



After asking permission to go out with her friends, a Vietnamese-Australian girl is lectured by her father in a 1998 professional production in Sydney of "Chay Vong Vong," written and directed by Tony Le Nguyen. Photo by Heidrun Lohr.

By any criterion—medium, method, aesthetic aims, social goals—the community cultural development field is diverse. Just as projects can be strung like beads at every point on the continuum from process to product, community artists are varied in their relationship to the “mainstream” art world and its practices. Some community artists entered the field through the gateways of community organizing or social services; and for others, the entry point was frustration with the restricted roles the art world offered. Some artists are entirely engaged in collaborative, participatory work, simultaneously satisfying their social aims and their individual desires for creative expression and exploration, while others maintain an individual art practice apart from their community work, finding they need self-directed expression and aesthetic innovation to stretch and nurture their gifts.

On this continuum, **Tony Le Nguyen**, the founder of Vietnamese Youth Media, is hard to place. His community cultural development work stems equally from several motives. He did indeed begin work as a conventional film and theater artist, racking up a long string of credits in movies, television and on the

stage. (He is probably best-known for his role as Tiger in the film “Romper Stomper.”) And he did indeed experience the constraints of the commercial cultural industries:

My family and I arrived in Australia in 1978 as refugees from Vietnam. In 1985, I got my first taste of the arts by playing a Viet Cong Boy in an Australian miniseries, “The Sword of Honour,” about the Vietnam War. Since then, I have had many exciting parts, playing many different Vietnamese Boys: Minh, Dinh, Thanh, Phan, Nam and Loc. I also got to play a Vietnamese Gang Leader in “Romper Stomper.” Then moving from there I got to play a Chinese in “Paradise Beach,” and a Japanese in “Fast Forward.” Then one sunny day, I was asked to play “George.” Wow, I thought, this was going to be exciting, a non-stereotyped character for a change. As it turns out, “George” is a Vietnamese criminal, but because the show was “Australia’s Most Wanted,”

they weren’t allowed to use his Vietnamese name, so they used George instead. So to sum up my acting experience in Australia, I am a Vietnamese/Asian/Criminal character expert.¹

But he understood the obstacles he faced were not merely personal, but indicative of social conditions facing the entire Vietnamese diaspora, and ought to be addressed systemically. In 1994, he founded Vietnamese Youth Media (VYM) with the support of the Footscray Community Arts Centre in Melbourne. As Tony describes it:

This was to be our own company, a place where young Vietnamese-Australians can come and make art, tell their own stories and create their own characters. The work that we do ranges from theatre to documentary-making, from music production to karaoke performance nights. We make our own work, because we don’t

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¹From an address to the Globalization and the Live Performing Arts Conference, June 2000 in Melbourne, Australia.

²Ibid.

*want to wait for Anglo writers and directors to give us work; too often the work is offered because they feel sorry for us or because they think it's the most politically correct thing to do.*²

VYM's 1995 production, "Chay Vong Vong" ("Running in Circles"), was the first contemporary Vietnamese-Australian play in Australia, focusing on the vicious cycle of poverty, discrimination, unemployment and social isolation in which many Vietnamese-Australians were caught up. This first production was a community project, with nonprofessionals participating fully at every stage of conception, production and performance. The following year, VYM received Australia Council for the Arts funding to mount a professional production of the play, reworked for a smaller cast, in South Melbourne's Napier Street Theatre. Tony has followed this pattern several times since: organizing a community cultural development project that culminates in a participatory production within the Vietnamese community; then using that production as the basis for a smaller professional production in a mainstream Australian theatrical venue for a wider different audience.

As the following interview makes plain, the concept of bridging—between generations, ethnic groups and countries—figures importantly in his practice. With VYM as a base, Tony has extended his work beyond Melbourne to the farthest reaches of the Vietnamese diaspora. In 2000, he received a Community Cultural Development Fellowship from the Australia Council for the Arts to visit Vietnamese communities around the world, including the United States, Canada, France and the United Kingdom.

