

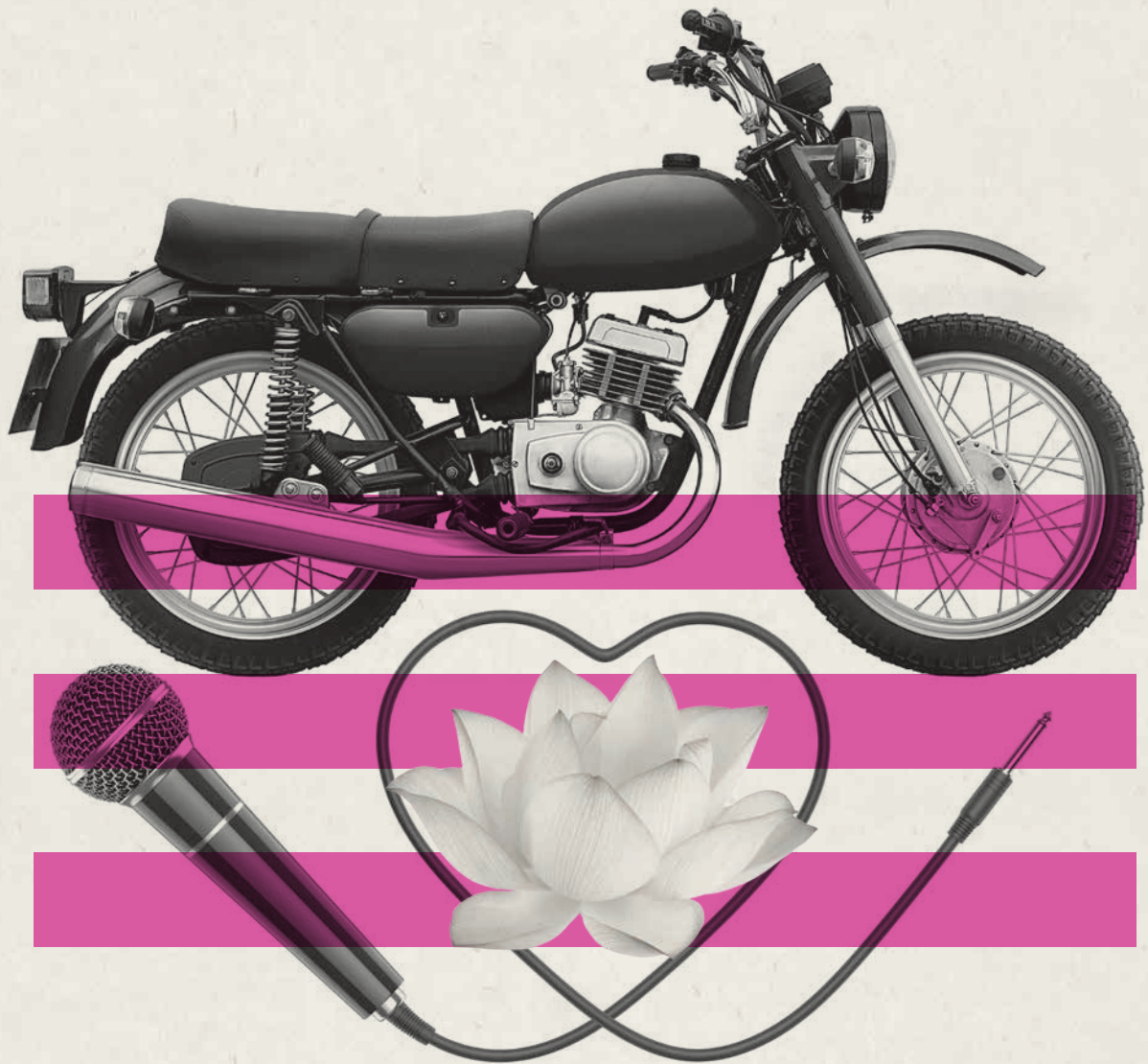


GUTHRIE  
THEATER

60 YEARS

# Play Guide

2022-2023 SEASON



# Vietgone

# Inside



## Vietgone

by QUI NGUYEN  
original music by SHANE RETTIG  
directed by MINA MORITA  
September 10 – October 16, 2022  
Wurtele Thrust Stage

### THE PLAY

Synopsis, Setting and Characters • 4  
Responses to the Play • 5  
Pronunciation Guide • 6

### THE PLAYWRIGHT

About Qui Nguyen • 7  
In His Own Words • 8

### CULTURAL CONTEXT

A Brief Summary of the Vietnam War (1959–1975) • 9  
Immigration of Vietnamese Refugees • 10  
Glossary of Terms • 11  
Poetry by Ánh-Hoa Thị Nguyễn • 12

### EDUCATION RESOURCES

Discussion Questions and Classroom Activities • 15

### ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

For Further Reading and Understanding • 17



818 South 2nd Street, Minneapolis, MN 55415  
ADMINISTRATION 612.225.6000  
BOX OFFICE 612.377.2224 or 1.877.447.8243 (toll-free)  
guthrietheater.org • Joseph Haj, Artistic Director

The Guthrie creates transformative theater experiences that ignite the imagination, stir the heart, open the mind and build community through the illumination of our common humanity.

