

# VIETGONE



EDUCATION RESOURCES

# QUEENSLAND THEATRE

Queensland Theatre acknowledges the Jagera and Turrbal people who are the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we work, and their unique relationship with the lands, seas and waterways. We pay our respects to their Elders both past and present, and to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.



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## PLAY BRIEFING

Monday, 30 October, 6.00pm

## DURATION

2 hours and 30 minutes, including an interval.

## CURRICULUM LINKS

Suitable for Years 10-12, Tertiary

## WARNINGS

This play contains medium level, frequent coarse language, adult themes including drug and sexual references, discussions of drug use, infidelity, depictions of violence, discrimination, grief and the aftermath of the war in Vietnam 1955-1975. It also contains the use of theatrical smoke, herbal and e-cigarettes, incense, haze, dynamic sound, strobe lighting and lighting blackouts.

*Vietgone* was originally commissioned by South Coast Repertory and performed on 4 October 2015. It received a world premiere co-production by Manhattan Theatre Club at Manhattan Theatre Club's Stage I Theatre on 4 October 2016. This production premiered at the Playhouse, QPAC on 4 November 2023.



Patrick Jhanur, Ngoc Phan, Will Tran



# CURRICULUM LINKS

## DRAMA GENERAL SENIOR SYLLABUS 2019

**UNIT 1:** SHARE

**UNIT 2:** REFLECT

## ACARA, YEAR 10 DRAMA (V9)

Investigate use of elements of drama, performance skills and/or conventions to communicate and/or challenge ideas, perspectives and/or meaning in drama across cultures, times, places and/or other contexts — AC9ADR10E01.

Develop performance skills and/or techniques to manipulate elements of drama and/or use conventions to communicate the physical and psychological aspects of roles and characters consistent with intentions — AC9ADR10D01.

Reflect on their own and others' drama or practices to refine and inform their use of elements of drama, conventions and/or approaches to shape and sustain dramatic action — AC9ADR10D02.

PURPOSE	CONTEXT	FORM AND STYLE	KEY CONVENTIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empathise</li> <li>• Celebrate</li> <li>• Educate or inform</li> <li>• Document</li> <li>• Provoke thought</li> <li>• Empower</li> <li>• Entertainment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Geographical</li> <li>• Cultural</li> <li>• Sociological</li> <li>• Personal</li> <li>• Generational</li> <li>• Psychological</li> <li>• Historical</li> <li>• Sacred</li> <li>• Family</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Epic Theatre</li> <li>• Contemporary Political Theatre</li> <li>• Theatre of Social Comment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multiple role taking</li> <li>• Non-linear narrative</li> <li>• Episodic</li> <li>• Historification</li> <li>• Didacticism</li> <li>• Narration / Direct address</li> <li>• Use of song</li> <li>• Intertextuality</li> <li>• Irony</li> <li>• Parody</li> <li>• Reversal of normal order</li> <li>• Intermediality</li> <li>• Breaking out of realist actions</li> </ul>



# CAST AND CREATIVE TEAM

## CREATIVES

Writer Qui Nguyen

Co-Director Daniel Evans

Co-Director Ngọc Phan

Designer Christina Smith

Associate Costume Designer Nathalie Ryner

Lighting Designer Bernie Tan-Hayes

Composer/Sound Designer Mike Willmet

Sound System Designer Michael Waters

Video Designer Nevin Howell

Choreography and Movement Kate Harman  
and Gavin Webber

Hip Hop Consultant Minh Nguyen

Stage Manager Yanni Dubler

Assistant Stage Manager Bridget O'Brien

## CONTRIBUTING ARTISTS

Cultural Safety Advisor

Katrina Irawati Graham

Cultural Consultant Việt Trần

Fight and Intimacy Director NJ Price

Voice and Dialect Coach Gabrielle Rogers

Vocal Coach Luke Kennedy

## CAST

Nhan/Khue Aljin Abella

Giai/Bobby/Captain Chambers/Redneck

Biker/Hippie Dude/Asian Guy/American Guy

Patrick Jhanur

Playwright Hieu Luong

Tong Kristie Nguy

Asian Girl/American Girl/Thu/Huong/

Translator/Flower Girl Ngọc Phan

Quang Will Tran



Ngọc Phan, Aljin Abella



# ABOUT

## A WILD ROAD-TRIP ROMANCE THROUGH THE HEARTLAND OF AMERICA.

Saigon has fallen. Helicopter pilot Quang and strong-willed Tong have both narrowly escaped the end of the Vietnam War and find themselves in a new and deeply strange country.

