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PHOTO BY JENNY GRAHAM, OREGON SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL.

Quang (James Ryen) and Nhan (Will Dao) argue over what to do as Saigon falls in the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's production of 'Vietgone.'

Between Vietnam and America

Artists outside dominant culture find their voices

OPINIONATED JUDGE
BY JUDGE DARLEEN ORTEGA



Why do I know so little about the perspective of Vietnamese refugees to the U.S.? Why have I never seen a sex comedy involving two compelling Vietnamese immigrants? Why do I expect Vietnamese characters living in the U.S. to speak in broken English?

These are among the questions that rose for me as I experienced the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's production of "Vietgone," which opened this month and plays until late October. Based on the experiences of playwright Qui Nyugen's parents, who

immigrated to the U.S. as refugees in the mid-1970s, the play moves back and forth in time between Vietnam and their early years in the U.S., including their meeting in a refugee camp and the steamy affair that began their relationship. Though Nyugen's parents told him most of his life that they had fallen in love at first sight in that refugee camp in Arkansas, they admitted to him more recently that the truth is a bit more coarse than that -- though also a tale of how they saved each other in a time when both were traumatized and longing

for home.

Most of the few immigrant stories that make it into American popular culture involve people who were desperate to move here to make a better life for themselves; I suspect that, at some level, the experience of immigrants who came reluctantly and pine for home defies American expectations. Nyugen's father, Quang, was a pilot with the South Vietnamese army, and his mother, Tong, worked in the U.S. embassy in Saigon. They both escaped to the U.S. to avoid certain death when the South Viet-

namese capitol was invaded; Quang left behind a wife and two kids who he had no way of retrieving, and Tong left behind a beloved brother.

The play's humor and raunchiness never obscures that these two 30-year-olds didn't want to be in the U.S. They were in anguish about the state of things at home, and folks in the U.S. saw in them only their Vietnamese enemy. The two refugees have left behind lives they cared about, and have traded respectability for places at the bottom of the social ladder.

As presented here, Nyugen's parents defy stereotypes. Quang (James Ryen) is tall and muscular and virile; Tong (Jeena Yi) is self-assured and irreverent. They utter their dialogue in perfect American

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