## Guthrie Theater Play Guide

Copyright 2022

GRAPHIC DESIGNER Brian Bressler  
EDITOR Johanna Buch  
CONTRIBUTORS Anna Crace, Sebastian Grim,  
Cody Kour, Ánh-Hoa Thị Nguyễn, Keely Wolter

All rights reserved. With the exception of classroom use by teachers and individual personal use, no part of this play guide may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publishers. Some materials are written especially for our guide. Others are reprinted by permission of their publishers.

The Guthrie Theater receives support from the National Endowment for the Arts. This activity is made possible in part by the Minnesota State Arts Board, through an appropriation by the Minnesota State Legislature. The Minnesota State Arts Board received additional funds to support this activity from the National Endowment for the Arts.





PHOTO: HYUNMIN RHEE AS QUANG AND EMJOY GAVINO AS TONG (DAN NORMAN)

## About This Guide

This play guide is designed to fuel your curiosity and deepen your understanding of a show's history, meaning and cultural relevance so you can make the most of your theatergoing experience. You might be reading this because you fell in love with a show you saw at the Guthrie. Maybe you want to read up on a play before you see it onstage. Or perhaps you're a fellow theater company doing research for an upcoming production. We're glad you found your way here, and we encourage you to dig in and mine the depths of this extraordinary story.

**NOTE:** Sections of this play guide may evolve throughout the run of the show, so check back often for additional content.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Thanks for your interest in *Vietgone*. Please direct literary inquiries to Dramaturg Anna Crace at [anna\\_crace@live.com](mailto:anna_crace@live.com).



REHEARSAL PHOTOS: FAR LEFT: HYUNMIN RHEE AND EMJOY GAVINO; LEFT: ERIC SHARP; ABOVE: ERIC SHARP, REBECCA HIROTA AND VIET VO (AARON THOMAS)

## Synopsis

“This is not a story about war — it’s a story about falling in love.”

– Playwright in *Vietgone*

It’s 1975, Saigon has fallen and Quang and Tong find themselves refugees in the strange American land of Arkansas. This kind-of-true love story follows Playwright Qui Nguyen’s parents as they navigate the journey from Vietnam to the U.S. amidst the backdrop of the Vietnam War. Tong brings her mother, Huong, to America, and Quang brings his best friend, Nhan, but both grapple with the loss of the family they’ve left behind — for Tong, her brother, Khue, and almost-fiance, Giai, and for Quang, his wife and kids.

At a refugee camp in Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, Quang and Tong meet and quickly fall in like (or maybe love). But they have separate ambitions: Tong is looking ahead to her life in America while Quang is desperately trying to get back to Vietnam. The pull of his family leads Quang to take an epic road trip across America with Nhan to Camp Pendleton in California. Meanwhile, Tong remains in Arkansas, flirting with the idea of dating Bobby, a U.S. Marine. Will the realities of life back in Vietnam become too much for Quang, and will he get back to Tong in time? [G](#)

### SETTING

Saigon and Arkansas, 1975.  
Arkansas, 2015.

### CHARACTERS

**Quang**, a helicopter pilot during the Vietnam War

**Tong**, a Vietnamese refugee

**Huong**, Tong’s mother

**Nhan**, Quang’s best friend

**Thu**, Quang’s wife

**Khue**, Tong’s brother

**Giai**, Tong’s almost-fiance

**Bobby**, an American soldier

**Playwright**, son of Quang and Tong

**Various supporting characters, including American Guy, American Girl, Asian Guy, Asian Girl, Captain Chambers, Flower Girl, Hippie Dude, Ninjas, Protestors, Redneck Biker and Translator**

# Responses to the Play

## The New York Times

For positive proof that in certain realms of theater, we have moved firmly beyond political correctness, see *Vietgone*, a raucous comedy by Qui Nguyen that strafes just about every subject it tackles and every character it presents. Sure, sometimes it wobbles uncertainly between satire and sentiment, but Mr. Nguyen's fresh and impish voice rarely lets up as he thumbs his nose at our expectations.

### Charles Isherwood

"Review: *Vietgone*, a Refugee Tale With Laughs and Rap,"  
*The New York Times*, October 25, 2016



Playwright Qui Nguyen usually describes his show, *Vietgone*, as a "sex comedy" about his parents. He also acknowledges that's a strange thing to do.

The play *does* have a lot of sex in it. There are raunchy jokes, and the characters frequently and unabashedly lust after one another and act on those desires. Nguyen said he wanted to make his characters — fictional Vietnamese refugees based on his parents — three-dimensional.

"It's something that you don't see very often in American media, where Asian characters are sexy; and when they're sexy, they're a fetish of a sort," said Nguyen. ...