Thrown together in the arrival camp in Arkansas, they must navigate a mystifying dust land of rednecks, bikers, hippies and cowboys. Tong wants to make a fresh start in the land of opportunity, while Quang just wants to get home. But what if the spark growing between them was to ignite?

With its in-your-face ninja action and pulse-pounding hip-hop music, Qui Nguyen's *Vietgone* is an inventive and genre-bending live-action theatrical cartoon — an irreverent, pulp fiction-style take on the love story that may (or may not) have led to his own birth.

Co-directed by Daniel Evans and Ngọc Phan, this action-packed comedy of love, family and displacement set against the backdrop of the Vietnam War, will be performed in Australia for the first time.

Cue the glitter cannon.

"A wildly fun, imaginative production, wonderfully staged and hilarious!"

— *The Hollywood Reporter*

"Nguyen's fresh and impish voice rarely lets up as he thumbs his nose at our expectations"

— *The New York Times*

"Exuberantly youthful... a punch-drunk mash-up of hip-hop, road movies, sex farce and Vietnamese-American history. Oh, also kick-ass fights."

— *Time Out New York* \**Company One Theatre*\*



# PRE-SHOW ACTIVITIES

## PRE-SHOW ACTIVITIES EXPLORE THE THEMES OF:

Home, War, Love,  
Connection, Immigration,  
Consequences of choice,  
Enforced fate.



### Research article:

- [Vietnam War and Vietnamese refugees in Australia](#)



### DISCUSS:

- What makes a place a home?
- What attributes make you an Australian?
- How important is the country you were born in to your identity?
- If war broke out, would you stay or would you flee to another country where you did not speak the language? Why?
- If you had to flee your country with no warning, what would you take with you?
- Have you ever felt like a foreigner? How did that feel?
- How do you imagine it would be like arriving in Australia as a foreigner? What would start out as alien to a foreigner?
- How did you parents / grown ups / carers first meet? Why did they tell you or not tell you this story?
- Do you believe in 'love at first sight'? Why?



Kristie Nguy, Patrick Jhanur



## PURPOSE OF ACTIVITY

To allow students to embody themes that *Vietgone* explores.

## ACTIVITY 2: CREATE THEMES

- Have students move about the space
- Call out a number and students must form a group with that number of people
- Call out a theme from the play (Home, War, Love, Connection, Immigration, Consequences of choice, Enforced fate)
- Students form a shape, using levels, gestures and facial expression to create a frozen tableaux of theme. Teacher calls out next theme and so on.
- Students in their groups form a short moment with movement and dialogue of the themes that they would expect to see in the play (e.g., with 'War' students could show a battlefield).



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.’”

**Qui Nguyen** - *Playwright*

*Flower Girl*  
**VIETGONE**





# PRE-SHOW ACTIVITIES

## PURPOSE OF ACTIVITY

To challenge students to step into another's shoes and explore the difficulty new arrivals experience in overcoming barriers to communication.



## DISCUSS:

- Discuss who portrayed a character that was naturalistic?
- How did they achieve that?
- How did they use their facial expressions, body language, gestures and voice?

## ACTIVITY 3: ALIEN LANGUAGE - NONVERBAL

- Refer to Appendix 1 – list of phrases
- Divide students into A and B teams
- Each student receives a phrase that they need to be able to communicate non-verbally to the class. They are not to show anyone else in the class
- One at a time each student in front of the class has to deliver the phrase to their team
- If team gets the phrase correct they score a point
- Winning team is the one who has the most amount of points

## EXTENSION:

- Divide class into pairs A/B
- A is the shopkeeper, B is the customer
- Refer to Appendix 2 – shopping lists
- B gets a shopping list and must communicate what they need off the list to the shopkeeper non-verbally
- Give time limit to get all items on the list (possibly 1 min)
- Team who 'gets the most right' is the winner

What I love about works I've had the fortune to work on in the past 12 months have been about de-centering that and going who's missing from the table and who doesn't have an invitation and going come in and let's figure out what your table looks like. If that means I have to take a back seat, and go I can't speak to a refugee experience, I can speak to an outsider's experience and an 'other' experience.

