

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Nothing Poor About These Yella Rednecks

Sylvie · Wednesday, April 10th, 2019

Playwright Qui Nguyen's *Vietgone* came and went, at South Coast Rep (SCR) and at East West Players, garlanded in all the "oohs" and "aaahs" that it richly deserved. That world premiere brought us a re-invented kind of playful comedy, sprinkled with unprintable expletives, heightened by terrific Ninja encounters and a smattering of rap draped around the tale of the playwright's colorful parents and their immigrant experience at the end of the Vietnam war.

In form and style, *Vietgone* was like nothing we had seen. It was such a frank and audacious assault on our theatre-going senses that the announcement of a new comedy by Nguyen was anticipated—by me at least—as a must-see. But the world premiere of *Poor Yella Rednecks* at SCR last weekend faced stiff competition. From *Vietgone*. Doubly so, since it is not just a new play, but that perilous thing called a sequel.



Samantha Quan (standing) and Maureen Sebastian in *Poor Yella Rednecks* at South Coast Rep.

We know sequels invite those odious comparisons we vow never to make, but then make anyway because we're flawed and human. And while *Poor Yella Rednecks* uses the same tools and clever impudence as did *Vietgone*, and is peopled by many of the same lively characters—Quang (Tim Chiou), his love Tong (Maureen Sebastian, reprising her 2015 *Vietgone* role) and her salty mother Huong (the terrific Samantha Quan, also reprising her *Vietgone* role)—those tools are not quite as surprising or novel as they were. *Poor Yella Rednecks* takes place six years later, when Tong and Quang's romance has hit a few roadblocks, including the big one called marriage.

Vietgone was the tale of a wild and woolly courtship between two hotheaded and ambitious refugees at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, who saw nothing but freedom, fame and fortune on the horizon. *Poor Yella Rednecks* is the come-down: the sweet, sad tale of the realities of married life in little El Dorado, Arkansas, a different-altogether place from Fort Chaffee and much less promising.

The happy-go-lucky Quang can't find a job worth having and Tong is waitressing at Paul's Diner, where she's been known to slap a customer or two for bad behavior. The only character who has not changed over those transformative years is Huong. She's living with Quang and Tong and has one major duty: looking after their young son, Little Man, a boy caught between two languages and two cultures and played by an inspired puppet (the creation of Sean Cawelti).



Maureen Sebastian & Eugene Young in *Poor Yella Rednecks* at South Coast Rep.

So the bloom is off the rose not only of Quang and Tong's romance, but also all the dreams life has insisted they defer. To make a knotty situation knottier (or a naughty situation naughtier), Quang receives a letter from the wife he unintentionally left in Vietnam. It pointedly reminds everybody that she still exists, as do the two children she bore him, something that had mildly tortured Quang long before the letter came.

This is as much plot as you'll get from me, since the rest of it speaks for itself. It is also here that *Poor Yella* and *Vietgone* part company. *Vietgone* was an all-out, no holds barred clowning comedy; *Poor Yella* gives us a softer one, tinged with melancholy amid the chaos and the four-letter words. Quang and Tong have discovered that the path to happiness is indirect. They'll shed a few tears over it, but also take whatever stumbling steps are needed to keep the hope and the comedy alive.

And a comedy it is. So much so, that *Poor Yella Rednecks* keeps reminding us that it, too, is intended as a Marvel comic, with projections exploding all over the firmament in perfect Marvel context (they are the excellent work of Jared Mezzocchi).

Production values are superior as they almost always are at SCR, with Arnulfo Maldonado's revolving set serving as different El Dorado locales, aided by Lap Chi Chu's lighting and Valérie Thérèse Bart's appropriately simple costumes.

One beef: if *Poor Yella Rednecks* thrives on its characters' honesty and optimism, Nguyen, overindulges his use of rap as a means of communication. A little rap tends to go a long way.



Maureen Sebastian & Tim Chiou in *Poor Yella Rednecks* at South Coast Rep.

