

# In ‘Vietgone,’ Seattle theaters tell immigrant tale with rap and ninjas

Aug. 6, 2024 at 1:00 pm | Updated Aug. 6, 2024 at 1:00 pm



Tong (Megan Huynh) and Quang (Josh Erme) roar into a better tomorrow in “Vietgone,” produced by Pork Filled Productions and SIS Productions. (Giao Nguyen)

By [Gemma Alexander](#)

*Special to The Seattle Times*

Audiences will have to look closely to find the similarities between the real-world situations in Qui Nguyen’s play “Vietgone” and “Raya and the Last Dragon,” the animated fantasy movie he co-wrote with Adele Lim for Disney. But the common threads

of stories rooted in Asian culture, strong female protagonists, martial arts action and comic book influences are just as present in this play loosely based on his own parents' lives.

Local Asian American theater companies Pork Filled Productions and SIS Productions copresent Nguyen's "Vietgone" Aug. 9-24 at Theatre Off Jackson. Directed by Mimi Katano, with live music by Yuelan, "Vietgone" is the story of a Vietnamese couple who meet and fall in love in Arkansas after fleeing the fall of Saigon.

"Vietgone" has been [performed in Seattle](#) before, at Seattle Rep in 2016. After the spike in hate crimes perpetrated against Asian American elders during the pandemic, "Vietgone" felt even more relevant to SIS Productions' executive director, Kathy Hsieh, because its young protagonists are today's elders.

"To be able to share their story on stage in a way that centers the relationships between people and does it with a huge sense of humor was really important," Hsieh said.

For Roger Tang, executive director of Pork Filled Productions, Nguyen is an inspiration. One of PFP's first productions — the Shakespeare/zombie/martial arts mashup "Living Dead in Denmark," in 2008 — was Nguyen's Pacific Northwest premiere.

"He showed that producing plays based in genre and rooted in fun can be viable for a theater company, and we've followed that model in our programming," Tang said.

Once Hsieh and Tang discovered their shared interest in "Vietgone," a Pork Filled-SIS coproduction was inevitable.

Director Katano homed in on Nguyen and Tang's shared love of comic books for this new production, using the graphic novel "[The Best We Could Do](#)" — another Vietnamese immigration story — as visual inspiration. She also replaced the recorded backing tracks with [Yuelan's](#) live band for the actors to rap over.

"Having a live band ups the cool factor by, like, 85%," Katano said.

Local rapper Durojaiye Gyasi Kweku Heru — stage name [Gyasi](#) — came in to coach the actors

For actor Megan Huynh, a devoted fan of hip-hop, rapping in character as the protagonist Tong is an exciting challenge.

“In this show, most of our raps feel like monologues; they’re emotional moments that we’re trying to process. It’s been fun to approach the songs from an acting perspective and as a fan of hip-hop, trying to find a flow that still shows a lot of that character’s personality in a way that is honest and meaningful,” she said.

Another new experience has been getting to play a character who is Vietnamese American like herself.

“It’s been filling my heart in a different way. I can drop back on my familial experience and bring my own cultural perspective,” Huynh said.

But playing a character of her mother’s generation has been eye-opening.

“Tong can seem really reactive and frankly, bitchy, throughout the show, but it’s been really fascinating getting to dive into all of the different layers of pressures in her life,” Huynh said. “My mom’s side all came over on a boat a few years after the fall of Saigon. Getting to unpack the cultural trauma of being a child of someone who had to come over in those circumstances, and understanding how that shaped them, has been so interesting and so healing.”

Tong’s mother, Huong, is usually a young actor made up to look older, but Katano wanted someone closer to the character’s age. “Wendy [Chinn] also just happens to be an acrobat and martial artist. We have pretty extensive fight scenes and I thought that it would be really great to see an older actor have the chops to handle scenes like that in a Michelle Yeoh kind of way,” Katano said. “The narrator pops out and says, ‘This is how the fight went in my mind,’ and there is a big fight that is super elaborate, and ninjas show up. It gives us license to go big. We’re going to involve everybody, including the band.”

Hsieh notes that underneath the fight scenes, sexual situations and rap music, “Vietgone” still tells a serious story.

“In a very fun way, it highlights some of the different struggles of age, gender, race, class and immigrant status,” she said.

Katano agrees and adds, “At the core of it, it is a love story and I think that is important. They were people who were young and in love, and that story is really universal.”

---

## “Vietgone”

Aug. 9-24; Theatre Off Jackson, 409 Seventh Ave. S., Seattle; accessibility info: 7:30 p.m. Aug. 22 sensory/relaxed performance, email [info@theatreoffjackson.org](mailto:info@theatreoffjackson.org) for wheelchair-accessible seating, large-print programs and digital scripts available on request; runtime: approximately 2 hours 25 minutes with intermission; \$10-\$50; 206-579-5486, [porkfilled.com](http://porkfilled.com)

---

**Gemma Alexander** is a Seattle-based freelance writer; [gemmaealexander.com](http://gemmaealexander.com).

 [View 0 Comments / 0 New](#)