**Daniel Evans** – Director

Ninja  
VIETGONE



# PRE-SHOW ACTIVITIES

## PURPOSE OF ACTIVITY

To explore an emotional undercurrent which is often highlighted in the musical soundtrack which underscores our life.



### Research:

- Hamilton the musical and its impact on reframing US history
- The revival of Show Boat and its place in contemporary politics

## ACTIVITY 3: LIFE PLAYLIST

- Students bring laptops to class
- Sitting in a circle, discuss power of music:
  - What role does music play in your life?
  - What do you think of your parents' music?
  - How hard is it to select one favourite song?
  - How do songs trigger certain memories from the past?
- Working individually, students select five to seven important songs that would be included on the Playlist of their life
- Students individually create PowerPoint document with song per page, explaining the memory / moment / feeling attached to each one
- Students can have the choice of presenting their PowerPoint to the class, explaining the meaning and memory of their Life Playlist.

### EXTENSION: CPR — CREATE/PRESENT/RESPOND:

In groups of 3-4 students select one of their Life Playlist memory/moment/feeling and present in short improvisation. Commence with:

- 5 frozen moments
- Add one line of dialogue to each frozen moment
- Connect frozen moments together with transitions
- Add narration/direct address to audience

The soundtrack is a mash between country/ Motown/1970's Vietnamese music and hip hop. The main purpose in the piece is the emotional undercurrent of that character at that time. Sounds keep reversing between the spaces being diegetic and an internal diegetic of their emotional points to the songs.

**Mike Willmetts** – *Sound Designer*



Ngoc Phan, Patrick Jhanur



# PRE-SHOW ACTIVITIES



## Research:

- Research Australian artist Anh Do's experience as a Vietnamese refugee

## ACTIVITY 4: MIGRATION CARDS

In groups of 4 give each group card and have them present 4 snapshot/frozen images which depict an introduction/body/climax/outcome to each scenario

Present images to class. Class responds through feedback to determine what the migration situation may depict.

C2000 BCE thousands of Jewish people walked from Egypt to Israel to build a new home where they wouldn't have to be slaves.	In 49 CE many Romans came to Britain to make it part of the Roman Empire.	In the early 1970's some American men went to Canada because they did not want to fight in Vietnam.	Today many people crawl through the tunnels at the Rio Grande to enter the USA where jobs are better paid.	In 1620 a group of Dutch and English people sailed to America to be free to follow their religion.	In the 1970's and 1980's young Black South Africans came secretly to Britain so that they could study.
In the 1800s some criminals were sent from Britain to Australia for stealing food.	Many people have left Somalia and come to Europe because there is fighting between different groups.	In the 1930's people who did not agree with the government, or who were Jewish, left Germany and moved to Britain and the USA, to avoid being put in concentration camps.	In 1973 Idi Amin made all people who were Asian leave Uganda.	In the 1840's people left Ireland and went to the USA or Britain because the potato crop failed and they had no food.	In the last seven years many people have moved from Poland to Britain to earn more money.
In 1974 Turkey took over Northern Cyprus. Many Greek and Turkish Cypriots moved to Britain because they had no homes.	After Yugoslavia broke up into several countries there was war. Many Albanians were forced to leave Kosovo.	In the 1950's people were asked to come from the West Indies to help Britain by working as doctors, nurses, train and bus drivers	In the 1997 a volcano erupted in Montserrat and everyone had to leave the island.	The rule of the Taliban in Afghanistan after 1991 meant that girls and women could not study. Many left the country.	Many people left Chile in 1977 after the murder of Salvador Allende and the start of the dictatorship of Pinochet .
Kurdish people left Turkey and Iraq because their country (Kurdistan) had been taken over and they were being attacked by soldiers.	In the last few years some older people have sold their homes in Britain, and gone to live in France and Spain when they retire.	When India was divided up in 1947 Muslim people moved to Pakistan and Bangladesh.	When India was divided up in 1947, Hindus moved from Pakistan and Bangladesh to India.	Many British doctors move to Australia and the USA where the climate is better and they can earn more money.	Many Indian and Egyptian doctors move to Britain where the jobs are better paid.
From 1760 many people from Bangladesh took jobs on British ships. The shipowners sometimes took away their jobs when they reached London.	From 1850 many people from China took jobs on British ships. The shipowners sometimes took away their jobs when they reached Britain.	When Vietnam became independent in 1979, all the Chinese people living there were forced to leave.	The Huguenots moved from France to Britain after 1685, because they were not allowed to be Protestants, and were being forced to change their religion	When Germany attached Belgium in 1914, the British government said that any Belgians could come to Britain.	