Today his work embraces the dialectic of local and global, as local community members collaborate on projects that are performed first for community audiences and then reframed as professional productions; as young artists learn community cultural development practice along with theater skills and use them both in community arts work and in mainstream professional theater; and as exchange and travel are used to discover commonalities and potential connections among the two million Vietnamese currently dispersed around the globe. His work seeks to address problems that also bridge the local and global: those of an artist thwarted by a racist society; of a minority cultural community subject to discrimination and its insidious effects; and of an entire culture displaced and dispersed by war and hardship.

Consequently, his work has multiple aims: to facilitate individual expression, understanding within the community and cross-cultural communication; and to champion an entire people's right to culture.

This interview was conducted by Arlene Goldbard on June 18, 2001, when Tony was producing a new community theater project titled "Aussie Bia Om," about the experience of young people who are forced into the sex industry, where they are exposed to extreme hardship, violence, abuse and the premature loss of innocence. The play explores prostitution from a historical Vietnamese context, in contrast with the current *Bia Om* (literally "hugging beer/hugging bar") situation in Vietnam and the illegal sex trade in Australia. The production takes as its framework the 17th century "Story of Kieu" by the poet Nguyen Du, Vietnam's equivalent to Shakespeare, and incorporates Vietnamese and English text, poetry, music (including Vietnamese lullaby and opera) and Buddhist rituals.

Sweet Honey Kill Fly

VIETNAMESE YOUTH MEDIA

An Interview With Tony Le Nguyen

Arlene Goldbard: I want to talk to you about your travels around the world in the Vietnamese diaspora, what you've learned, and then go back and pick up your work in Australia.

Tony Le Nguyen: I first went back to Vietnam in 1995. I was very much interested to learn about Vietnam as a country: where's it at socially, culturally and politically? I was not going anywhere with my work in Australia. I needed to find out about my roots, my origin and my past to come to some sense of reality, so that I could continue to move on.

AG: What were you able to see?

TLN: A lot of my understanding of Vietnamese culture and Vietnamese history was through whatever I'd picked up: oral history from my parents, or from the Western writers or journalists, or documentaries made by either French or Americans. There was another version written inside Vietnam as a form of propaganda for the government. Most histories of Vietnamese culture are much distorted. Personally, I feel that the real Vietnamese history and culture are somewhere between all those conflicting views and opinions of what Vietnamese people are about.

I wanted to see where Vietnam is at the moment: that is, where they live, how they sleep, how they eat, how they work, how they think, how they deal with government, how they deal with bureaucracy... If I hadn't gone to Vietnam, the only thing I could do is live inside my Dad's anger of the past, not understanding why I was angry.

Maybe I could try to understand some of his anger or the anger of refugees who've been dispersed all over the world. That was important to me; I needed to do that for myself.

AG: So what did you recognize in yourself that felt at home, and what did you recognize that felt like, "I'm not from here"?

TLN: I realized that I'm not Vietnamese. I'm not as Vietnamese as the Vietnamese in Vietnam. But being in Australia, I thought that I was very Vietnamese, due to what this society tells me. Everything that I do here makes me feel so Vietnamese; but the more I go back to Vietnam, the more I realize I'm very Westernized. My whole concept of Vietnamese is very Westernized. I also realized I'm not alone in this: I'm part of the 1.5 generation. I grew up here since I was 10, so I have taken on a lot of these things that I didn't even realize I've taken on.

The longer I was gone, the more I realized that Australia feels more like home. But coming back to Australia, I also felt very depressed, feeling that I don't really belong anywhere, not Vietnam nor Australia. That's a huge thing to come to terms with, that you don't really belong anywhere. I don't feel totally comfortable with being part of Western society. I live with them, I work with them, I'm an artist. I hang out with a lot of Western artists. But the humor, the joy, the pain and the way we think about politics and religion and everything—I think very differently. Even the whole thing about equality, human rights and compassion—I'm very strongly influenced by Buddhism, Vietnamese Buddhism.

