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'KUNG FU ZOMBIES VS. CANNIBALS' DELIVERS AS PROMISED

ROB CALLAHAN | Updated 10/14/2013

Review: Genre blender set in the dark, dystopian future mixes action, horror and political commentary.

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Payton Woodson, Meghan Kreidler, Maxwell Chonk Thao and Laura Anderson band together against a cannibal hunting party.

As post-apocalyptic settings go, there are few venues better suited to the genre than the Southern Theater. The old stone walls flanking its stage look poised to crumble at any moment, and that state of decay lends itself well to the story taking place onstage. It's the first thing you'll notice going in, and the first on a long list of factors adding up to a truly remarkable show. In other plays, suspension of disbelief ends where set meets venue, but the staged decay of "Kung Fu Zombies Vs. Cannibals" and the actual decay of the Southern merge seamlessly, bringing playwright Saymoukda Duangphouxay Vongsay's debut story to life. To groaning, shambling, flesh-eating life...

"Kung Fu Zombies" is the story of Sika (Meghan Kreidler), a mixed martial artist from northeast Minneapolis who whips out her sword and relieves her enemies of their heads whenever the need arises. The action takes place while Sika makes her way her way through a ghoulish future world on a quest to return her parents' remains to their ancestral homeland. Along the way she struggles with survivor guilt, hopelessness, and identity as she bonds with a small band of survivors high in the mountains of Laos. Together, her group fights to survive in a world overrun with monsters that happen to know kung fu.

Out of context, this is a somewhat hackneyed premise for a kung fu action story, but context is everything in this show. This show has layers. Lots and lots of layers. Like an ogre.

For a start, there are the zombies. True to their Romerian roots, the zombies are a horror



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(http://www.vita.mn/crawl/227692041.html) for a real world problem. This comes out as Sika journeys from the ravaged ruins of the United States to the equally ravaged remains of Laos. The symbolism resides in the contrast between our real, modern Laos and the dystopian future Laos of the play. In our times, Laos holds the unenviable title of most heavily bombed country, per capita, ever. The upshot of which is a nation saturated with unexploded ordnance, where life is already pretty hard. Then it gets harder when the remains of a long dead war rise up and kill without warning. In this sense, the grim dystopian future in which "Kung Fu Zombies" takes place treats the entire world as one big metaphor for Laos, and Vongsay's walking dead are a grimmer and bitterer metaphor than Romero's shopping mall zombies ever were.


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Also, it's a show that asks hard questions: How well will our beliefs hold up after the whole world goes to hell? What good are our senses of identity after the society that shaped them crumbles? Can one generation escape the lingering wounds endured by generations past, or is that sort of fallout hereditary? If it came right down to it, could we unite against our common foe, or is the enemy of my enemy not necessarily my friend? Is it just enemies all the way down? "Kung Fu Zombies" is as much about its titular monsters as it is about posing these questions.

But genre fans in search of lighter fare won't necessarily feel overwhelmed, because ZOMFG KUNG FU ZOMBIES!!!

If you're not paying attention, you'll miss most of the deep, dark and sober stuff, but you can't miss the kung fu or the zombies. There's simply too much of that and they're doing too much to ignore. Fight choreographer Allen Malicsi has put together a series of impressive battles harking back to Kinji Fukasaku's golden age. Some are epic, others are intimate. For instance, when Sika and her rival Arahan (Laura Anderson) square off they do it like Sonny Chiba vs. Bruce Lee, albeit with a hint of slashfic. When it's time for a last stand against the undead horde, it's like the climax of an old Toei film. Each fight scene builds up to a bigger, tougher challenge yet to come, pitting Sika and her band of antiheroes against increasingly impossible challenges as they level up in preparation to face the end boss. Fans of Shogun Assassin (or, for the purists, Lone Wolf and Cub) will delight in a stage play that takes its cues from the same source material that influenced Aaron McGruder and Quentin Tarantino, and accomplishes everything you used to be pretty sure live theater can't do.

Page 1 | 2 (<http://www.vita.mn/crawl/227692041.html?page=2>) | [Next](#)
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Bryan Thao Worra · Following · Grant Writer at Independent Contractor

A great and amazing review by **Rob Callahan** on **Saymoukda Duangphouxay Vongsay's** new play **Kung Fu Zombies vs. Cannibals**. I think it's accurate and perceptive. You don't need to have read this going in to get a great experience out of the play, but if you do, I think he adds some great questions for you to consider and things to watch out for.

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Ketmani Kouanchao · California State University, Fullerton

A great review. Thanks for putting it into context and encouraging people to see it.

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