[www.collaborativelearning.org/migrationconnect.pdf](http://www.collaborativelearning.org/migrationconnect.pdf)



# PRE-SHOW ACTIVITIES

## ACTIVITY 5: MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT

Have students read the New York Times interview with playwright Qui Nguyen and answer the corresponding worksheet

- How Mom and Dad Met, With Ninjas

### HOW MOM AND DAD MET, WITH NINJAS

By *Diep Tran*

October 5, 2016 *New York Times*

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.

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.



## HOW MOM AND DAD MET, WITH NINJAS (CONT'D)

“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.

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.



## HOW MOM AND DAD MET, WITH NINJAS (CONT'D)

“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.”

*A version of this article appears in print on Oct. 9, 2016, Section AR, Page 7 of the New York edition with the headline: How Mom and Dad Met, With Ninjas.*



Aljin Abella, Will Tran



# PRE-SHOW ACTIVITIES

## WORKSHEET

1. Who is the playwright of the play *Vietgone*?

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2. What is the central theme of *Vietgone*?

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3. Where and when did the reading of *Vietgone* take place, which led to its production?

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4. Who is Elizabeth Rothman, and what role did she play in the play's production?

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5. Which prestigious theatre company produced *Vietgone* Off Broadway at New York City Centre?

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6. In what other artistic areas, apart from playwriting, does Qui Nguyen work?

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7. What kind of content does Qui Nguyen create for Marvel Studios (research his recent film work)?

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8. How does Qui Nguyen describe his writing style and personality?

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9. What theatre company did Qui Nguyen co-found, and what genre of theatre were they known for?

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10. What is the title of Qui Nguyen's best-known play that has received numerous productions since 2013?

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11. What was the mission of Vampire Cowboys, the theatre company co-founded by Qui Nguyen?

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12. Why did Qui Nguyen feel the need to create roles for minority actors?

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## WORKSHEET (CONT'D)

13. How does *Vietgone* break away from traditional representations of Vietnamese characters in popular culture?

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14. What is the significance of *Vietgone* in providing strong Asian-American characters?

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15. According to the director May Adrales, what elements characterize *Vietgone*?

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16. What does the article suggest about the relevance of “*Vietgone*” in the context of immigration and displaced people?

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17. How many plays are there in the cycle about Qui Nguyen’s family, and what is the focus of the second play in the cycle?

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18. Why haven’t Qui Nguyen’s parents, Quang and Tong Nguyen, seen *Vietgone*?

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19. What made Qui Nguyen’s parents realize that he had written something special?

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20. What was the reaction of a Vietnamese newspaper to *Vietgone*?

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# CREATIVES

## CHRISTINA SMITH – *Vietgone* Designer

The set for *Vietgone* is a billboard structure which stages all the different scenes. The set itself is a monolith taking the image of the billboard which changes images through the use of digital media to show different locations, including Saigon and California, as well as time travel. On a practical level it allowed us to utilise levels and structures. Having the frame and not having to wait for trucks to move furniture/sets allows for transitions to be quick.