I applied for a fellowship so that I could spend more time meeting with different Vietnamese people, to see the differences between the Vietnamese people living in all parts of the world. We all left Vietnam for different reasons. For instance, the Vietnamese in France have been there for a long time, during the French colonization. And then there are those who went overseas to study during the Colombo Plan.³ Then you have the large number who fled Vietnam after '75, a large population of former public servants and teachers like my Dad. Then there were people who left Vietnam for economic reasons. In America, I realized the Vietnamese in America are very different from Vietnamese in Australia, partly due to the sort of people they accepted, a very large number of former South Vietnamese government officials and soldiers, angry because they lost the war, and they also have a larger group of half-American Eurasian kids, from Americans who left little babies in Vietnam. Now there's another whole new group: children of high-ranking party members who can send their kids off overseas to study. Some have a lot more

³The Colombo Plan was an aid plan established by the Commonwealth countries to develop Asian countries, aiming to slow the spread of communism by providing capital aid, student education and technical help to the poorer countries of Southeast Asia. Australia was one of the most active donors. Thousands of Asian students were trained in Australian universities.

money to spend than we have. Some of that money is funded through corruption in Vietnam, which is really crazy.

So we are trying to find the dialogue, the language and understanding —trying to find the common values to connect the Vietnamese people. That is maybe my lifelong mission, to do that through the arts.

AG: You mentioned yourself as a member of the 1.5 generation. Is that the focal point of what you wanted to look at, the people who like yourself are not Vietnamese in the way of those who live in Vietnam and not French or American or Australian in the way of someone who feels at home there?

TLN: No, not quite. I'm more interested in understanding the diversity within the Vietnamese people: political diversity, cultural diversity, religious diversity and generational diversity. What kind of influence or impact has the foreign culture had on them? That will help me define a dialogue to make art.

In Vietnam, 80 percent live in country towns; it's almost like opposite to the West. In the West, 80 percent live in the city, and maybe 20 percent live in rural areas. The Vietnamese in the West live almost like Westerners: they're educated, they live in cities, but at the same time, there's very little understanding of or appreciation for the arts. There's no cultural democracy within the arts in Vietnamese society, because there's still segregation between literature and the sort of things that I do, performing arts. Literature is considered to be high art. If you can speak, if you can write, you're considered to be an important person; you're part of the intellectuals. Performing artists are considered to be the other end of the scale, closer to being considered a prostitute than anything else. To them what we do is like a kids' game, all just for fun. Now they realize it's actually a lot more complex, so they start having a bit of a fear because we use a lot of words they don't want to know, like the four-letter words.

AG: Do you see yourself as having a role in creating with these Vietnamese communities around the world, or is it more a question of meeting, learning whatever you can and bringing that back to Australia?

TLN: My dream has always been to be part of the global Vietnamese community, and then part of the global world. To me it is very important that we are all human beings. But I feel that the work that I do is so rare on this planet, especially focusing on the Vietnamese community. You know, we are only about two million people. There's not many of us working in this area at all, especially in between community cultural development and youth theater.



In a nightmare sequence from “Chay Vong Vong,” written and directed by Tony Le Nguyen, a young Vietnamese man is tortured by the army in this rehearsal for the play’s first production at Footscray Community Arts Centre in Melbourne in 1995. Photo by Andrew Locks.

AG: Let me ask you about this process of translating something from the community-level production, which is very much people telling their own stories, to a production that you want to tour. Explain why you feel that’s important.

TLN: The work I do is modeled pretty much on the community cultural development process, where the content evolves through the community, where the outcome and the process are equally important. Sometimes I think maybe the outcome is almost like a bonus.