The play is not exactly about sex. Neither is it just a love story about his parents. It's about being displaced from home and family. It's about the struggle to start a new life in a new place, and it arrives in the theater at a time when refugees and immigrants are at the center of a contentious presidential race.

### NPR "Morning Edition"

October 14, 2016

## South Coast Repertory

Swordfights, giant dragon puppets and an inexplicable sense of humor are hallmarks of a Qui Nguyen play. *The New York Times* described his infectious style as "culturally savvy comedy." While his play *Vietgone*, premiering at South Coast Repertory, doesn't have a sword fight or a dragon puppet, it does retain that Nguyen charm as he delves into the more personal story of how his parents met in Arkansas at a Vietnamese refugee camp. *Vietgone* strikes a balance between what South Coast Repertory audiences are familiar seeing onstage and an exciting new approach to a romantic comedy.

### South Coast Repertory Blog

"Unexpected Inspirations: Qui Nguyen," August 21, 2015

## BROOKLYN RAIL

*Vietgone* was written in response to a commission from South Coast Repertory, one of the few theaters in the nation that commissions a playwright to write whatever they want. Qui always knew that he wanted to write about his parents, though he had assumed he wouldn't tell their story until he was far more "mature." But something happened. Part of the commission at South Coast included going into the Orange County community for inspiration. Turns out Orange County has the largest population of Vietnamese in the nation, and there he discovered photographs of the Arkansas refugee camp where his parents met. That sealed it. He had no choice: His parents' story would be told now, in all his "immaturity," Vampire Cowboys style. [G](#)

### Trista Baldwin

"Sounding Like Qui Nguyen: *Vietgone*," *The Brooklyn Rail*, October 2016

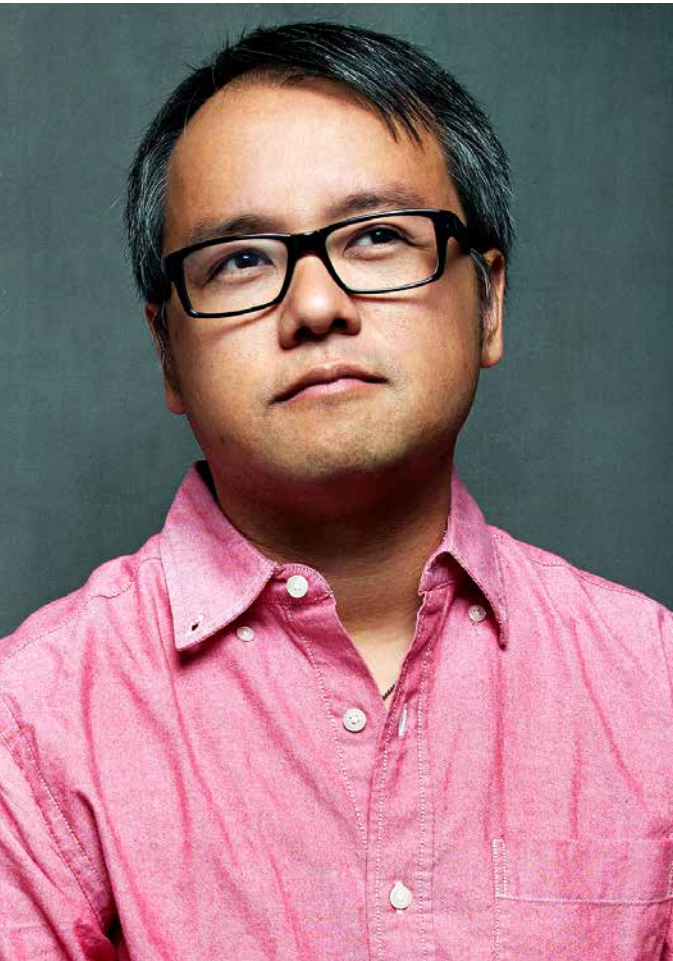


# Pronunciation Guide

By Keely Wolter  
Vocal Coach

Qui	[kwi]	kwee
Tong	[ton]	tone (the “t” specifically hits the back of the teeth)
Tong Thi Tran	[ton ti tʃæn]	tone-tee-chan
Quang	[gwan]	gw-ahn
Nguyen	[gwɪn]	gw-ihn
Giai	[zɑɪ]	zai
Nhan	[nan]	n-ahn
Thu	[tu]	th/tu (this “th” hits the back of the teeth, technically a “dentalized t”)
Huong	[huʌŋ]	hu-uhng
Khue	[kwei]	kway
Mo Duc	[məʊ dʊ]	mow du
Bic	[bɪ]	bih (with a glottal stop replacing the final consonant)
Trang	[tʃæŋ]	chang
Quyên	[ku jən]	koo yen
Muu	[mu:]	moo
Pham	[fæm]	fam (rhymes with “ham”)
Loc	[lɔ]	law (with a glottal stop replacing the final consonant)
Nha Trang	[njæ tʃʌŋ]	nya chung
Bao Loc	[baʊ lɔ]	bow law (with a glottal stop replacing the final “c”)
Vung Tao	[vʊŋ tau]	voong tau
Soc Trang	[sɔ tʃæŋ]	saw chang (the “c” is replaced by a glottal stop)
Elgin Air Force Base	[egln]	egg-lynn
Lackland Air Force Base	[læklənd]	lack-lund

# About Qui Nguyen



Qui Nguyen is a playwright, television/film writer and Co-Founder of the Obie Award-winning Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company.

