



Family values tug heartstrings in 'Vietgone'

By Bob Evans

Cynthia Levin/Unicorn Theatre



The newest play at Kansas City's Unicorn Theatre presents a unique look at family structure, values, and the Vietnam era when seen through the eyes of native Vietnamese, relocated (by choice) to the United States as Saigon began to fall.

"Vietgone," by Qui Nguyen tells the story of several Vietnamese people who escaped the ravages of war only to find themselves in a "land of opportunity" that offered little opportunity and did not resemble the travel brochures they expected. As the enemy approached, Saigon was destined to fall as soon as America withdrew. With America gone, natives knew

their hope to withstand the Communist Vietcong regime evaporated and that those who could flee must do so immediately. Those who could not, remained to face consequences.



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Vi Tran plays Quang, a Vietnamese soldier who received his pilot training in America and commands/flies helicopters in the Vietnamese army. As Saigon falls, he takes a full load of escapees out of the country with every intention of returning to rescue and evacuate his wife and two children. But, through a twist of fate, he cannot.

His story of heartbreak controls the piece. A heart wrenching story of honor, love, and dedication place Quang in conflict with his new country. The reality: if he returns to Vietnam, he will probably face immediate death; but, if he remains in America, he forfeits his family—forever. What a choice?

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While the drama covers so many differing views of the Vietnam

War, when seen through the eyes of a native Vietnamese person, the conflict and tenderness swell in audiences' hearts. The use of rap songs to tell the story and feelings strikes a unique note. Whoever heard of Vietnamese Rap music? Well, settle in, Vi Tran and Ai Vy Bui both deliver much of their life-story by means of rap music and lyrics. And, while listening to their rap, notice the music and sound created by Jonathan Robertson who made it work and made it sound like a pre-written track.



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Tran and Bui both bring compelling, different stories from their Vietnamese characters. Tran's character wants to return to evacuate his family but Bui's character wants to move forward and find a piece of the American Dream. Both encounter problems with their plans. Also, among the characters are Bobby and a playwright played by Sean Yeung, and Guy (Quang's friend) played by Eric Palmquist both relishing their life in America. And, finally, Andi Meyer's character, a middle-age mother, very conflicted about her present and future. Stellar casting by producing artistic director Cynthia Levin make this story work on so many levels.

"Vietgone" will cause audiences to rethink Vietnam and the Vietnamese people. This is the story about conflict within

their country, not ours. The play gives the perspective through their eyes. Without spoiling the story, one lyric tells about a stoned American hippie who claims he understands the war because he lost his older brother there while Quang raps that he lost his whole family, his country, and everything sacred to him to the war. Whoa! It's an in-your-face slap to make you rethink. It's done so well and without blame. Amazing song and delivery.

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“Vietgone” challenges the audience as good theatre should do. One cannot leave without thinking and discussing the piece. Whether for or against the Vietnam War, Americans remain conflicted as a country. This piece proposes new insights. It's dynamic and bold as promised by the Unicorn's philosophy. Be challenged. Go see this show.

“Vietgone” continues through May 13. Tickets may be purchased by phone, in person at the box office or via The Unicorn website.



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