

Standing ovation for Fil-Am star of riveting play ‘Year Zero’

Written by special to the filipino reporter
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Han (Michael Rosete) looks on as Ra (Juliette Hing-Lee) tends to Vuthy (Daniel Velasco) in “Year Zero.” (Photo by Meghan Moore)

Fil-Am actor Daniel Velasco, who was a scholar of Oscar-winning actor Denzel Washington at Fordham University at Lincoln Center, has landed a theater acting gig — a lead role and his biggest break to date — a few months after his graduation in May.

He stars in a comedic drama called “Year Zero” for Merrimack Repertory Theatre (MRT) in

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Lowell, Massachusetts, one of 74 regional theaters outside of New York City and one of three in the state of Massachusetts.

Daniel, who's been receiving a standing ovation every night, portrays the central character Vuthy Vichea, a 16-year-old Cambodian-American living in Long Beach, Calif. in the early 2000s.

With other young Cambodians like him, he struggles with the death of his mother as he tries to find his place in a community that doesn't accept him.

The play — which went on previews on Sept. 11, and formally opened on Sept. 14 and will run through Oct. 5 at the Nancy L. Donahue Theatre — was an overnight sensation primarily because the city of Lowell has the second largest Cambodian-American population in the U.S. (next to Long Beach).

The heartwrenching play reflects the challenges young Cambodians have to go through making their way to America.

"Year Zero" is inspired by the exodus of many Cambodians when Khmer Rouge took over their country in 1975 intending to eradicate all existing Cambodian culture and traditions resulting in the genocide of 1.7 million people.

"Most Cambodian families in Lowell witnessed the genocide and are refugees to a world in which they were forced to start over back to 'year zero,'" Sochenda Uch, youth leadership program coordinator for Lowell Community Health Center and vice president of the board of directors of the Angkor Dance Troupe, told the *Lowell Sun* newspaper.

Based on the acclaimed 2009 novel of the same title by playwright and screenwriter Michael Golamco, who is of Filipino-Chinese descent, the play is directed by Kyle Fabel.

Daniel's character as Vuthy is viewed as a weird kid (primarily because of his looks and thick glasses) in a place like Long Beach, "where weirdness can be fatal."

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And since his best friend moved and his mother died, the only thing he secretly talks to is a human skull he keeps in a cookie jar.

Cathy Uy, a former Fil-Am community leader in the New York tri-state area, who has moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts with her family a few years ago, was among those who caught the play she described as “the most relatable Asian play I have seen in my life.”

“We went to see the play just for curiosity’s sake but what we saw was an extraordinary play with a spectacle of emotions that pushed everyone to tears and laughter,” Cathy said of the 300 people, more than half of them Caucasians, who came to the Sept. 14 opening night.

“It focuses on the Cambodian-American community but any member of the Asian-American community will be able to relate to what the Cambodians have to go through — discrimination, bullying, intolerance...I just kept crying in many of the scenes that accurately depict an immigrant’s life. I didn’t expect to be touched this way by a play.”

Cathy was equally thrilled about Daniel’s raw and powerful performance.

“Daniel is an amazing, amazing actor,” Cathy told the **Filipino Reporter**.

“He delivered a performance that will be hard to forget.”

The four-character cast also includes Juliette Hing-Lee as Vuthy’s older sister Ra; Arthur Keng as Ra’s boyfriend Glenn; and Michael Rosete, also a Fil-Am, as neighbor Han.

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Anthony 'Yard' Dela Cruz, Rosewise, Photo by Mig Danilov, and Juliette Hing-Lee, Photo by Mig Danilov