Born in El Dorado, Arkansas, to Quang and Tong Nguyen, he grew up the eldest of three sons in one of only two Asian families in a primarily African American neighborhood. Throughout his childhood, he was fascinated by different types of storytelling and enjoyed devouring comic books (*Spider-Man* in particular), watching martial arts films (especially those involving Bruce Lee) and participating in freestyle rap battles. These interests developed into a love of theater that led him to study acting at Louisiana Tech University, where Nguyen decided that instead of playing stereotypes written for Asian actors, he would create his own. He went on to earn a master's degree in playwriting from Ohio University.

Known for his innovative use of pop culture, stage violence, puppetry and multimedia, Nguyen's numerous and eclectic plays include *Vietgone*, *Poor Yella Rednecks* (a follow-up to *Vietgone*), the Dungeons & Dragons comedy *She Kills Monsters*, the action comedy *Six Rounds of Vengeance*, the action drama *Soul Samurai* and the Shakespearean zombie comedy *Living Dead in Denmark*. In 2016, Nguyen received the Steinberg New Play Award for *Vietgone* and a Daytime Emmy Award for Outstanding Writing in a Preschool Animated Program for "Peg + Cat." He has also written for Marvel Studios and Walt Disney Animation Studios, where he introduced an original superhero in 2020 with *Raya and the Last Dragon*.

A driving force behind Nguyen's work and his theater company is the desire to create substantial roles for minority actors and specialize in "geek theater" — a phrase coined by theater producer (and Nguyen's wife) Abby Marcus — which, in their own words, "creates and produces new works of theater based in action/adventure and dark comedy with a comic book aesthetic." Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company holds the unique distinction of being the first and only professional theater organization to be officially sponsored by New York Comic Con, and its critically acclaimed shows include *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*, *Alice in Slasherland: A Horror Comedy*, *Fight Girl Battle World* and *Men of Steel*, among others.

Learn more at [www.quinguyen.com](http://www.quinguyen.com). 

# In His Own Words

When my parents came to America, they didn't have a filter on how to raise kids. I watched a lot of stuff on TV that was way too inappropriate for me at a very early age. American pop culture was always just a huge part of my whole existence. It also helped to teach me English — I learned to speak by reading comics and seeing cartoons and watching movies where people cuss a lot. That shows up in my work; there's a lot of cuss words. I knew Foxy Brown and Shaft — these were the characters that make up the fertile ground of where my art goes.

## “Rolling the Dice: Qui Nguyen Reveals All”

Ilana Brownstein, [BostonTheatreScene.com](http://BostonTheatreScene.com)

Growing up, every Vietnamese narrative on the planet — from *Platoon* to *Rambo* to *Miss Saigon* — the main protagonist is always a white guy going to Vietnam, and Vietnamese are the bad guys being shot at or the people who need saving. I remember watching those movies as a kid, and I remember how shitty it felt feeling like the alien. They have no agency for their own narrative; all the yellow characters are there to serve the white characters' narrative. In *Vietgone*, I specifically wanted the Asian characters to be their own heroes. ...

There's another version of me watching, an Asian American kid who sees this and says, “Wow, that's a sexy Asian male, a sexy Asian female!” Sexy because they're complex characters, not because they're exotic. ... They're not exoticized. A 14-year-old can look up and see their parents and not have all the baggage that makes my parents and me different, so I wanted to make them sound very modern. ...

In a time when refugees are being so demonized ... it's especially important to remind people that refugees are people. The American story isn't always about people running to America for opportunity; sometimes it's about running away from a place because they're going to die. They still love that place, but they can't be there anymore.

## “*Vietgone* Creator on What It Means to Be an Immigrant in America Today”

Jerry Portwood, *Rolling Stone*, November 30, 2016

My play is about being displaced from home and family. It's about the struggle to start a new life in a new place. And when I wrote it, yes, we were absolutely living in a very different America. So while I may think of *Vietgone* as nothing more than a fun play about my parents, it's obviously more than that now.

I hope that *Vietgone* tells people that all of us are part of the American fabric. And that fabric isn't one shade, one color or one story. What a lot of us are forgetting ... is that we are a country that created itself. And everyone brings a little bit of their story into this giant quilt. I think *Vietgone* should remind us all that America can be better than what it is right now.

## “*Vietgone* playwright: And now, for someone completely different”

John Moore, *Denver Center Blog*, August 22, 2018

I'm just a dude who likes to write funny stories. My writing process isn't magical or intricate. It's more just, what do I like? I did a lot of things in *Vietgone* just because I wanted to, not because there was necessarily any dramatic reason for it.