The model that Vietnamese Youth Media operates on is a cross between youth theater, community cultural development work and professional work. So one project would start out as a community-theater project, and then the following year, we reapply and rework the script and get a full budget, hopefully even pay people. The third phase, which we haven’t got yet, is to tour the show. The difficulty is we started with a community show with a large cast. You’ll not be able to tour a show with more than six members, or maybe eight if you’re lucky, which dramatically changes the whole thing. And that also creates problems for me. Immediately, when you turn professional, you kind of lose essence—that community voice and all that power. All of that is very important to me.

Community theater can sometimes be preaching to the converted. You are telling your story to the same people who’ve already heard it hundreds of times. So it’s really important to take your story beyond your own community. That’s really important because that

other community is part of the dominant culture oppressing your community. Unless they are aware, unless they know about it, nothing's going to change. It's good that we can sit together and cry, but, hey, sometimes it's equally important to educate and inform those outside our community. We need to let them know that the things they do are hurting us.

How do you take that message out from your community and still keep the essence of the authenticity? That's tricky, because now you're at another stage, and when you do a professional show, you will be judged as a professional production, rather than a community production. People come to see a community production partly because they want to support your content or the participants, to say, "Yes, oh great, you've got the courage to go tell a story which I really want to talk about." But now it's a different ball game.

I am still struggling with that. I'm still searching for an answer. At the end of the day, when I'm producing a show, I have to deal with reality, which is the budget, the costs. When we do a show in the community we can use a church hall, use this space or that space. We can find someone to help out with sound. If you haven't got money to pay for a professional lighting designer, one of you can operate that. But when you're in a theater it's a very different story. Where do cast and crew eat, where are you going to perform, how do you generate audience, publicity, all of that? What you have to do is exactly the same as any professional show; otherwise you won't get an audience.

AG: And you have had this experience?

TLN: "Chay Vong Vong" started out as a community show, then it went professional, and then it's gone back into another version of a community show in a different city, in Sydney. Using the ideas and issues and themes from the show, we developed a whole new show with the same name.

AG: You talked about the importance of sharing your story with other communities, especially people whose actions oppress the Vietnamese community. So what happened? Did you get mixed audiences?

TLN: All our work attracts a mixed audience, because I think that's the challenge ahead. The first thing I have to do is ask, what kind of story do I tell, what kind of theater do I make to enable Vietnamese people to like to come see the show. The second thing is within the Vietnamese people, there is diversity. The old people tend to like something they can more relate to, like Vietnamese traditional opera

and theater, and the young people like something a bit more hip, a bit more modern, a bit more challenging and confronting. And then I have got the challenge of dealing with the traditional theatergoers: What do they want? How do I make theater that challenges and excites them and that they want to see? That's the challenge of every single project I make, because I'm very interested in generating new audiences to see my work.

Of course, when we actually reproduced the professional show the following year, one of the issues we had to deal with was do I do the show in a Vietnamese community area or do I take the show and perform it in a traditional theater space not in a Vietnamese area? Because I'd done the community show in a Vietnamese area already, I decided, let's do it in a traditional theater space, because I really feel that I need to bring Vietnamese people to a new space. They have a right to go and experience different things. I know there's a chance that my Vietnamese audience will be reduced, but at the end of the day, I'm not upset by that, because I know I am doing something very important, bringing Vietnamese to a nontraditional space. I'm constantly questioning, do I build a bridge from the Australians into the Vietnamese community or do I build from Vietnamese community into Australia? I do one project in one way, the next in the other.

AG: Do you find there's a different character to the experience or impact if you're doing it in a mainstream theater or a community-based place?

TLN: If I do it in a Vietnamese area, we probably won't have a theater—but if I do a show in a Vietnamese area, I know that there will be a chance that I will lose a bit of the traditional theatergoing audience, because they're not used to going to a place like Footscray to see theater. And then when I do my play in a traditional theater space, the Vietnamese people kind of feel very strange. But I have to do a bit of give and take, to try to increase my audience number with every show.

AG: Let's explore your reasons a little bit. What is it you hope for from that exchange?

