



It was difficult, though, to explore queer culture. "I felt like I was living in a world of 'don't ask, don't tell.' I know there's a queer culture there; it's just so underground I wasn't able to find it..."

—Stephanie Mulligan

Left: Celebrating Thanksgiving 2000 in Ho Chi Minh City (Stephanie Mulligan is third from the right)

Below left: Laura and her Gentleman Caller take on a new look



ACTING ON HISTORY

Theater exchange promotes diplomatic relations with Vietnam

by Lisa Bradshaw

"Growing up in the '60s and '70s, all I knew about Vietnam was what I saw on television. War, poverty, sadness," says Stephanie Mulligan of Portland's Artists Repertory Theatre.

However, she spent the past three months getting to know Vietnam a whole lot better. She just returned home after taking part in the Vietnam America Theatre Exchange, the first ever artistic collaboration between the United States and Vietnam.

The project was founded by Lorelle Browning, associate professor of literature and peace studies at Pacific University, in partnership with Artists Repertory Theatre and Vietnam's Central Dramatic Company. The exchange includes two stage productions with both U.S. and Vietnamese actors and various theater workshops.

ART's artistic director, Allen Nause, became the first U.S. citizen to direct a play in Vietnam. Along with Mulligan and two Vietnamese directors, he staged a Vietnamese language production of Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* and a bilingual production of William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's*

several others know enough Vietnamese to get around the city but not to direct a production. Most of the Vietnamese involved were at about that same level of English.

During rehearsal for the bilingual, co-directed *Midsummer*, both the U.S. and Vietnamese directors produced notes, which had to be translated into the other's language clearly enough so the concepts were understood by the cast and crew. It was a long and tedious process.

But once the language barriers were broken and the actors understood the direction, they were able to execute the lines "as well and as professionally in either tongue," Mulligan observed. "That's where you see that art is the common ground."

As stage manager, Mulligan's tasks were numerous. She worked with the director "from the first rehearsal to opening night," she explained, "after which every aspect of the show was under my supervision until closing night."

Mulligan was responsible for all the lighting, sound and scenery cues as well as direction to the actors regarding lines, tempo and positioning. "Really, everything that makes the production work smoothly."

She had to convey her own stage direction working around language, showing the crew what she wanted instead of saying it. (Although, she said, "They all knew my key phrases in English: 'Take five' or the dreaded 'One more time!'")

The theater culture of Vietnam added to the difficulty of understanding Mulligan's production orders. "Stage management is unheard of here," she said.

Instead, senior actors function as company managers but do not direct lighting or sound cues. "The operators just run the cues however they see fit," she remarked.

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