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## Mu Performing Arts finds unlikely combo in 'Kung Fu Zombies Vs. Cannibals'

Article by: LISA BROCK, Special to the Star Tribune

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REVIEW: The new play at Mu Performing Arts merges deep thoughts with martial arts, a hip-hop beat and comic-book action.

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2 of 4 10/7/14 1:03 AM

Autumn is upon us, and there's a smell of apocalypse in the air. At least that's the case in **Mu Performing Arts**' world premiere of **Saymoukda Duangphouxay Vongsay**'s "**Kung Fu Zombies vs. Cannibals**," which has turned the Southern Theater into an arena for an epic, end-of-times battle between humans and those who desire to make them their dinner.

Vongsay's work is really three plays in one: a coming-of-age story as a young woman makes a pilgrimage from Minneapolis to Laos to discover her place in the world; a morality play in which thoughtful people ponder how to make ethical choices in an unethical world; and a flat-out, knock 'em, sock 'em action thriller with more mixed martial arts demonstrations than you can shake a fighting stick at. All of which transpires to the tune of a driving hip-hop beat provided by onstage DJ **Kool Akiem**.

Sika, played with ferocious energy by **Meghan Kreidler**, is just 15 when solar flares create environmental devastation across the globe and also manage to reanimate the dead. Luckily, she's a student of mixed martial arts, since these zombies have mysteriously acquired Kung Fu skills on their trip back from the grave. She spends 10 years fighting her way from Minneapolis to Laos, in order to lay her parents' ashes to rest in their homeland. Along the way she meets perhaps the oddest assortment of lost souls ever to tread a stage.

There's a lot to enjoy in this unlikely mélange, under Randy Reyes' direction. Jeannie Lander delivers a visceral, over-the-top performance as a tent-revival style preacher espousing a gruesome gospel of cannibalism. Ayden Her is a delight as an unaffectedly adorable 6-year-old refugee, while Maxwell Chonk Thao offers up a hilariously comic and irreverent performance as a wannabe gangbanger turned Buddhist monk. Allen Malicsi's fight choreography is beautifully balletic, introducing startling notes of grace to the fairly gory proceedings.

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That said, "Kung Fu Zombies vs. Cannibals" struggles with tone as it attempts to deliver both a serious moral debate and a broadly drawn, brawling adventure story. Vongsay sketches intriguing parallels between the devastation of this apocalyptic world and the lingering havoc wreaked on Laos during the Vietnam War, but this theme never gets the opportunity to fully develop as it competes with the sheer weight of tangents and styles that overlay the play.

"Kung Fu Zombies vs. Cannibals" may be more effective as an actionpacked comic-book thriller than as a philosophical treatise, but Mu Performing Arts deserves credit for bringing this ambitious new playwright to their stage.

Lisa Brock writes about theater.

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Payton Woodson as Loc, Meghan Kreidler as Sika, Maxwell Chonk Thao as Slim, Laura Anderson as Arahan Michal Daniel KUNG FU ZOMBIES VS. CANNIBALS

Who: By Saymoukda Duangphouxay Vongsay. Directed by Randy Reyes for Mu Performing Arts. Where: Southern Theater, 1420 Washington Av. S., Mpls. When: 7:30 p.m. Thu.-Sat; 2 p.m. Sun. Ends Oct. 27. Tickets: \$22, 651-789-1012.

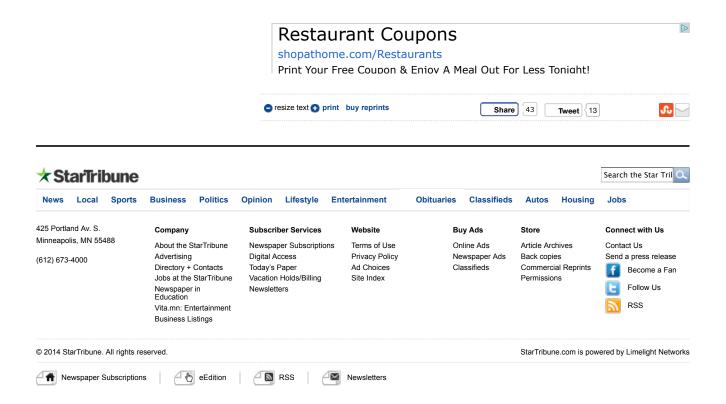
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3 of 4 10/7/14 1:03 AM



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