Throughout the performance you see both sides of the billboard which are both worn and aged. Additionally through utilising the back of the billboard and the area underneath to change costumes the actors don't leave stage which adds to the pace of the performance.

*Vietgone* doesn't have a huge amount of furniture but some incredibly key pieces of scenery/furniture highlight key scenes. The use of freestanding motorcycles which seem to float and pivot on stage depicts the linear journey on the road from one side of America to the other. The motorcycles are also used in a motorcycle fight scene.

In addition to the billboard and revolve, the space opens to reveal a cyclorama behind the billboard which has slash curtain, star curtains, silver confetti and all go towards make the world bigger!

The show deck is old bits of billboard which are plastered on the floor. These images highlight a collage of experience through the use of sections of road signs as well as imagery of Saigon. The incorporation of these images of experience which have led them to this point is pivotal to the journey towards finding 'home' the main characters are on.

### COSTUMES

The costumes for the cast of five varies from a leather jacket that just go on and off the main character Quang to an on stage transformation into older version of himself

Tong goes through a series of changes but within her own character. As Tong is onstage most of the time her costumes evolves from leaving Saigon to finding herself and growing up in America.

The other three cast members change costumes on multiple occasions with most of the costume changes occurring on stage. The concept behind the costumes is that the American characters are very over the top and caricatured to the point of seeing it through Quang and Tong's eyes that all Americans feel very strange and alien to them.

A colour palette flows through *Vietgone* from the start in Saigon, which is depicted in night through tonal use of midnight blues to lighter blues that goes through until dawn. Then the costume colour palette goes through daytime until sunset which is realised through yellows, oranges and golds, and hints to the sun setting and rising.



## CREATIVES



### IN CONVERSATION WITH DANIEL EVANS & NGỌC PHAN

– Co-Directors

In 1975, tens of thousands of Vietnamese civilians were evacuated from their homes to escape the Viet Cong as part of a US military campaign called Operation Frequent Wind. Families were separated. Lovers were torn apart. And lives were forever split into two. A large number of Vietnamese people would never return to their home, forced to take root in foreign countries and start over, to grow a new life in unfamiliar (and, at times, hostile) terrain.

Playwright Qui Nguyen’s grandmother, Huong, told her grandson that when she arrived in America she had nothing. With little money or belongings to her name, she said that the only thing she could leave him in her old age were her stories: “that’s all I have.” In a beautiful ode to her life and legacy, Qui grew up to become a master storyteller (a very successful one of both the stage and screen) and *Vietgone* feels like his love-letter to both her and his parents.

*Vietgone* chronicles how Qui’s mother, Tong, and father, Quang, met after the fall of Saigon in Fort Chaffee, Arkansas; one of several military barracks re-purposed to house Vietnamese refugees until they were fostered into the wider community. Like most love stories, their plot is not linear. Qui has structured the play in the way we might experience stories handed-down to us through our parents — in fragments, not-quite-whole, with a little embellishment and some minor theatrics. We revolve backwards and forwards in time as we move through Saigon, across the South Pacific and along Route 66 at lightning pace as Quang searches for a way to get home.

This is a play about pushing upwards, pushing on, driving towards something impossible and making peace with what is tantalizingly out of reach. Designer Christina Smith has worked with imagery of ‘the horizon’ and the Great American Highways — as a way to capture the feeling of being in an in-between space, a sort-of limbo. At the centre of the space is a monolithic billboard — a relic of the mid-west, of post war consumerism, where everything was bigger, shinier, more desirable and less attainable. Over the next hour and a bit, this industrial skeleton will become a ship, a military station and eventually: a monument to his parents’ love.

Qui wrote this play for his sixteen year old self — for that awkward kid who loved rap and ninja movies but hadn’t seen a Vietnamese face like his on television or in cinemas... or centre stage. *Vietgone* is something of a write-back, an opportunity to take up space and re-score the story. In Qui’s play: Viet women are not exoticised but given agency. Viet men are made into leading men — action heroes in the driver’s seat. The characters are the authors of their own representation and self-expression: they rap, they ninja-battle, they speak to us in their own words, on their terms.