TLN: First I want to make a political statement about the right to be in a particular place. Even though the Vietnamese have been here over 25 years, there are a lot of spaces where they have never set foot. A lot of Vietnamese tell me that they don't feel comfortable in these spaces, that they don't feel they belong or have a right to be there.



Members of Vietnamese Youth Media perform in a Dem Lieu Mang performance night directed by Tony Le Nguyen and Huu Tran at Melbourne's Footscray Community Arts Centre in 1997. Photo by Yen Le.

On the other hand, there is a wider theater audience who are used to a theater district, complete with bars and cafés. When we choose to perform in a nontraditional space—no bar, no café, no champagne—I know that I risk losing part of this audience. My solution is to create a theatrical experience that explores aspects of contemporary Vietnamese society as truthfully as possible.

AG: Do you feel you've had an impact?

TLN: I think so. If people talk about theater in Australia, they'll probably mention my name. I have made a huge impact in this country and I want to continue to do so. But while I'm doing it, it's really important to bring other people along with me, especially young people. With their energy and their ideas, I will be able to transfer some of my experience to them.

AG: When you say "bring them along," what do you mean?

TLN: The project I'm back in Australia to produce is "Aussie Bia Om." The director is a young guy, Huu Tran, who's worked with me for about seven years. He graduated from drama and media two years ago; this is his directing debut. My job is also to be a mentor for him and other young emerging artists such as the costume designer Yen Le. This is her first costume design job: she's a young Vietnamese-Australian; she's designed other stuff, but she's never really designed a theater show before. My composer's the same: Anh Dzung Nguyen is a multitalented musician who plays nine traditional instruments. He's currently completing his Bachelor of Music, majoring in jazz

and blues at Monash University. As composer of “Aussie Bia Om,” he has to work with non-Vietnamese kids, creating new music which has elements of traditional Vietnamese and a bit of jazz and blues. We’re really interested in crossing over and challenging each culture, to challenge and reinterpret Vietnamese culture as much as to challenge and reinterpret Australian culture.

AG: With the younger artists you’re mentoring, it sounds like what they’re learning to do is be more involved in professional theater. Are you also doing training for community artists, community cultural development workers?

TLN: Funding bodies in Australia require that a professional artist is employed to work on any cultural development project. Such a person must have a proven track record as a paid worker on community projects. If we are to have community artists working on our project we have to provide an opportunity for some young people to build a professional career in the arts. Out of maybe a thousand young Vietnamese with whom I have worked, only a few will continue on and do further training, some of them coming back to work with me. For example, Huu started out in my youth theater group and continued on and got his degree. Now I’m able to say to him: “Okay, it’s your turn to do it.”

Despite Huu’s experience, I do not think that our role at Vietnamese Youth Media is to turn Vietnamese kids into artists. I want to be very realistic. I want them to know that life in the arts is very tough, and I tell them that a majority of artists are very poor, but I also say that the arts are a very powerful place to be. Many young people often fantasize about the arts. They think it’s very glamorous, and they think there’s a lot of money out there. All they see is MTV and Hollywood and dream that one day they all can be rich and famous. I’m not saying that’s impossible—nothing is impossible—but understand the reality, that a majority of artists are not rich.

My job isn’t to brainwash anyone or to convert anybody into an artist. All we’re doing is using the arts as a way to help people, to give them an outlet to express themselves: their anger, frustration and sadness, whatever is inside of them. If they don’t express themselves artistically, they will do it physically. They’ll hurt someone else, or they’ll hurt themselves. We all need some outlet, and often, if you’re a young Vietnamese person, you’re very limited, because your culture does not allow you to do that: it’s a hierarchical culture, and you have to learn to be top-down.

AG: When you talk about challenging and reinterpreting Vietnamese culture—you've mentioned these hierarchical elements several times—what's your goal?

