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“Kung Fu Zombies vs. Cannibals” at Mu Performing Arts

October 15, 2013

By [Dominic Orlando](#)



Payton Woodson, Meghan Kreidler, Maxwell Chonk Thao (rear) and Laura Anderson face off against those hungry cannibals (photo by Michal Daniel)

Randy Reyes has made a bold choice for his first production as Artistic Director of Theater Mu. Actually, that’s a bit of an understatement. Reyes is not only producing but directing his inaugural show—which is a world premiere—by a first-time playwright—about a future apocalypse—in which zombies and cannibals have all but taken over the world.

Yikes. In the sense that “Kung Fu Zombies” is truly a one-of-a-kind experience, I’d say Reyes’ artistic gamble paid off. I’ve been in the Twin Cities for New York-based Vampire Cowboys’ recent run of epic cultural mash-ups (I’m from NYC)—fans of VC will have to forgive me if this is all familiar territory to them.

For me it was a dizzying stew of pop-cultural motifs—most of them, oddly, from film—slammed together on The Southern Theatre’s massive canvas (and **John Bueche**’s terrific multi-level set, rising up like a natural outgrowth of the space, in the designer’s signature style, simultaneously ramshackle and obsessively detailed). Reyes and Fight Choreographer **Allen Malicsci** have done an impressive job of recreating the comic book/martial arts/Matrix mayhem—the fights come at you like the elaborate numbers in an old-time musical, the “fighting chorus” (**Venise Berte, Joelle Fernandez, Rocky Her, Taylor Her**, and Allen Malicsi) Reyes’ warped version of the Zigfield Dancers. Aided and abetted by “DJ/Sound Designer” **Kool Akiem**, visible high up on stage left (I don’t mean “upstage”—I mean “up”, up in the air—it’s a really cool set). Akiem scores the piece before our eyes, somehow managing to be ever-present without overwhelming the action. He knows the true meaning of “underscore”, and the power it can have when done right.

It’s a lot of fun. As are the fighting Buddhist Monks played by **Maxwell Chonk Thao** and **Payton J Woodson**. The audience was packed and ready to have a good time—even the smallest joke brought a huge response (why else would you go to a play with this title?). One of the play’s forgivable flaws (we are talking about a first-time effort, from a writer who should not be discouraged) is that the fun can flag for long stretches at a time. I collected comic books as a kid (OK, all the way up to my young teens. Fine, late teens). There’s a certain way comic books have of suddenly getting “serious” that playwright **Saymoukda Duangphouxay Vongsay** hasn’t quite mastered. I’m not talking about the bitter flashbacks from the Hmong Warrior Arhan (played with both martial and emotional expertise by **Laura Anderson**)—I could have used more Laos-specific content. I mean saying, on the one hand “for some reason these motherfucking zombies know Kung Fu!” and then expecting us to suddenly downshift into David Rabe territory. Vongsay could have had faith we’d understand the seriousness of some of her material without needing it to be “serious”.

I also know from my late teens (OK, early twenties), that comics are a well-oiled machine. “Kung Fu Zombies” begins with a video introduction that seems oddly designed to confuse the audience, while the straightforward quest of our hero, Sika (**Meghan Kreidler**, with a pop-gravitas that rivals Laurence Fishburne—like Fishburne, she understands how “serious” and comics go together)—to scatter her parents’ ashes in their home country—a journey from Minnesota to Laos through a Zombie-infested world—didn’t become clear to me until a long way into the story (why doesn’t Sika simply explain her quest to the little girl she rescues in the first scene—the remarkable Aden Her?). At this point in our cultural history, you can drop us into a zombie apocalypse and be confident most of us will know where we are without too much explication (if—when?—society collapses, how many of us will actually know the details?).

A familiar pleasant sense overtook me as the second act progressed—I realized later it was my Saturday afternoon feeling. I grew up in the 70’s—on the days when it rained, or for whatever reason you had nothing to do, there weren’t a zillion options, just three or four channels mostly playing Kung Fu, Monster Movies or Abbot & Costello. Reyes does his job conducting the elaborate visual orchestra of “Kung Fu Zombies”, but is it enough to simply lift these adolescent forms onto the stage, or are writers like Vongsay obliged to do something more with them?

I pose that as a real question, not a rhetorical device. For now, let’s just congratulate Mr Reyes on a gutsy, crazy-ambitious artistic debut.

Recommend Don Eitel and 58 others recommend this.

Tags: [Kung Fu Zombies](#), [Randy Reyes](#), [Saymoukda Duangphouxay Vongsay](#), [Southern Theatre](#), [Theatre Mu](#)

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1. [The reviews are in for Mu’s “Kung Fu Zombies vs. Cannibals” | obsessionsys.com](#) on October 15, 2013 at 5:04 pm

[...] From Dominic Orlando at HowWasTheShow.com: [...]

2. [The reviews are in for Mu’s “Kung Fu Zombies vs. Cannibals” | State of the Arts | Minnesota Public Radio News](#) on October 15, 2013 at 3:21 pm

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