Taking on this gambit are actors Will Tran, Kristie Nguy, Hieu Luong, Aljin Abella and Patrick Jhanur. Between them they play over 20 characters and execute 100 costume changes. No small feat. Watching them rise to tackle



Ngọc Phan  
Co-Director



Daniel Evans  
Co-Director





this theatrical mash-up has been a real highlight. Second only to being able to work together as Co-Directors. Although we come from different personal, cultural, and artistic places: we've met somewhere in the centre — to collaborate on a special project that brings together our own two worlds with respect, integrity and the view to paving a new way of collaborating in Australian theatre.

We dedicate our work on this show to the spirit of Vietnamese people — their bravery, their camaraderie, their capacity to find strength to start again — has been the beating heart of this process and production. We've been so lucky to feel its pulse through our cultural consultant Uncle Viet, hip hop aficionado Minh Nguyen, the parents of some of our cast and the stories offered to us along the way.

This is an American story but the refugee experience at its centre is universal, recognisable to many in our Viet community. We've learnt what Tong and Quang will come to understand — what Qui had to reconcile in his own self — that 'home', like the shimmering horizon, is not a physical destination — it is the people you make it with... in circumstances you could never have seen coming... in a life that may be small but, in the hands of a great Playwright, can be writ large and magnificent for the whole world to see.

— Ngọc and Dan



Daniel Evans, Ngọc Phan



## CREATIVES

### **MIKE WILLMETT** – *Vietgone* Sound Designer

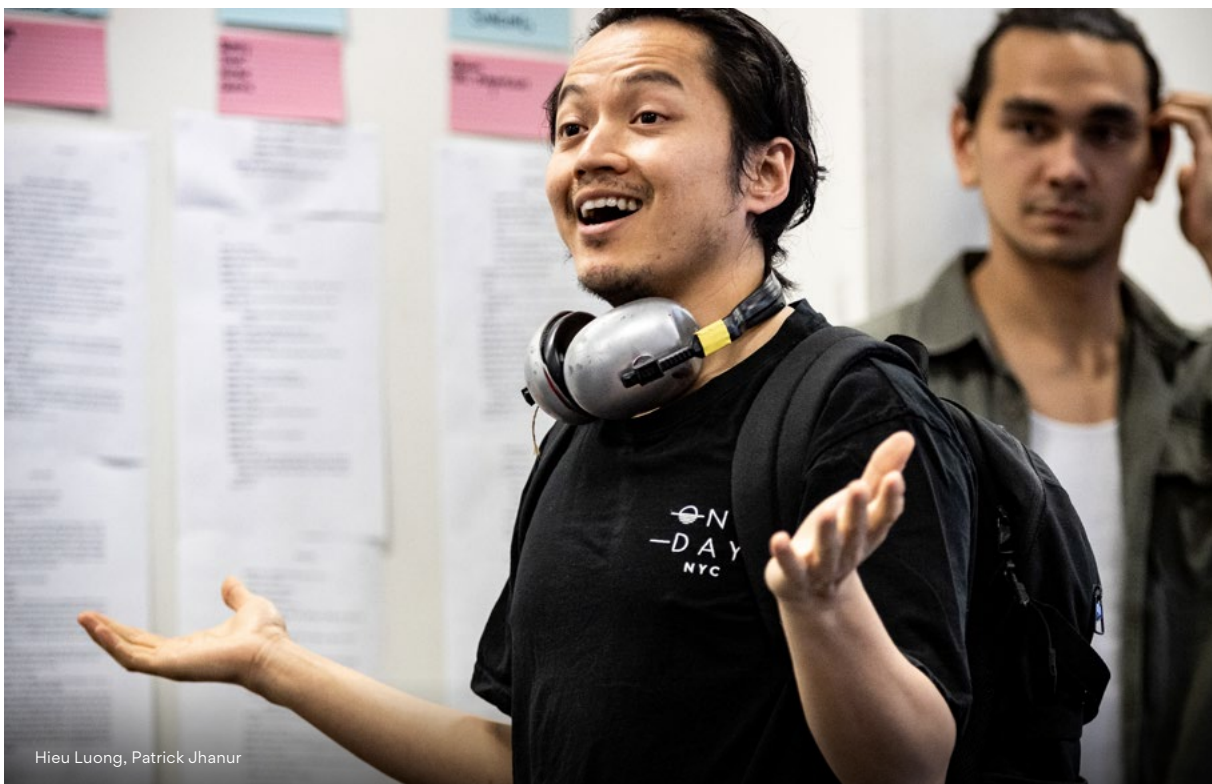
*Vietgone* is a love letter that's written of growing up in the 90's hip-hop. To make the soundtrack for *Vietgone* was like making an album – six hip-hop numbers and five mega mixes spread between both acts. The music is a lovely Ven diagram of heightened memory and the love the playwrights parents had for music.

