

At Secret's End

**Review of *American Hmong: A Memoir Play*
--a solo stage performance by Teng Yang**

Reviewed By

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At the modest *Rites and Reason* black box theater at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, I had the privilege of watching – indeed being caught up in – an extraordinary one-man show, *American Hmong*, staged by Teng Yang of Milwaukee as he graduated with a Bachelors degree in Ethnic Studies. The performance was a *tour de force*, as Mr. Yang deftly played a disparate collection of characters, including both his father and his mother, himself at various ages, as well as Tou Ger Xiong and Fong Lee in the notorious police shooting scandal. The script used a multimedia pastiche approach, cobbling together Yang's self-authored script with video footage, audio recordings, press releases and a sampling of musics. Every aspect of the show was produced by Yang, from the written script to staging and choreography, to sound and lighting, to costume and make-up, to the raw, honest acting drawn straight from the core of his being. Not only did Yang perform in many roles, deftly changing costumes right on stage with strategic blackouts, oscillating seamlessly between Hmong and English, but he danced, sang both *kvv txhiaj* and a soulful Hmong lullabye, and told Hmong folktales in the voice of an experienced elder. The result was a stunning fusion of artistic soul with professionalism that kept the audience on the emotional edge of their seats for well over

an hour. We laughed, cried, got the chills, and were called out of ourselves into the acute feeling tones of a dispersed people in their transitional generations.

Brown University – known as having been the first Ivy to admit Hmong students in the 1970s and to have consistently admitted more than other elite schools since - is famously supportive of creative, synthetic projects, of undergraduates crafting outside-the-box combinations; this dramatic product constituted Yang's honors thesis. The play showcased the self-designed dovetailing of arts with academic studies that Yang had wrought over his four years of Ivy League study, years in which he acted in over a dozen shows, traveled the world performing with the elite *a cappella* men's singing group the Jabberwocks, and studied classical acting for a semester at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts, all the while training in and beyond the classroom on the politics of U.S. minorities. Indeed, one could say that Yang, who most recently played the lead role Valentin in *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*, fashioned the fact of his coming from an underprivileged, urban family of twenty siblings and having enrolled at a top tier East coast university into the starting premise of his dramatized reflection. Redolent with pathos and filiality, it documents the monumental quantity of roads traveled by those Hmong of Laos who became Americans within a generation, and the challenges of assembling a memory repertoire that would prevent youth like himself from leaving their pasts in the dust.

Responsible to his origins, Yang reminds us: Beginning in the early 1960s, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) recruited and trained over 30,000 Hmong to fight in the Laotian theater of the Viet Nam War. These guerilla soldiers and pilots, who were clandestine because Laos was officially neutral territory, were employed to resist

communist Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese incursions into their homelands and help block the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Many – too, too many, as Yang laments - risked or sacrificed their lives in ground combat or on missions to rescue downed American pilots. In a gruesome example of the discrepant valuation of human life that has marked so many U.S. imperial ventures, ten Hmong men might be sent on a life-threatening expedition to retrieve one American pilot--who was already dead. Yang persuades us of just how horrific was this scenario by portraying his own father reluctantly picking up a gun in order to stay alive, and by making palpable the heartstopping fear of navigating those jungles as footsoldiers during an air war. Never before have I grasped with so much empathy the centrality of fear to the Hmong war history: in a thoughtful evocation, Yang suggests how unwilling Hmong soldiers were tightly hedged in – both intimidated to secure their participation and terrified when they agreed to combat.

As we know, in the course of this covert operation, later known as the “Secret War,” Laos was bombed more than any other place on earth to date. To this day, small cluster bombs litter the fields and mountains of that tiny country as unexploded ordinance that is tripped off by a child’s skip or a farmer’s footfall and still claims limbs and lives of those trying to make their futures in a country ravaged by a proxy war. An international treaty to ban this form of weapon was signed in 2008, but the U.S. refused to be a signatory. Yang uses the motif of haunting to evoke the waves of emotional aftershock experienced not only by those former Hmong soldiers, but also by their children who are chased by angry ghosts all the way to the American cornfields. But the work is more than an exploration of the psychic contours of trauma; at another level it is

a political wake-up call, an intimation that the U.S. itself should not imagine it can escape being haunted by the spectres of the Viet Nam war.

The U.S. withdrew precipitously from Laos in 1975, and as a consequence of that superpower relinquishing of the Lao “domino,” thousands of Hmong faced fierce reprisals and became political refugees trekking across mountains and swimming the Mekong River that bordered Thailand, with devastating attrition of innocent lives through drowning, hunger and other dangers. After sojourning in refugee camps like Ban Vinai, where Yang was born and where he takes us back in his evocation of an indomitable young boy’s imaginative play, many sought resettlement in the United States and made their lives in cities and towns across America.