*Vietgone* is partially a superhero version of my mom and dad. Is my dad that cool? No, he's just a regular guy. Is my mom that much of a feminist and that strong? No, she's fallible, too. But in this thing, he's Superman and she's Wonder Woman. 🇺🇸

## “Arkansas native Qui Nguyen tells refugee parents' story with *Vietgone*”

David Conrads, *Fayetteville Flyer*, March 15, 2018



# A Brief Summary of the Vietnam War (1959–1975)

The Vietnam War was a protracted struggle between the Communist forces of North Vietnam and the allied forces of the U.S. and South Vietnam. The Vietnam War is also known as The American War, The American War in Vietnam, Second Indochina Conflict and Vietnam Conflict. For the purposes of this play guide, we will be referring to the conflict as the Vietnam War.

Vietnam and its people were no strangers to conflict before the Vietnam War. Between 1945 and 1954, the Vietnamese waged an anticolonial war against France, which received \$2.6 billion in financial support from the U.S. The French defeat at the Dien Bien Phu was followed by a peace conference in Geneva. As a result of the conference, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam received their independence, and Vietnam was temporarily divided between an anti-Communist South and a Communist North. In 1956, South Vietnam, with American backing, refused to hold unification elections. By 1958, Communist-led guerrillas, known as the Viet Cong, had begun to battle the South Vietnamese government.

To support the South's government amidst fear of Communism and the domino theory, the U.S. sent in 2,000 military advisers — a number that grew to 16,300 in 1963. The military condition deteriorated, and by 1963, South Vietnam had lost the fertile Mekong Delta to the Viet Cong. In 1965, U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson escalated the war after the North Vietnamese fired directly on two U.S. ships in international waters on August 2 and 4, 1964, commencing air strikes on North Vietnam and committing 536,000 ground forces in 1968. On January 30, 1968, the North Vietnamese launched a surprise attack on 100 South Vietnamese cities and towns known as the Tet Offensive. Although the U.S. and Army of the Republic of Vietnam troops were able to repel the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, it proved that their enemy was stronger and better organized than they had anticipated.

The next U.S. President, Richard Nixon, advocated for Vietnamization, withdrawing American troops and giving South Vietnam greater responsibility for



PHOTO: ERIC SHARP AND HYUNMIN RHEE (DAN NORMAN)

fighting the war. This withdrawal began in July 1969. In 1970, Nixon attempted to slow the flow of North Vietnamese soldiers and supplies into South Vietnam by sending American forces to destroy Communist supply bases in Cambodia. This act violated Cambodian neutrality and provoked antiwar protests on college campuses across the nation.


From 1968 to 1973, efforts were made to end the conflict through diplomacy. On January 27, 1973, an agreement known as the Paris Peace Accords was reached: U.S. forces were withdrawn from Vietnam, and U.S. prisoners of war were released. On April 30, 1975, after continued fighting between North and South Vietnam with little support from the U.S., Saigon fell to the North, and the South surrendered. On July 2, 1976, Vietnam was reunited as a Communist country: the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. 



PHOTO: HYUNMIN RHEE AND ERIC SHARP (DAN NORMAN)

# Immigration of Vietnamese Refugees


The immigration of Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian refugees occurred in three distinctive waves. The first wave, which we see in *Vietgone*, involved relatively affluent, educated and urbanized people in Vietnam who owned property and/or had strong ties to the U.S. government through the military or the embassy in Saigon. Many were pro-capitalism and anti-Communist, which meant their lives would be in danger if they stayed in Vietnam under Communist rule.

Once it was evident to the U.S. that the North Vietnamese would take Saigon, they began evacuating approximately 140,000 Vietnamese people. Many were evacuated before the Fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, but those who were not evacuated participated in Operation Frequent Wind, which was the final aerial evacuation of Saigon by helicopter ordered by President Gerald Ford.

The first wave of Vietnamese refugees were set up to succeed in a very different way than the following two waves, which occurred in the late 1970s and then in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1975, the U.S. was dealing with its own internal fallout from the Vietnam War, and there was a strong sense of guilt that helped fund and support refugees at this time.

This fueled the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975, which provided emergency assistance to Vietnamese refugees for the 1975–1976 fiscal year and gave funds to help with their resettlement in America. Federal funding was spread out among U.S. states, and it was up to the specific

state and county offices to determine how the funds were used to help the immigrant communities. In Minnesota, the Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota was instrumental in supporting Vietnamese refugees, including helping them gain citizenship, enroll in school or access further education. There was a semblance of structure to the chaos that was not found in the later waves. In the late 1970s, around 120,000 refugees escaped Vietnam by boat and consisted largely of rural Vietnamese people and many ethnically Chinese. The third wave consisted of a steady trickle of refugees from the late 1980s to the early 1990s, which was largely driven by family reunification and continued economic dislocation.

