



A CONVERSATION WITH **VIETGONE** Director Desdemona Chiang

Before the start of rehearsals, members of the Alley Theatre staff got on the phone with Desdemona to learn more about her vision for *Vietgone*. What follows are excerpts from that early conversation.

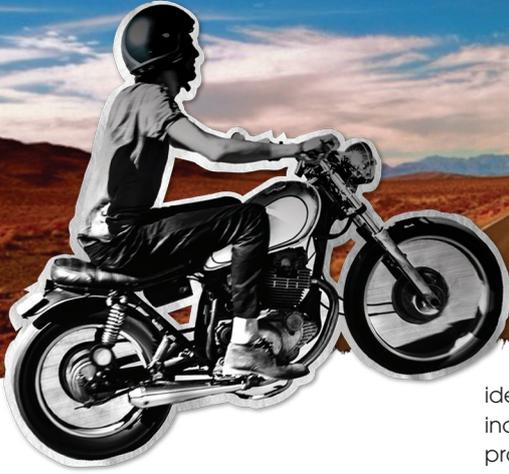
I'm an immigrant. I was born in Taiwan and I came to the States when I was three. This play brings up a lot of personal memories from my early years in America—like when I heard English spoken for the first time. It reminds me of my first encounters with American culture and that feeling of foreignness, trying to understand and negotiate what it was like trying to live in this new place, to understand its values and people. As a newcomer to this country, you spend a lot of your time trying to figure out the rules, and I remember trying to balance what it meant to be caught between two worlds. Ethnically, I'm Chinese—and in many ways I feel very Chinese because of my early years in Taiwan and my upbringing in a community of largely Chinese people, but at the same time I've also lived the overwhelming majority of my life in America, so I also feel very American. I had a friend (who is also an immigrant) say to me recently, "Des, actually we're not Chinese-American. We are Chinese and American.

It's not a hyphenated identity; it's actually two separate and coexisting identities." And that kind of blew my mind. So I think in a similar way, *Vietgone* is both Vietnamese and American; it's a duality of cultures, as opposed to a hybridization. That nuanced difference feels very potent and real to me, very biological.

The concept behind this production came when I had my first conversation about the play with our set designer Georgia (Junghyun Georgia Lee).

"We talked about the play taking place on the highway and the road trip being the conceptual arc of the story."

Vietgone is the quintessential American road trip story. We're always on the highway. There are other settings that come and go, but we always return to Quang and Nhan's journey on the



motorcycle. We never leave the sense that we are constantly heading west. And conveniently, the Neuhaus can be configured into a long thrust, so Georgia thought it would be a great set-up for the stage itself to be one long highway with the horizon in the distance. And through the use of projections and lighting, we find ways to create motion, to create disorientation.

"We're using a lot of projections to lift up that idea, but the thing I'm really excited about is the way we plan to use hip-hop and rap."

The rap element in the play is huge, specifically because rap music is often an expression of power, rage, and rebellion. Even though there is a comic book-like, vibrant comedy in the play's tone, that levity exists in stark contrast to the trauma of the characters underneath. There's a lot of anger in this play. I'm particularly excited to be collaborating with a local Houston rap artist, EQuality, on this show. Houston has its own community of rap artists, with a unique hip-hop culture and

identity, so we're looking forward to incorporating some of that style into this production as well.

Culturally specific stories vary in how they are received in different communities. Major national issues, like race and culture, are also very much regional. I'm interested in putting *Vietgone* forward as a story about Americana, but the nuances of how this representation of the Vietnamese population is perceived in a mainstream theatre will vary based on the demographics of the folks who come see it. Vietnamese-Americanness on the west coast is different from the east coast, which is different from Texas—and Houston in particular, which has one of the largest populations of Vietnamese immigrants in this country.

These two elements of projections and music speak to the spirit and style of the play, which is an upending of the traditional immigrant narrative that will appeal to a younger generation of theatregoers. Rap and hip-hop have a history of lashing out against the system, speaking truth to power on behalf of disenfranchised people. This play embraces the cultural consciousness and spirit of political activism of young people today, and I look forward to seeing some of those faces amongst the audiences at the Alley.