

'Year Zero' fires on all cylinders as MRT opener

By KATHLEEN PALMER

Staff Writer

LOWELL, Mass. – Vuthy is a teenage boy in Long Beach, California, with a “Big Bang Theory” style wardrobe, a frozen-in-carbonite Han Solo on his bedroom door, and mad Dungeon Master skills. He speaks with the cadence and parlance of a rapper, trying to front some bravado when all the while he’s fending off bullies at school. His main confidant is a real human skull he picked up on his last trip to his family’s homeland. Just a typical American teen.

Merrimack Repertory Theatre begins its 36th season with “Year Zero,” a poignant, gripping – and surprisingly funny – tale of Cambodian refugees coming to America in the wake of the Khmer Rouge massacres. The show will run through Oct. 5 at MRT’s home stage at the Nancy L. Donahue Theatre, 50 E. Merrimack St.

Vuthy (performed by Daniel Velasco) and his sister Ra (Juliette Hing-Lee) have been left to fend for themselves after the death of their beloved mother. She had worked hard to make a life for her children in America, after escaping the atrocities occurring in Cambodia. The kids are trying to pack up their apartment – and life – while Vuthy struggles with gangs at school and Ra commutes back and forth from college in Berkeley and a yuppie Chinese boyfriend (Arthur Keng). Ra’s tall, ripped former flame, Han (Michael Rosete) is “the biggest Cambodian in the world,” who just got out of prison. He’s got a strong urge to protect Vuthy and Ra, and feels he has a debt to repay to their mother for

IF YOU GO

Merrimack Repertory Theatre presents ‘Year Zero’

WHEN: Through Oct. 5. See website for dates and times.

WHERE: The Nancy L. Donahue Theatre (in Liberty Hall, adjacent to Lowell Memorial Auditorium), 50 E. Merrimack St., Lowell, Mass.

COST: \$20-\$60.

TICKETS/INFORMATION: 1-978-654-4678 or www.mrt.org.

her kindness to him in his struggling times.

The beauty of this play is how many emotions are experienced onstage and as an audience member. Velasco as Vuthy is sweet,

funny and painfully vulnerable, as we are privy to his pensive thought processes through the device of his

soliloquies to a Khmer Rouge victim’s skull he stuffed in his backpack while visiting Cambodia (lightened up by where he keeps it in the apartment). We see and empathize with his fears – of being beaten again by the Samoan gangs, and of being left behind by his collegiate sister – his misplaced anger at Ra’s boyfriend Glenn (“Your name has two Ns in it; isn’t that reason enough to be mad at you?” Vuthy spurts to audience laughter), and his feelings of isolation as his family dissolves and he finds no real place of belonging at home or school.

Hing-Lee’s Ra is brisk and businesslike on the surface, jumping in to attend to what needs to be done: Laundry, packing up their mother’s store, along with an apartment full of dozens of knick knacks she

collected to her children’s bafflement. She keeps on top of Vuthy about school and fitting in, and not retaliating against the bullies. She tries to cram in studying for her MCATs while packing up their lives.

It’s only a matter of time before she loses control of her facade of calm, and it’s a heartwrenching dissolve to witness.

The return of Han to the neighborhood brings back not only Ra’s secret past with him, but conflicting feelings of where she belongs. Ra wants to honor her mother’s hard work and firm encouragement to pursue a successful medical career; but she has some resentment about her mother never discussing her life in Cambodia. She’s surprised to discover her mother told her whole story to Han, “because I wasn’t one of her children,” he explains gently. Han tells Ra all she wants to know about her mother – and perhaps more.

When Han’s big-brother tending to Vuthy crosses a few lines, things get tense. When Glenn comes down from Berkeley to help Ra, things are worse. Han has the set jaw and grim acceptance of gang life duties. Rosete telegraphs his quiet internal conflicts and true gentle nature beautifully. Han is countered starkly with Anglocized Glenn in his A&F wardrobe and planned-out life. But Keng’s Glenn has his own deep feelings, and gets to express them in faceted dialogue reveals.

This play is less about being a refugee or an immigrant; it’s more about how all of us struggle to fit – or buck – the roles we are cast in: Nerd, overachiever, gang banger, projecting our cultural heritage versus assimilating into our adopted country. Each character has decisions to



Photo courtesy of MEGHAN MOORE

The cast of MRT’s “Year Zero.” Clockwise from back row, Arthur Keng as Glenn, Michael Rosete as Han, Daniel Velasco as Vuthy, and Juliette Hing-Lee as Ra.

make about their future, and have to consider how those decisions will impact the ones they love.

This comedic drama is another fine example of

the strong professional theater MRT has become known for. Jump on board for their new season right away with this story that will unquestioningly touch

your heart.

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