There are many Vietnamese refugees and children of refugees living in Minnesota today. However, there is no singular immigrant story of leaving Vietnam. Although history defines these three waves, each family left Vietnam in very different ways. You can find more stories from Southeast Asian refugees through the [University of Minnesota's Immigration History Research Center](#). 

# Glossary of Terms



## ARVN

Acronym for the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam's army).

## DAO

Acronym for Defense Attache Offices, which operate from U.S. embassies around the world and perform representational functions on behalf of the Secretary of Defense and other government entities.

## Demilitarized Zone (DMZ)

The line that divided North Vietnam and South Vietnam at the 17th parallel. This dividing line was agreed upon as a temporary border at the 1954 Geneva Accords.

## domino theory

Named after the chain reaction that occurs when one domino is pushed over, this U.S. foreign policy theory states that one country in a region that falls to Communism will lead to surrounding countries also falling to Communism.

## DRV

Acronym for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (Communist North Vietnam).

## gook

A derogatory slang term for the Viet Cong.

## Ho Chi Minh Trail

Supply paths from North Vietnam to South Vietnam that traveled through Cambodia and Laos to supply the Communist forces fighting in South Vietnam. Because the paths were mostly outside of Vietnam, the U.S. (under President Lyndon B. Johnson) did not bomb or attack the Ho Chi Minh Trail for fear of expanding the conflict to other countries.

## NLF

Acronym for the National Liberation Front (Communist guerrilla forces in South Vietnam, also known as Viet Cong).

## NVA

Acronym for the North Vietnamese Army (officially called the People's Army of Vietnam or PAVN).

## RVN

Acronym for the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam).

## Viet Cong (VC)

The Communist guerrilla forces in South Vietnam (also known as the National Liberation Front).

## Viet Minh

Shortened term for the Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi (League for the Independence of Vietnam), the organization established by Ho Chi Minh in 1941 to gain independence for Vietnam from France.


## Vietnamization

The process of withdrawing U.S. troops from Vietnam and turning over all fighting to the South Vietnamese. This was part of President Richard Nixon's plan to end U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.

## VNAF

Acronym for the Republic of Vietnam's Air Force.

## VOLAG

An abbreviation for "Voluntary Agency" used to describe U.S. volunteer groups that helped find sponsors for refugees. 



# Poetry by Ánh-Hoa Thị Nguyễn



Ánh-Hoa Thị Nguyễn is a poet, community artist, activist and educator based in the Twin Cities. She holds an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Mills College in Oakland, California. Her work has been published in a variety of literary journals, magazines and anthologies, including *As Is: A Collection of Visual and Literary Works by Vietnamese American Artists* and *Troubling Borders: An Anthology of Art and Literature by Southeast Asian Women in the Diaspora*. Most recently, her food essay “Buy 10 Get 1 Free! Open Letter to Bánh Mì Wanna Be’s” appeared in *What We Hunger For*. Nguyễn has been a scholar for the Minnesota Humanities Center and an artist-in-residence for The Floating Library with her project *Waves Enfolding: A Paper Memorial* that honored lives lost during the Vietnamese refugee waves of 1954 and after the war in Vietnam and Southeast Asia (1975–1992). Nguyễn is currently a member of She Who Has No Master(s), a collective of women and gender-nonconforming writers of the Vietnamese diaspora.

Enjoy two of her poems, and learn more about her work at [dvan.org/author/anhhoanguyen](http://dvan.org/author/anhhoanguyen).

## FORSAKEN ONES

*For Vietnamese spirits lost at sea*

Sun searing salt on lips.

Tongues betray captive in mouths.

No words to will no will to speak.

Souls float an illusive fog

In hulls of skin.

Ribs like reeds fragile as fingers cupping water.

For weeks.

For weeks.

You are still. You are silent. You are breath upon breath.

Bones bowing bodies bifurcating.

You is a collective stench a collective stifling.

You long for the smoke of incense broil of charcoal exhaust of motorbikes.

Strands of hair scented with sand.

Remember the smell of safety.

You beg for rain.

*Please.*

*Please.*

*Please.*

You pray. You promise. You plead.

The hunger tightening all you crave.

Food.

Family.

Freedom.

Clawing you inside.

So loud this siren of sacrifice. Suffering.

So loud it makes you want.

To swim.

# STOP. TIME. BEFORE.

*For Tommy Le & His Family*

Stop.

Time.                      Before.                      The bullet.

You.                                      Were time.                      Before.                      Stop.

Time.                      Seconds.                      Before.                                      You were.

Before.                                      The bullet.                      Stop.

Time.

I.

*Your life was stolen before you were born.*

                    An invisible chain                      of labor                      pulled you from the womb.

Our ancestors' blood burned

                    streams of lava searing constellations

    scarring the map of our histories.

The sweetness of your eyes have roots in the ashy soil of Hawaii,

                    the cruel cane of Cuba,

    the smoked earth of Louisiana.