The music is a mash between country/Motown/1970's Vietnamese music and hip-hop and takes the design of a mixtape –ode of honouring the source material for the original score 90's hip-hop and branching and making it bigger by layering and sampling. This allows us to go to a 90's hip hop DJ culture to give it extra backing to acknowledge that these are big numbers in a big space with generally only one person singing any song.

The main purpose of the music in *Vietgone* is the emotional undercurrent of that character at the time. Sound and space narrow and the wide focus of the music being piped through the back of the stage/above the audience/around the audience highlight a slip of memory through little tales of songs. Sounds keep reversing between the spaces being diegetic and internal diegetic of their emotional point to the songs.

Outside of that, the rest of the design has a heavy use on atmospherics, and ways in and out of the numbers through heightened theatrical space or using record scratches and anything that rotates. Tape sounds, record players, helicopter blades, motorcycle wheels, and anything that gives you a feeling of momentum and that can be used to jump forward and back in time to mimic the feeling of the play as it jumps forward and back in time. This use of rotating momentum helps the audience understand those transitional senses and give a language to those transitions.

*Vietgone* at it's core, is really about the idea of rewinding and heightening memory.



Hieu Luong, Patrick Jhanur



# APPENDIX 1

- It's a pleasure to meet you
- Good to see you
- Long time no see
- How have you been?
- Is this your first time here?
- Where are you from?
- What do you do?
- Nice to finally meet you
- It's nice to put a face to the name
- How's life treating you?
- How's your day been so far?
- It's nice to see you
- What have you been up to lately?
- I heard about your recent trip, how was it?
- That's a great outfit you're wearing
- How's work/school?
- How's your favourite sports team doing?
- What are your plans for the weekend?
- Did you catch the latest movie?
- Did you have a chance to try that new restaurant yet?
- How's your family?
- I've been meaning to ask you about your recent project
- What's the weather like today?
- how's the traffic?
- It's been too long since we last caught up
- Have a good one!
- I was just talking about you the other day
- I love this song, it always puts me in a good mood
- Would you like to go out with me?
- Can you pass me that document?
- Can you lend me that, please?
- Would you like to join me for a drink?
- I would love to have you over for...
- I'd be happy to help
- Would you be so kind as to close the door?
- Can you give me a hand?
- Would you like to grab a coffee?
- Can you show me how to do this?
- Would you like to go for a walk?
- Can you please explain that again?
- Would you mind keeping an eye on my stuff?
- Can I borrow your pen?
- I can't thank you enough
- You're a lifesaver
- You're a true friend
- I couldn't have done it without you
- You always know what to say
- I really appreciate your support
- Thanks for being there for me
- You're a real lifesaver
- You always make me smile.



## APPENDIX 2

### LIST 1

- Apples
- Chicken
- Water

### LIST 2

- Bread
- Pasta
- Pizza

### LIST 3

- Shampoo
- Chips
- Sugar

### LIST 4

- Tissues
- Soap
- Milk
- LIST 5
- Nuts
- Meat
- Juice

### LIST 6

- Cake
- Light bulbs
- Toilet paper

### LIST 7

- Ice cream
- Bananas
- Eggs

### LIST 8

- Garbage bags
- Chewing gum
- Popcorn
- LIST 9
- Razor
- Toothpaste
- Cheese

### LIST 10

- Fish
- Pepper
- Dog food



Kristie Nguy



**QUEENSLAND THEATRE**