TLN: I believe that there's a middle ground. One extreme is the very strictly ordered hierarchical system that exists in conservative Asian culture, and then you've got the other, "Who gives a shit?" kind of Western young people's attitude. I'm very sad when I see on the news stories about kids attacking older people in the street. I realize that somehow this whole notion of having respect for older people is not as strong here as within Asian culture. I don't want to feel that you totally disregard people who've been there before you. Of course they often have a fixed way of doing and thinking, but you don't have to treat them like shit.

I'm hoping that my work can inspire and excite the next generation of artists—whether they are American-Vietnamese, French-Vietnamese, Vietnamese-Canadians or Vietnamese-Australians or Vietnamese in Vietnam—to see the possibilities that we have in this life. All they need to start is just a bit of imagination and hard work. I hope to inspire people to go out there and do it and take bigger risks and make mistakes.

I've learned a lot by making mistakes. Four years ago I thought I knew everything I needed to about community cultural development or community arts or whatever you want to call it. When I first started making "Chay Vong Vong," it was a very angry project. Then three years later, I realized that if I continued to do that kind of work, my work would become predictable, and those who don't want to be confronted will stay away from my work. But maybe those who choose to stay away are also those I really want to see my work. So how do I get them to see it without offending them—and also without losing my integrity—and still be able to deliver my message?

AG: So you are looking both at what is worth preserving in traditional Vietnamese culture, like respect for elders, and what might need to change as well.

TLN: Yeah, the nice part is what we need to respect and honor. If other things are part of Vietnamese culture, like encouragement to bash up a woman, or pouring fish sauce down the kid's nose—these are things that I'm totally against, so I said, "No, I'm sorry, but I don't think that's Vietnamese culture." Yet I like this whole thing about having respect for elders. They did look after you when you were younger; maybe when they get older, we should look after them.

After working for seven years with young people, I realize one thing: young people seem to be easy to work with, but they're very difficult; and old people seem to be hard to work with, but they're very easy. Old people have a fixed way of thinking, because they stop taking risks; they cannot deal with the diversity and complexity of society, so it's better for them to have a stable way of thinking and living. With young people, the challenge is to find unpredictable stuff, new, exciting stuff, so that their minds change all the time. The biggest difference is that an old person is more likely to have more discipline than a younger person. They can accept things more easily.

When I first started, I found it very difficult to work with old people because I was scared of them, but I've realized that both old people and young people are extremely vulnerable. Adults tend to be angry because they feel they are losing respect and power. What my work is really trying to do is to allow the young people to see their parents, and the adults to see the young people—that could be their children. Theater is a way to see and learn about yourself, and to learn about things indirectly.

AG: Some of the issues you talked about—in passing, you mentioned men beating their wives, or conflicts between old and young—it made me wonder if your community work connects with other forms of community organization or political movements. Have you been hooked up with groups working on the issues you address?

TLN: Yeah. We often work with schools, juvenile justice centers or health agencies on issues that are relevant to our work. We like to get non-theater people involved in our work so that they can support us both with the content and, if issues arise during the process, offer advice.

We also want to work closely with the Vietnamese organizations and groups to let them know about what we're doing. Sometime it's hard to explain to them how can we do a 50-thousand dollar play and it doesn't make any money. They are not used to working this way. Most of the Vietnamese cultural events are organized by commercial producers.

AG: How do you work with partners? How do you get them involved?

TLN: When I start a project, I go and talk to people about our ideas to see whether they would be interested in being involved. One of the most important things is to see whether we can work together, so that it's their project as much as my project.

On top of that, I do a two-level negotiation: first it's with the workers and the community; the second level of negotiation involves the artists. I am always interested in finding artists who want to work on a particular issue or have an interest in working with the community. Then we put a package together, and then we just wait. A larger project might take a couple of years in the planning.

But with a small project, because we're lucky to be based at Footscray Arts Centre, we have access to reasonable resources: rehearsal space, performance space and lighting and sound, photocopy and Internet—stuff like that. We're kind of the adopted child of this center. They didn't actually bear us, but they kind of liked us, so they adopted us.

