

LEARNING HOW TO BREAK THE RULES

BY MAY ADRALES

One of my very best collaborations with a writer started out as one of my worst. Qui Nguyen professed how much he hated me when we first worked together (as director/fight director, not yet as director/playwright) with Partial Comfort theatre ensemble in 2009. The director, a laser-focused perfectionist with a penchant for dark, highbrow art and with self-acknowledged control issues, meets the writer/fight director, an impulsive, genre-bending, playful mischief-maker—the conflict was clear. Fast-forward to 2014: I am the last on the list of available directors for a devised show at NYU, and we end up in the rehearsal hall again. But, mirroring the plot of a romantic comedy, a storied animosity blossomed into a beautiful friendship and an incomparable playwright/director relationship.

Our histories and geographies were actually quite similar—both first-generation Asian kids with working-class parents who, through the turmoil of geopolitical crisis, ended up in the rural South. We both found theatre to be our outlet for creative expression—a testament to the power of theatre itself, since nothing on the current mainstream stages reflected our experiences.

Where we differed was actually what caused our divide in 2009. An overachieving, straight-A student, I believed that I could achieve my version of the American Dream by playing by the rules laid out for me by the white dominant culture. Inheriting a mindset of an oppressed colonized people, I believed that Western standards were superior, and in my pursuit to follow my passion, I emulated those forms. I shied away from any form of self-aggrandizement; I buried myself deep into the work, believing that the work itself, judged positively by the gatekeepers, would be the only proof needed for advancing to the next professional level. The work then became my best *impression* of those idealized forms, instead of my own authentic, unique voice. Don't get me wrong, I was really good at it. My best impressions led me to the start of a professional career. But it was when I encountered Qui's work that I transformed into the artist I am today.

Then, and now, Qui didn't care about highbrow arty-art and scoffs at any intellectual dramaturgical justification for it. He always wants music to blast when audiences enter the theatre. He wants to include two or three fight scenes and a song and a movement montage because that's what he wants to see. He doesn't do that

because he consciously wants to be irreverent or genre-busting—he wants to have fun in the theatre and, in turn, wants theatre to be fun. He cares that people who come to see the play have a good time. He wants theatre to give people a jolt, an experience. And he wants those people to be like the people he knows—his friends, his family who had never heard of (or cared about) Aristotelian form. In essence, without the pretension of setting out to create a “transformative experience,” he does it anyway.

This boldness is born because Qui is completely himself and unapologetically so. He doesn't give two fucks that he is outside the culture; he regards that as his superpower. He brings his entire self to each of his characters—from horny heroines to badass underdogs to guileless sidekicks who spend the majority of the play spouting sophomoric insults only to reveal deep wisdom at the end. Despite the bright vividness of his stories, they are deeply political, though he'd never willfully say that aloud. He puts Asian stories on stage that defy harmful, dehumanizing stereotypes. He expands what theatre is in form, but he also expands what *American* is to Americans.

In working together, I found that I could break the rules without compunction. In fact, I would break the rules with infectious glee. I found myself reacquainted with the girl who took the wheel of a truck at age 12 and stopped a church service with a forceful opinion. I put things on the stage that brought me joy—that celebrated my own weird, impish humor. I leaned into my guilty pleasures—like romantic comedies and pop songs. On stage, the “eye-popping” and “bold” aural and visual world simply reflected the darkness and the joy of my curiosities. The rehearsal room became my home, and the people in it family. It was a kind of take-your-shoes-off, come-to-the-table welcome that allows everyone to show up as themselves. I learned how to love my work, regardless of what anyone else said. I began to use my own outsider status as my superpower. *I made space for myself in my work.* And for anyone who has struggled to free themselves from that colonized mindset, you know just what a revolutionary act that is.

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PHOTO Aliza Rae



Jon Hoche + Raymond Lee in *Vietgone* at South Coast Repertory, directed by **May Adrales**
PHOTO Debora Robinson/SCR