Boyhood then expands onto the streets of Milwaukee: Yang guides us through the ‘hood as an immense playground for more brothers than he can count on two hands, mischievously crushing their Mom’s garden of precious Hmong herbs as they discover football play. Playground, yes, but fear returns, creeping up as the immigrant boy comes of age, and as realization dawns that he is a man of color on violent turf. How will he fashion a masculinity with fidelity to the ethics of his patriline conjoined with street savvy about how to avoid getting attacked or killed as the newcomer on the block in a blighted metropolis where resources are scarce?

Yang, as the autobiographical story recounts, steps up. He packs a suitcase and leaves the ‘hood. Should he feel guilty that he leaves for a distant college, one that would make his parents inestimably proud if only they understood? How can he leave without forsaking all they are? In his real life, Yang solved this conundrum by returning to listen and recall and learn anew, even apprenticing himself to elders to practice the oral

storytelling genre which he had never before known how to do. His method for creating the script was what his professor calls "Research to Performance Method." Through it he captures their voices and personalities with fidelity and brings them to distant ears.

American Hmong, then, delves deep into the perilous stakes of forgetting and remembering the legacy of a war that has so indelibly marked the Hmong diaspora. For the Lao war remains for many a well-kept secret, and Hmong endure daily invisibilities and misrecognitions on American soil. Indeed, Yang's work deftly talks back to the latest incarnation of this invisibility, Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino*, whose plot is driven by the white American lead's Korean War veteranhood, but which - with no mature male Hmong characters - consigns the gritty tarnished history of real Hmong veteranhood in Southeast Asia to an abyss of obscurity.

In the final lines of the drama, Yang's character apologizes in a somewhat elliptical fashion that lets the audience know that in fact the whole piece stands as a kind of apology, an urgently necessary ritual by which he chastens his wide-eyed generation. How? Two related meanings - that of the immigrant, and that of the citizen - intertwine. Yang has become American. His apology is the strongest indication of this. Forgetting Hmong history is forgetting Viet Nam. It is myopically forgetting the long reach of American empire so that every U. S. war seems to have its own logic, its own naive *raison d'être*. It is breaking the links of history, links that bind us between generations and knit us together irrevocably across the Pacific in a dirty secret.

Remembering his parents' pain, their experiences, and listening with his whole heart, by contrast, is loyally remembering the conditions that allowed Yang to accede to Americanness --conditions that included extraterritorial invasion, reckless bombing,

unjustified sacrifice in the form of injuries and fatalities, and capricious exit, creating nothing but exile for America's Hmong allies. Letting himself see the ghosts, making himself look them in the eye, Yang owns his responsibility to remember.

But even as Yang dutifully remembers as an immigrant son, so, as a citizen of an American metropolis with all its racial agonisms, he also must own even more. The tenderly wrought tapestry of Yang's script suggests a chilling continuity. Why have Hmong young men been mowed down over and over again by police in confrontations with shady circumstances? Why have so many of these police officers gotten off? What are the consequences for a barely visible people who arrive on American turf and suffer having violence, lawlessness and cultural misfit ascribed to them relentlessly? Can Yang compel us to see the co-implication of the ostensibly playful, but bitingly disparaging, KDWB radio song about Hmong Americans and their ghastly racialized executions?

Yang apologizes, then, because he finally knows that which his parents have acutely felt since they were conscripted into war so many decades ago. That the unjust deaths of Hmong soldiers in Laos were *of a piece* with the unjust deaths of Hmong boys suspected of gangsterhood. And that - as an Asian American man, educated and more empowered - if he doesn't name this, Yang too becomes culpable. *American Hmong*, then, is a staging of historicized conscience.

Teng Yang remained in Providence after graduation and currently works as a college advisor for underprivileged high schoolers through the National College Advising Corps. American Hmong: A Memoir Play is available to be booked as an event in venues across the U.S. Please contact Yang at tengyang89@gmail.com.

About the Author:

Louisa Schein teaches Anthropology, Women's and Gender Studies and Asian American Studies at Rutgers University and is one of the founding members of the Collective for Critical Hmong Studies. She has worked with Hmong Americans for three decades, has done longterm fieldwork in China on the Miao and is author of *Minority Rules: The Miao and the Feminine in China's Cultural Politics*. (Duke 2000) She is currently writing a book, *Rewind to Home: Hmong Media and Gendered Diaspora*. She has been involved in two documentary films *Better Places: Hmong of Rhode Island a Generation Later* (Sequel to *The Best Place to Live*, both with Peter O'Neill), 2012, and one in production on Hmong health and healing issues with Va-Megn Thoj. Recently, she has worked with Thoj and Bee Vang on activist projects directed at the after-effects of *Gran Torino*. She also contributes on arts and media to popular press outlets such as *Hmong Today*.

