow up to be cowboys...,” sang two actors, who were playing a Vietnamese father and his son.

End of play.

Immediately, the audience — a mix of industry professionals, subscribers and members of the Vietnamese community — stood up in applause. Among them was Elizabeth Rothman, director of play development at Manhattan Theater Club. Right after the reading, she called the theater’s artistic director, Lynne Meadow, with the words: “We must do this play.”

A year and several other productions later (including a current run at Oregon Shakespeare Festival), “Vietgone” began performances Oct. 4 at Manhattan Theater Club’s 300-seat space Off Broadway at New York City Center.

Even now, Mr. Nguyen, 40, can’t believe it. “They’re nutbags,” he said, jokingly, about the prestigious theaters who have given a prime slot to a writer best known for low-budget, action-packed plays about superheroes and samurai.

He was speaking over a dinner of bacon and pineapple pizza, jet-lagged after having

flown into New York at 5 that morning for “Vietgone” rehearsal.

After 13 years in Brooklyn, he moved to Los Angeles six months ago, to write for television. His credits include the PBS children’s show “Peg + Cat” and the coming Syfy series “Incorporated,” produced by Ben Affleck and Matt Damon.

His week is largely taken up with his new job: screenwriter for Marvel Studios. In typical Marvel fashion, Mr. Nguyen is quiet about what he’s working on, except to say: “Things seem to be going O.K. for me right now!”

If Mr. Nguyen could be described in only four words, it would be “not the model minority,” as he puts it. Talking to him is to be showered with a steady stream of jokes and the occasional expletive — more like a playful 20-something than the father of two children that he is.



From left, Raymond Lee, Paco Tolson and Jon Hoche rehearsing “Vietgone” at the Manhattan Theater Club. Krista Schlueter for The New York Times

But Mr. Nguyen doesn’t consider his new day job different from what he had been doing in New York. He is a co-founder of the Obie-winning downtown theater company Vampire Cowboys, which drew a passionate following thanks to plays with titles like “Soul Samurai,” “Fight Girl Battle World” and “Alice in Slasherland.” His

best-known play, “She Kills Monsters,” has received almost 300 productions nationwide since 2013.

It was that work that also drew notice from Marvel, which Mr. Nguyen calls “kind of a dream job.” He added: “It’s a weird evolution from doing downtown superheroes, creating theater, and suddenly, writing *actual* superheroes.”

“Vietgone” may seem to be a drastic departure. The playwright calls it a “romantic comedy” about how his parents met at a refugee camp in Arkansas in 1975, having immigrated right after the Vietnam War. It’s a story that Mr. Nguyen grew up hearing and knows well, but it has also been filtered through his pop-culture-filled and irreverent sensibility.

“When my parents told me stories about Vietnam, they told me the real stories, what actually happened,” he explained. “But what I imagined was kung fu movies. Because the only things I ever saw [growing up] that had a lot of Asian people in it, were kung fu movies.”

So there is kung fu in “Vietgone,” and ninjas. As in Mr. Nguyen’s other works, everyone speaks in a modern voice and raps — and no one speaks with “an Asian accent,” part of his fight against minority stereotypes.

“This play is still very much him,” the director, May Adrales, said by phone during a rehearsal break. “There’s genre-bending, it’s bawdy, it’s slick and it’s humorous.” (A critic for The Los Angeles Times called it “a riotous theatrical cartoon [that] won me over with its simple honesty.”)

Mr. Nguyen, the oldest of three sons, said he always knew he would be a storyteller. He was born and raised in El Dorado, Ark. His parents — Quang Nguyen, a pilot for the South Vietnam Air Force, and Tong Nguyen, who worked at the United States Embassy in Saigon — had grown accustomed to Arkansas while in the camp and didn’t want to move. They were one of only two Asian families in town and lived in a primarily African-American neighborhood.

Along with family stories, Mr. Nguyen consumed comic books (Spider-Man was his

favorite superhero), studied martial arts (Bruce Lee was an idol) and participated in freestyle rap battles. He joined the drama club in high school because “there are cute girls in theater,” he said with a laugh.

