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A heartwarming tale of zombies and cannibals

Saymoukda Vongsay's "Kung-Fu Zombies vs. Cannibals" premieres at the Southern Theater this weekend.



Laura Anderson and Meghan Kreidler rehearse for "Kung-Fu Zombies vs. Cannibals" at the Mu Performing Arts Studio on Wednesday, October 2, 2013. "Kung-Fu Zombies vs. Cannibals" is a play based on the five Buddhist tenets about a post-apocalyptic world overrun with zombies and cannibals.

By Chelsea Gortmaker

By **Emily Eveland** October 10, 2013

Tucked behind a Sears Outlet Center and a tall chain link fence sits Mu Performing Arts, the only pan-Asian theater company in Minnesota, marked by an unassuming square sign hanging near the driveway. It's easy for first-time visitors to question whether they're in the right place.

Beyond the front door, a dark carpeted hallway awaits, revealing a room piled from floor to ceiling with props. Visitors must then follow signs dangling from overhead beams that lead them through the maze of warehouse hallways to the hidden wonder that is Mu's theater studio.

On a stormy Wednesday evening last week, the studio was crammed with actors and crewmembers rehearsing for Mu's upcoming play, "Kung Fu Zombies vs. Cannibals," written by University of Minnesota faculty member Saymoukda Vongsay.

The rehearsal opened with a recording of Sika, the lead zombie hunter played by University theater graduate Meghan Kreidler, narrating the story of the zombie apocalypse that's ravaged the world for 10 years, claiming the lives of her loved ones. As the recording played, Sika stood center stage, fighting off zombies in slow motion.

The narrative, at first, sounded intentionally average. But as the recorded story came to a head, Sika paused and the tone changed dramatically.

"And for some reason, these motherfuckers knew kung-fu," she said.

With those words, DJ Kool Akiem's funk-laden beats filled the room, the slow-motion fight scene switched to full speed and "Kung-Fu Zombies vs. Cannibals" proved to be more than your average zombie story.

"Kung-Fu Zombies" quirky character list includes a 6-year-old cannibal, a gang-banger turned monk, a principal who secretly doubles as a kung-fu master and an old villager who shows love for his wife by dry-humping her side. Where did Vongsay come up with this stuff?

Vongsay, a Lao American poet and an English graduate of the University of Minnesota, is the community outreach coordinator for the University's Asian American studies program. She said the idea for "Kung-Fu Zombies vs. Cannibals" came to her through recurring dreams she had about fighting zombies.

"I decided to keep a dream journal and then eventually those entries turned into poems and short stories," she said.

She brought her ideas to a monthly event called Madness, held at the Playwrights' Center, during which playwrights are given a restricted period of time to write and stage five- to 10-minute plays.

Two years later, the 10-page script she wrote for the event has evolved into a thoughtful, high-energy piece applying Buddhist tenets to a zombie-filled fantasy.

"How do you survive in a post-apocalyptic world where you can't lie to get yourself out of situations that are harmful to you or take things that

didn't belong to you, but that you need to survive?" Vongsay said. "What happens to your moral standards?"

Each scene in "Kung-Fu Zombies" is based around one of the five Buddhist tenets, which prohibit lying, stealing, killing, having immoral sex and putting toxins in the body — the ingestion of toxins in "Kung-Fu Zombies" comes in the form of cannibals devouring human flesh.

The production stays true to its name, with showy martial arts choreography impeccably executed by the actors.

"Not only were we looking for good actors and Asian actors, but we were also looking for actors who had a good foundation in martial arts," Mu's artistic director Randy Reyes said.

Lead actress Kreidler said she took martial arts classes from second grade until high school. Between multiple lengthy monologues, she's able to kick some major zombie butt without sounding out of breath.

To up the ante on the fight scenes, Vongsay recruited her husband, DJ Kool Akiem, who spent long hours writing and recording the play's soundtrack.

Akiem, a Rhymesayers-affiliated musician who teaches hip-hop history at McNally Smith College of Music, worked with more than a dozen local artists to create the soundtrack, which will be released as a full studio album by the end of the month. Featured artists on the album include Carnage, Desdamona and Beasely.

The mixture of live DJ-ing, kung-fu choreography and humorous social commentary sets "Kung-Fu Zombies" apart from standard theater fare. But the play's message extends beyond its unique externalities.

"I would say that the title is a little bit deceiving because it seems like it might be a little bit hokey," Kreidler said. "It's actually a really touching story about a woman's journey through survival."

The oft-repeated line, "no attachment, no fear," pulsates through the play, providing social significance and lasting resonance. Even the walking dead can relate.

What: "Kung Fu Zombies vs. Cannibals"

When: Thursdays through Sundays, Oct. 12-27; times vary

Where: The Southern Theater, 1420 Washington Ave. S., Minneapolis

Cost: \$10 for students; \$22 for adults; \$5 off if you dress like a zombie

Age: 14+

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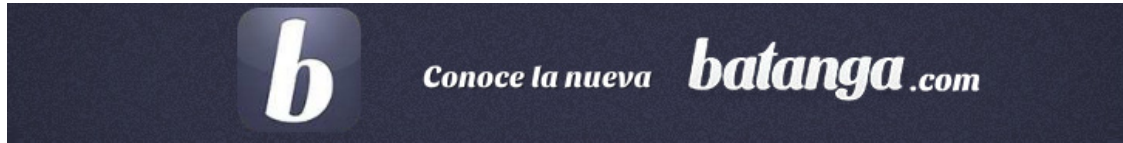
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