AG: How about your relationship with the community cultural development field in Australia in general? Do you participate in those debates and conferences and dialogues and so forth?

TLN: Yes, I attend a lot of conferences and I often speak about our work. We are always looking for new partners to develop projects with, so those conferences are really important. I'm also at a stage where I like to send some of the young artists to work with different companies so I'm looking at developing a kind of exchange project within this country with companies that haven't had much exposure to Vietnamese artists yet.

AG: Where does the support for your work come from?

TLN: Government and some private foundations, like the Sidney Myer Foundation and the Lance Reichstein Foundation, they have been very supportive of our work. My biggest problem at the moment is I don't have enough people who have the ability to manage huge projects. I think it's really important we do larger projects as well as little ones, because I can also use these projects as a way of training people into different positions and responsibilities. This helps them to build credibility and a track record that allows them to move on to other companies, if they so wish.

AG: So are you training people to manage the various projects that you're doing?

TLN: Training is an important part of every project. The composer, the music director, everyone has to learn about working on a community project: the decision-making process and protocols; how to negotiate and work with the community as well as with each other. Sometimes we do things very Vietnamese and sometimes we do things very Australian.

AG: Could you give me a snapshot? Like when you say that sometimes you work in a way that's very Vietnamese, what would an example of that be?

TLN: First of all, I don't know whether it's Vietnamese or not. I say it's Vietnamese. First we have to ask what's the difference between Western culture and Vietnamese culture? Vietnamese culture is family-orientated. The way that we address each other is "brother" and "sister." We don't have this nine-to-five system.

And sometimes when I'm working with kids, I operate very much like a gang, a Vietnamese gang. So I am not afraid of telling them directly what I think of their work. I don't constantly go and pat them on the back and tell them, "This is great already." There are many little subtleties. It's kind of hard to explain, because trying to explain something from another culture is difficult unless you have a cultural reference point.

One thing I'm doing at the moment is just being conscious that we constantly want to work together, like on the current project. Half the people involved are not Vietnamese, and then you've got half Vietnamese, some who don't speak good English at all. And I want to have that range of people, people with different levels of experience, some who are only good at performing in the Vietnamese style and professional actors who are used to working in a particular way. So by creating such an environment, I'm forcing people to change their way of working.

A lot of adults in the Vietnamese community tell me they feel threatened by my work, and I realize that's not what I want to do. I want to be effective. I want them to understand the pain of young people; but at the same time, I realize that adults also have a lot of pain. When we have a lot of pain, we ignore other people's pain, so I really want to connect; I want to make young people see and feel the pain of the adults, and I also want the adults to see the pain of these young people. The only way I'm going to make some real change is if they both come to see my work. The work has to be relevant to each of them and have their voice in it, or else there's no reason for them to come and see it.

That is something that I'm pushing within the Australian theater industry all the time because they are complaining about lack of audiences. The only way they're going to be able to generate new

audiences is to make their theater relevant to their community. And if that community is black, or Vietnamese and whatever, then they have to deal with the complexity, because at the moment, they're not dealing with it at all.

AG: Talking about the material your work is based on, you've mentioned feelings of anger and pain and sadness. Do you feel like that's the story that needs to be told above all others, or are there other stories that may be more celebrations or stories of empowerment?

TLN: The only thing I want as an artist is for my audiences to think; I want them to take something away to think about. Of course what you do has to affect people to enable them to think. You want them to come in, and then you leave something inside them. At first my work used to be very confronting. Now, my agenda is not about confronting, but to be effective instead. Huu and I talk about making seductive theater, where we actually seduce our audience. We base this on a Vietnamese concept. There's a saying: "Sweet honey kill fly." So don't be fooled by the sweet honey, because that might kill you. The sweet honey will attract people to the theater, but just be careful, okay? That puts people slightly on edge already. But they want to come and see it, because they've been seduced.