Full credit goes to director May Adrales, who also had staged SCR's premiere of *Vietgone*, and Adrales mostly gets what she's after. The fight scenes were fumbled a bit at Sunday's matinee, but it's nothing that more frequent playing won't adjust. If *Poor Yella Rednecks* offers less flash and sense of discovery than its predecessor, Adrales makes sure the added dimension of felt emotion compensates.

Best of all, as desperate as things sometimes get, no tonic works better than The Awful Truth to bring about comic and other relief. Except for an isolated moment of contrition, the unflappable Huong uses regular injections of that Truth as strong medicine. She has passed this remedy on to her daughter Tong, who's grown skilled at using it. By play's end, it has even trickled down to Little Man who, learning from the grown-ups — Mother, Dad and Grandma — figures out how to beat the odds as well as how to beat the (expletive) out of the bullies who taunt him at his American school.



Eugene Young & Maureen Sebastian with Little Man in *Poor Yella Rednecks* at South Coast Rep.

Top image: l-r, Eugene Young, Samantha Quan, Paco Tolson, Tim Chiou and Maureen Sebastian in South Coast Repertory's 2019 world premiere production of Poor Yella Rednecks by

Qui Nguyen.

Photos by Jordan Kubat.

WHAT: *Poor Yella Rednecks*

WHERE: South Coast Repertory, 655 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa, CA 92626.

WHEN: 7:30pm, tonight & Sunday, also 4/16, 17, 18, 21, 23, 24 & 25; 8pm on Friday, Saturday, also 4/19, 20, 26 & 27; 2:30pm on Saturday, also 4/14, 20, 21, 27. Ends April 27. ASL-interpreted: Saturday only at 2:30pm.

HOW: Tickets start at \$23, available online at www.scr.org, by phone at (714) 708-5555 or in person at the theatre's box office.

PARKING is available on Park Center Drive, off Anton Boulevard.

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POSTSCRIPT: *THE ORIGINAL AT ACTORS' GANG*

I slipped into the opening night of *The Original*, a set of three new one-acts written and performed by members of the Actors' Gang. Included were Bob Turton's *Clean Slate*, James Dane's *Tradition* and Lynde Houcke's *A Perfect World*. (This program alternates with *The Classic*, consisting of Sartre's *No Exit* and Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*.)

Slate delivers a mildly surreal session between a middle-aged woman (Mary Eileen O'Donnell) and her therapist (Tom Szymanski) at an undisclosed location, terrestrial or otherwise. It is spiced up by a sinister touch of role-reversal, but none of it makes much sense, in case sense is what you're looking for.

Bane's *Tradition* is a semi-choreographed ensemble piece executed with military precision (and presumably about some military tradition) with actors Andrea Monte Warren, Quonta Beasley, Guebri Vanover and Kaili Hollister, always in perfect formation. The choral speaking makes it unclear what it's telling us, but it's well synchronized as staged by Tess Vidal.

The final piece, Houcke's *A Perfect World*, follows a life journey by Jim (Jeremie Loncka) and Lisa (Lee Margaret Hanson) that takes them from childhood through marriage and maturity to a shared old age as they contemplate the moon and, as they always also have, "a perfect world." Or so they say. Loncka and Hanson render each age with zest, changing vocal tone, mannerisms, costumes and hair styles. This piece has the semblance of a through-line, but remains squarely, as do the other two, in the domain of a well performed writing/acting exercise. Danielle Powell directed.

Performances in all three playlets are consistently better than the writing, and the entire event more valuable for the actors than satisfying for an audience. "Actors," we are reminded, is the first word in the company's name.

WHAT: *The Original*

WHERE: The Actors' Gang, 9070 Venice Blvd | Culver City, CA 90232

WHEN: Saturday, 8pm, Sunday, 2pm; April 20, 6pm. Ends April 20.

HOW: Tickets, \$34.99, Seniors \$30, full-time students under 30, \$25. Closing night tickets on 4/20, \$34.99-\$50. All are available on line at TheActorsGang.com or by phone at 310.838.4264.

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