But he stuck with it, eventually majoring in theater at Louisiana Tech University, with an emphasis on acting. It was there that he started writing plays. “I don’t want to play a stereotype,” he recalled thinking. “How do I get those roles? I’ll just write them.” He eventually earned a master’s degree in playwriting from Ohio University.

Creating substantial roles for minority actors became a touchstone of Vampire Cowboys, which Mr. Nguyen co-founded in 2002 with the director and fellow comic-book lover Robert Ross Parker. The troupe specialized in what became known as “geek theater,” a term coined by a producer, Abby Marcus, who eventually became Mr. Nguyen’s wife.



Temar Underwood, left, and Maureen Sebastian in the Vampire Cowboys’ stage production of Qui Nguyen’s “Fight Girl Battle World.” Jim Baldassare

The genre proved popular; their shows regularly sold out, and they had their own performance space called the Battle Ranch and a regular booth at New York Comic

Con.

“One of the missions of Vampire Cowboys was always to make heroes out of women, people of color, lesbian, gay, transgender characters — those people who generally don’t get to be heroes,” Mr. Parker said by phone.

Though the company is on hiatus, its essence lives on in Mr. Nguyen. In “Vietgone,” he wanted to tell a story he had never seen growing up, a story about people like his parents, South Vietnamese who fought for their country.

Movies like “Rambo” and “Platoon,” and even the musical “Miss Saigon,” provided a narrow view that turned the Vietnamese into supporting characters in their own stories, Mr. Nguyen said.

“It always made me go: ‘Oh no, you’re the other! You’re either the other we’re killing or the other we’re saving!’” he added. “‘You’re never going to be the lead character.’”

Not in “Vietgone.” In a world where leading roles for Asian-American men and women are still rare and Asian-American characters are sometimes whitewashed, it was important for Mr. Nguyen to create “strong Asian-American characters,” he said. “They’re cool, and they’re sexy, and they’re not exotic. They can be feminist, strong women, and they can be sexy men.”

And Ms. Adrales, whose parents were immigrants from the Philippines, thinks the relevance of “Vietgone” goes even beyond Asian-Americans, especially when the presence of new generations of immigrants is being fiercely debated.

“When he’s writing about people that are displaced,” she said, “it makes me think of the Hmong and now the Syrians, who have that same story.”

“Vietgone” is the first in a five-play cycle about Mr. Nguyen’s family. Manhattan Theater Club and South Coast Rep have commissioned the second play, which will be about his parents acclimating to life in Arkansas. As for the real Quang and Tong Nguyen, who still live in El Dorado, Mr. Nguyen said that they haven’t seen “Vietgone.” And they don’t plan to.

“A lot of people who come from a tumultuous situation — whether it’s the Holocaust or the Vietnam War or the Syrian crisis — I think it’s hard for them to revisit it,” he said. But that doesn’t mean they’re not proud of him.

Though it wasn’t the awards the play has won or its productions that made them realize that Mr. Nguyen had written something special. “What made them think it was a big deal,” he said with a chuckle, “was when someone wrote about it in a Vietnamese newspaper.”

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'Vietgone' Creator on What It Means to Be an Immigrant in America Today

Qui Nguyen's extraordinary new play is a love story (with hip-hop) that subverts the stereotypes of what it means to be Asian-American

By **JERRY PORTWOOD** 



Raymond Lee (left) as Quang and Jon Hoche as Nhan in 'Vietgone.'

Carol Rosegg

When playwright Qui Nguyen working on his play *Vietgone* four years ago, no one seriously thought Donald Trump would one day be the President of the United States of America. It was long before he descended his gaudy Trump Tower escalator to announce his candidacy and malign Mexican immigrants as criminals, drug dealers and rapists. But now Nguyen's sexy, genre-busting "All-American love story" musical – which has its final performances this week in New York City – about how his parents met at a refugee camp in Arkansas in 1975 feels all the more vital in the way it addresses issues of race, immigration and female empowerment. Even though it's a wild, enjoyable ride – complete with

comic book tropes, kung fu fights and ninjas – he did create it to correct Asian and immigrant stereotypes.