Of course, some people say we're not being very fair; are we trying to trick our audience? It's a very fine line. I said somewhere at one of the conferences, "Youth theater is sometimes like a drug, because you make these kids feel good and after the performance they all got high and then it's all over. And then they all get depressed. Now, what are you doing? You are as bad as a drug pusher."

AG: So what's the solution?

TLN: Mine is that there has to be continuity. We'll develop the next work together. Let's keep doing it, and we'll do it with or without funding. If the kids want to do it, we'll do it. If they want to do stuff on karaoke or martial arts or whatever. If they're used to doing karaoke, how can you make karaoke interesting? Start with karaoke as a base, as a starting point. If they're used to watching Chinese martial-arts movies, Jacky Chan stuff, and they all want to hit each other, how do I turn it into performance? We take cartoons, game shows and video games; then we add a story to it—that's what makes performance. I'm really interested in starting with what people feel comfortable with and then slowly stretching them.

AG: What about criticism and evaluation? How do you know if what you're doing is working? Who do you listen to about whether it's good?

TLN: Criticism in youth and community theater can be very interesting. Traditionally many theater critics are of Anglo backgrounds. They are still struggling to understand anything beyond "English-language fourth-wall theater." So how do we expect them to understand theater from cultural and diverse backgrounds, being created by young Vietnamese-Australians who have complex cultural experience? In the past, I liked the idea of people writing nice things about me. But now the more I've been around, more people know me, even good things that people write, like praise, I don't always believe them. There's not many Vietnamese who do what I'm doing. The critics used to write things that I'd get upset about; now I'm struggling to see something which really upsets me. In community theater, I look at the process and outcome as equally important. So if they only focus on the outcome, and not on the process, then it doesn't bother me that much, because they don't really know what my process is.

AG: How do you get response from your participants?

TLN: If the community and young people don't like what we do, we won't be around too long, because they won't come and see the show or work with us. There's not many of us; if they don't want us, then we're in trouble. So, yeah, we do have to work very closely with them, and we have to monitor ourselves. Our process has been really great, totally and fully involving from start to finish. I keep begging people, "Please come in." But the reality is they have school, they have work, or they're looking for work, or whatever. I often tell people it's up to them how involved they want to be. If they want to be really involved, then we give them more responsibility. If they want to be involved a little bit, then they can have a bit of responsibility. I like to know whether people are going to be there or not on the day when we're performing. It's not fair on the others if they don't turn up for rehearsal.

If people cannot come, I really want to know why and whether it's a transport issue, financial issue, or if there's anything that we can do to help, like organizing car pooling or whatever. Closer to the performance time, we also try to feed people, we'll create a community kitchen. We try to do as much together as possible. I encourage people to come and work with me constantly.

AG: When we were talking together about globalization earlier this spring, many of the things that people described have already happened to the Vietnamese: to be forced to be refugees, to have to go elsewhere to look for security, economic or personal security and to be leaving behind cultural traditions in favor of new cultural products of the country you go to. What insight does this give you into what's happening around the world now on a larger scale? How do you see the Vietnamese experience relating to the whole question of globalization?

TLN: I think like all minority cultures of the world, the Vietnamese culture will eventually be swallowed by the dominant culture. That might sound too harsh, but I think there are many signs of this happening already. Every year when I go back to Vietnam I see these changes, from the music people listen to, to the food that they eat and the clothing that they wear.

This sad reality is because Vietnam is so far behind the rest of the world. The Vietnamese leaders are too busy trying to make quick money at the expense of arts, culture and education. The Chinese film industry from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore has also exploited this opportunity by flooding the Vietnamese market with low-budget Chinese films with Vietnamese voice-overs, all over the world. In America, even with the largest Vietnamese community outside of Vietnam, they are still not doing very much apart from reproducing American and Chinese music with Vietnamese lyrics.

The future for Vietnamese culture and other minority cultures of the world is looking very bleak. I'm very much saddened by the thought of the day I can wake up in Saigon, have McDonald's for breakfast and KFC for lunch and have dinner at Jack in the Box while watching CNN and drinking Coke.