

# The Asian Reporter

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**MY TURN**

■ **Dmae Roberts**



## Prince Gomolvilas

Two years ago, I spoke with Prince Gomolvilas about a potential trip to Portland to workshop his new original play before its world premiere in 2019. Finally the time has come to unveil *The Brothers Paranormal*, presented by Theatre Diaspora, a project of MediaRites.

*The Brothers Paranormal* focuses on two Thai-American brothers living in the Midwest who capitalize on recent strange phenomena of Asian ghost sightings (probably due to truly frightening movies such as *The Ring* and *The Grudge*). The first client of the brothers is an African-American couple displaced by Hurricane Katrina. At its heart, the play is about cross-cultural characters dealing with grief, loss, and the ghosts of the departed. Through authentic characters based on myth and memory, audiences experience laughter, spookiness, and gripping poignant moments.

The mission of Theatre Diaspora is to shed light on Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities that are rarely represented in American theatre. Thai stories are rarely told, especially in theatre, hence the playwright, Prince Gomolvilas, proudly calls himself the “best-known” Thai-American playwright in professional theatre.

I’ve learned a lot researching some of the themes in the play, including the difference between Thai and American funerals. In Thailand, a Buddhist funeral may last many days. A bathing ceremony in which guests pour holy water over the deceased is the first step in the process. The body is then dressed and placed in a coffin for display for up to a week in a temple or home. For religious leaders, government officials, or royalty, a body may lie in state from six months to two years. Afterward, there is a funeral procession before the body is cremated.

I was intrigued when I heard one of Prince’s characters comment that American funerals are so sad and “boo-hoo,” while Thai funerals have a sense of celebration with a party for the person to enter the next life. One character even mentions the existence of gambling at a funeral party. During my internet searches, I discovered that while gambling is generally prohibited in Thailand, it appears to be a common part of Thai life and culture even in funerals. “Funeral casinos” indeed exist; a book was even written about it — Alan Klima’s *The Funeral Casino* (Princeton University Press).

Another aspect of *The Brothers Paranormal* is the use of “ghosts” as a metaphor for the alienation and isolation many immigrants feel when displaced from their country of origin into mostly white rural areas. The “ghost” themes in the play also speak of the grief one goes through when missing a loved one who has passed on. All the characters in the production — both Thai and African American — deal with that loss. And the show also brings up little-talked-about resistance that minority communities often might feel toward the mental-health profession. Although cultural communities often have high rates of depression, alcoholism, and suicide, it’s difficult for many immigrants and people of color to get past the stigma of seeking help for mental health.

In fact, Prince Gomolvilas said his inspiration for the mental-health themes comes from an experience of one of his family members who was hearing voices and seeing visions. Instead of going to a western doctor, they sought out a “monk” who lived miles away in a suburb. He said the conditions the medical community might ascribe as mental illness are often referred to as “spiritual sickness” in several Asian communities. He reported that his family member improved after the visit to the monk.

Though he lived in Thailand when he was a baby, Prince Gomolvilas was born in and grew up in Indianapolis, Indiana. He received the name Prince because his kindergarten teacher couldn’t pronounce his Thai name — “Khamolpat” — or his nickname — “Binm” — so he was crowned “Prince.”

Because of his visibility as a playwright in Los Angeles, Prince Gomolvilas has been sought out by the Thai community for projects to bring more visibility to Thais. In 2010, he was asked to put together a forum of Thai-American writers in Los Angeles for the PEN Center and the University of Southern California. In 2013, he developed a play to raise awareness about Thai human trafficking for the Thai Community Development Center. And in 2014, he produced the entertainment portion of that organization’s 20th anniversary gala and also served as host. He’s met with the Thai Rotary Club, been to the Thai consul general’s home, and met with the Thai Prime Minister, along with other community members, to talk about issues important to the Thai-American community.

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