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“Growing up, every Vietnamese narrative on the planet – from *Platoon* to *Rambo* to *Miss Saigon* – the main protagonist is always a white guy going to Vietnam and Vietnamese are the bad guys being shot at or they are the people who need saving,” he says. “I remember watching those movies as a kid, and I remember how shitty it felt feeling like the alien. They have no agency for their own narrative; all of the yellow characters are there to serve the white characters’ narrative. In *Vietgone*, I specifically wanted the Asian characters to be their own heroes.”

It was also years before buzz began to circulate for Lin-Manuel Miranda’s new musical *Hamilton*, so Nguyen wasn’t exactly prepared for the comparisons to “the world’s biggest musical ever.”

“Lin and I are the same age, our influences are the same; obviously he’s a far more talented, legitimate hip-hop artist than I am. I have a much more Nineties influence; I don’t freestyle or anything,” Nguyen explains. “But Lin and I do have very similar goals for both shows: He cast his with non-white, Latino and black actors to give them an opportunity to play these roles. *Vietgone* has a similar motivation, but instead of non-white actors, it was Vietnamese characters. I just wanted to make them as relatable as possible.”

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Plus, he explains that he wanted to present characters that would inspire a younger Asian-American audience. “There’s another version of me watching, an Asian-American kid who sees this and says, ‘Wow that’s a sexy Asian male, a sexy Asian female! Sexy because they’re complex



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Nguyen accomplishes this by throwing any thought of realism out and adopting a satirical worldview to lighten the mood. What that means is that the characters, although they were born and raised in Vietnam, don't sound the way one might expect them to. Or as the performers bluntly state at the top of the show, don't expect this stereotype: "Herro! Prease to meeting you! I so Asian! Say Cheesu!" Rather, Tong, the female lead announces: "Yo, what's up, white people?" And male lead Quang offers: "Any of you fly ladies wanna get up on my 'Quang Wang?'" And any American character talks in a garble that sounds like: "Yee-haw! Get'er done! Cheeseburger, waffle fries, cholesterol!"

Vietgone: Highlights Montage



Perhaps the boldest, and most threatening to typical whitebread **theater** audiences, is the fantastic way in which Nguyen writes his female characters. Tong (played by actress Jennifer Ikeda) talks dirty, likes sex and isn't afraid to show that she's smarter than many of the men around her. As she raps late in the show, when she thinks her romance with Quang has fizzled: "Love is just some bullshit story/ A poetic veneer why we get horny ... I just needed your dick to scratch a little itch/ If you wanna fall in love, go find some other bitch ... I'm not some little girl dreaming for her prince/ I can save my own kingdom, I'm a badass bitch!"

"I hate that sex for women is taboo, whereas sex for men is celebrated, so I wanted to have that," Nguyen explains. Although all his plays feature strong female characters, this one seems especially brash since she's inspired by his mother's story, but he doesn't seem to shy about the fact that the woman who gave him life also had physical needs. "My mom is a wannabe feminist. She was raised in the Seventies and she's Asian, but a lot of this stuff, as she's gotten older, she really loves talking about," he explains. "When we were kids, she didn't want to talk about sex at all with her kids. But after I wrote this play and I got married she definitely opened up about it. When it came to that song in particular, I understood where it came from. I remember when I'd broken up with someone she'd say, 'Just hook up with someone else real quick, because that will make you feel better.' She gave that advice because that's how she feels about it."

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That said, neither of Nguyen's parents have come to see a production of *Vietgone*, since the storylines remain too difficult for them to relive – even interpreted by his bawdy, comedic vein of storytelling. Ultimately, despite the tumultuous personal and political themes embedded in this story, he hopes that people will be able to see the message of understanding as the topic of new immigrants coming to America is being fiercely debated.

"In a time, when refugees are being so demonized, especially with Mexicans and Syrians, it's especially

important to remind people that refugees are people,” Nguyen says. “The American story isn’t always about people running to America for opportunity, sometimes it’s about running away from a place because they’re going to die. They still love that place, but they can’t be there anymore.”