*Bodies so brown they were black, too.*

                    This was time before.

    Before you were born.

*Their history is never our history.*

II.

*Before time*                      your youth was tapped                      like rubber from a tree.

                    Starved of the rice                      from your own                      seeds.

                    For centuries

*you were not the owner*

    of your life.

This chain                      your mother gave you

                    the gold of sacrifice

    hanging around her neck.

*This is your worth*

bought back

now buried.

*Their truth is never our truth.*

III.

*It has never been a fair fight.*

You with a pen in hand.

The Western hero with the gun.

*What were they so afraid of?*

With their Atomic Bombs  
Dumb Bombs  
Guided Bombs  
Cluster Bombletts  
Fuel Air Explosives  
Fuel Air Bombs  
Hand Combat  
Weapons  
Pistols and Revolvers  
Infantry Rifles  
Sniper/Marksman Rifles  
Submachine Guns  
Shotguns  
Machine Guns  
Grenades and Mines  
Agent Orange  
  
Torture

*Before your time.*

You were in the line of fire a line so long it seems infinite.

Your life annihilated another line of lines

in the paper in the streets in the lies in the crimes in the fields in the shrines.

IV.

I will light incense for you.

I will pick up your pen.

I will use it as my weapon.

I will carve your memory in my skin.

I will sow the seeds of your story.

*Savor your smile like sugar.* 

These poems were previously published in the *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement*.



# Discussion Questions and Classroom Activities

In addition to the resources below, we recommend watching this 2015 conversation between Playwright Qui Nguyen and Director May Adrales ahead of *Vietgone*'s 2016 run at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Together, they discuss the play's journey from page to stage.

Scan the QR code to watch with your students on YouTube.



“[*Vietgone* is] a love story. It’s a romantic comedy about my parents — about how they got together in 1975 in a refugee camp in Arkansas. ... I think everyone has a family story they want to tell. I think everyone has an interesting family story, right? I guess being a playwright, I get the opportunity to tell those stories out loud and have people hear them.”

– Playwright Qui Nguyen on *Vietgone*

## A LABOR OF LOVE: RESHAPING THE STRUCTURE OF A PLAY

Traditionally, stories unfold linearly, with one event leading to the next and the next until the story is wrapped up neatly at the end. However, in *Vietgone*, Nguyen chooses a different story structure that jumps around in time and place. Thinking about memory and how it is often scattered and moves fluidly between the past and present, he incorporates these ideas into the narrative structure of *Vietgone* to create a unique method of storytelling.

### Discussion Questions

- This play tells us a love story by skipping around in time, utilizing flashbacks and having scenes that transition between the past and present. Why do you think Nguyen decided to tell this story out of order? What effect does it have?
- At the start of the play, Nguyen wrote the Playwright character to address the audience and discuss the fictitious nature of the play, which we know is based on the true story of his parents meeting at a refugee camp in Arkansas. How do added embellishments or mythmaking augment the nature of “truth” in a story? Why not tell the story exactly as it happened?
- Breaking the fourth wall helps draw the audience into the story and humanizes the characters onstage. How do you feel about characters breaking the fourth wall? Does it distract or enhance your viewing experience?

### Classroom Activity

Invite the students to think about an interesting story in their family detailing how their parents, grandparents or other older family members found each other, and instruct them to write it down in a short, three-paragraph love story. Have the students pair up with a partner and share their stories with each other.

Next, have each student tell their partner’s story back to them with embellished details — think about time skips, characterization, breaking the fourth wall or other fantastical storytelling elements. Discuss how the changes affected the entertainment value of the story, the “truth” of what happened and its overall emotional impact. What did the students notice?



PHOTOS: LEFT: REBECCA HIROTA, HYUNMIN RHEE AND EMJOY GAVINO; CENTER: ERIC SHARP, VIET VO AND HYUNMIN RHEE; RIGHT: EMJOY GAVINO (DAN NORMAN)

## REMIXING THE STORY: A REFLECTION ON MUSIC

Music plays such an integral role in our lives. We use it as an escape from our troubles, motivation to focus on a task or simply to make our days more enjoyable. In *Vietgone*, Nguyen added hip-hop, spoken word and rap songs because those are his favorite genres of music. While this play is not a traditional musical, music certainly plays a central role in moving the plot forward and developing the characters.

### Discussion Questions

- What can musical moments in theater reveal about the characters? How does the addition of music and song in a play affect the storytelling?
- Think about your favorite songs or music genres. How do you feel about music as a form of self-expression? What sets music apart as an art form?
- What do you feel is the difference between a play with music and a musical?

### Classroom Activity

Ask the students to reflect on their favorite genre of music and pick a song they enjoy. Have them examine the lyrics of the song: What is it about? Who is it about? What story is being told through the words? How does the song enhance its story using musical elements like melody, rhythm and dynamics? Ask them to write about how the musical elements work with the lyrics to tell the story and then compare and contrast their findings in small groups.

## BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS: HUMOR AND LANGUAGE

Nguyen uses humor and language in some very specific ways in *Vietgone*. With the shifting of accents and dialects, his portrayal of English versus Vietnamese and the stilted interactions between characters, he displays how difficult it can be to traverse a language barrier. Humor is also central, as it humanizes the characters and gives levity to otherwise uncomfortable or heavy topics and situations.

### Discussion Questions

- This play uses satire, caricature and humor to discuss topics such as war, discrimination and alienation. How have you seen media utilize humor in similar ways?
- What are some ways that we communicate with each other when a common language isn't an option? How does this reveal the complexities in how we communicate with one another?
- How can we interrogate the nature of truth through humor?

### Classroom Activity


Choose a recent major historical event (e.g., global pandemic, climate change, scientific advancements, political races). Ask the students to reflect on the humor surrounding discussions of your chosen event, which could be in the form of memes, political cartoons, TikTok videos, comedy sketches and more. Invite them to free write on how humor helps to open our perspectives, understand different viewpoints or process an event. Invite the students to share their discoveries with the class. 



PHOTO: HYUNMIN RHEE, REBECCA HIROTA, ERIC SHARP, VIET VO AND ENJOY GAVINO (DAN NORMAN)

## For Further Reading and Understanding

### BOOKS

*South Vietnamese Soldiers: Memories of the Vietnam War and After* by Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen.

*The Vietnamese Experience in America* by Paul Rutledge.

*The Fall of South Vietnam: Statements by Military and Civilian Leaders* by Stephen T. Hosmer, Konrad Kellen and Brian M. Jenkins.

*Vietnamerica: A Family's Journey* by GB Tran.

*The Refugees* by Viet Thanh Nguyen.

*A Different Pond* by Bao Phi.

*Quiet as They Come* by Angie Chau.

*The Gangster We Are All Looking For* by Le Thi Diem Thuy.

*The Best We Could Do: An Illustrated Memoir* by Thi Bui.

*Night Sky With Exit Wounds* by Ocean Vuong.

*Not Here* by Hieu Minh Nguyen.

### ARTICLES

"Minnesotans' refugee stories, 40 years after the Fall of Saigon" by Elizabeth Venditto and Erika Lee. *Star Tribune*, April 29, 2015.

[www.startribune.com/minnesotans-refugee-stories-40-years-after-the-fall-of-saigon/301752061/](http://www.startribune.com/minnesotans-refugee-stories-40-years-after-the-fall-of-saigon/301752061/)

"Into the American Jungle: 44 years later, refugees return to Arkansas, revisit 1st U.S. steps" by Bill Bowden. *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*, June 20, 2019.

[www.arkansasonline.com/news/2019/jun/20/44-years-later-refugees-revisit-1st-u-s/](http://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2019/jun/20/44-years-later-refugees-revisit-1st-u-s/)

"Emerald Voices: Chú Tuấn" by Sharon H. Chang. *South Seattle Emerald*, August 30, 2017.

[www.southseattleemerald.com/2017/08/30/emerald-voices-chu-tuan](http://www.southseattleemerald.com/2017/08/30/emerald-voices-chu-tuan)

"We Ran for Seven Days" by Xai Phia Yang. *Minnesota Remembers Vietnam: The Story Wall*, PBS.

[www.mnvietnam.org/story/we-ran-for-7-days](http://www.mnvietnam.org/story/we-ran-for-7-days)

### FILM

*The Vietnam War*, a 10-part documentary series by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick. PBS. 18 hours.

[www.pbs.org/kenburns/the-vietnam-war](http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/the-vietnam-war)

### PODCAST

"CNI Unplugged: Qui Nguyen!" *Comic News Insider*, Episode 1158.

[www.comicnewsinsider.com/2021/03/episode-1158-cni-unplugged-qui-nguyen.html](http://www.comicnewsinsider.com/2021/03/episode-1158-cni-unplugged-qui-nguyen.html)

### LOCAL RESOURCES

**Minnesota Vietnamese Language School.** Established in August 2013 with the goal of contributing to the maintenance and dissemination of Vietnamese language and culture.

[www.vietngumn.org](http://www.vietngumn.org)

**Theater Mu.** Produces great performances born of arts, equity and justice from the heart of the Asian American experience.

[www.theatermu.org](http://www.theatermu.org)

**Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota.** Video collection of Southeast Asian Refugee Stories that provides unique, firsthand accounts of the wars in Southeast Asia, the difficulty and dangers of life as a refugee, the vast resettlement bureaucracy and the communities refugees and their families built in the U.S.

[cla.umn.edu/ihrcc/immigrant-stories/story-collections/southeast-asian-refugee-stories](http://cla.umn.edu/ihrcc/immigrant-stories/story-collections/southeast-asian-refugee-stories)

**Minnesota Remembers Vietnam: The Story Wall.** A Minnesota PBS initiative that uplifts stories about the Vietnam War from across the state.

[www.mnvietnam.org](http://www.mnvietnam.org)