Don Nguyen: ’The play is an exciting evening of theater, but it must also raise awareness for the pandemic.’

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Visual AIDS’s commitment to supporting women living with HIV on an international scale is perhaps best exemplified by our recent partnership and programs with the International Community of Women Living with HIV (ICW). We launched our 2015 events calendar with a Valentine event, LOVE POSITIVE WOMEN: Romance Starts at Home, for which we hosted three papermaking valentine workshops to support women living with HIV. Jointly, women living with HIV and invited artists created hand-made valentines to be mailed with personalized messages to women living with HIV around the world as a gesture of love and support in hopes of lessening the stigma experienced by women living with HIV. And our My Body! My Rights! An Intergenerational Community Arts Werrrqshop with Women Living with HIV earlier this month for Women’s HIV Awareness Month was an interactive hands-on workshop and intergenerational exchange of ideas and story telling with women from ICW joining us from Kenya, Ukraine, Canada, Puerto Rico, Kazakhstan, New Zealand, Nigeria and a number of other places to talk about their experiences identifying as women living with HIV and their activist experience. Together the group created activist banners that were carried and displayed during other activities throughout the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

Don Nguyen’s play Red Flamboyant brings a similar perspective to the stage, through the story of Pham Thi Hue and her activism for women living with HIV/AIDS in Vietnam. Here, Visual AIDS interviews Don about the play, his process, and stigmas surrounding HIV/AIDS in Vietnam.

Red Flamboyant runs from April 24 through May 16 at the Firebone Theatre, with performances Thursdays and Fridays at 8 p.m. and Saturdays at 2 and 8 p.m. Further information can be found at the Firebone Theatre Company.

Describe the inspiration and process behind your writing of Red Flamboyant.
Pham Thi Hue, a woman living with HIV in Haiphong, Vietnam, served as the inspiration for my play Red Flamboyant. I first heard of her in a New York Times article when I was a playwright in the inaugural Emerging Writers Group at the Public Theater in 2008. I was struck not only by her courage in the face of so much prejudice and stigma against anyone having HIV, but also by her deep compassion and desire to start a support group so that no one dies alone. The fact that I was

also learning for the first time about this pandemic happening in my home country really hit me on a very personal level and I knew I wanted to write about the bravery as well as the humor of these women who Pham Thi Hue brought together in the country's first support group for HIV/AIDS.

When I started this play, I not only wanted to write about these women, but I also wanted to juxtapose them with the legend of the Trung sisters, two ancient female warriors who fought to liberate Vietnam from China's rule. The task would prove daunting for me, a guy who was born in Vietnam but grew up in Nebraska. I was terrified to write this play, so much so that I would constantly put it away and work on other projects. And yet I kept coming back to it. After about the twentieth draft and several readings and workshops, I found myself completely frustrated. Something wasn't connecting with me. I realized writing this play forced me to admit to myself that the Vietnam I knew was only through movies and television, often depicted through the lens of the American involvement during the war. That's all I knew of my homeland, which was not much at all. So, I decided to take a trip to Vietnam, my first time back since I left with my family when Saigon fell in 1975. And it was there that I got to meet Pham Thi Hue in person. I only spoke to her for an hour, but it was one of the most incredible moments of my life. I walked away feeling confident about the play and the direction it was heading.

What is the significance of the evocative title Red Flamboyant?
The title comes from the name of the HIV support group that Pham Thi Hue started in Haiphong, Vietnam. A red flamboyant is also the name of a flame-red flower that grows all over Asia and other tropical areas around the world. I love the name because it fits the play and the characters in it, which both exude a stylish exuberance.

What are some particularities of the experience of living with HIV in Vietnam that the play sheds light on?
In Vietnam, the general public has an irrational fear of coming into contact with those who are infected, to the point that many believe the infected run around in the streets poking people with infected needles. There is a stigma that befalls the infected, not only by the public at large, but often times by their own families. Some are left to die on the bathroom floor of their house. Many hospitals and physicians still refuse to treat those who are infected. Many are fired from their jobs or kicked out of their own schools and left with no legal recourse. The Vietnamese government categorizes HIV/AIDS as a social evil, along with drug use and prostitution, so this public stigma and shunning trickles down from the top. The Vietnamese government does not do enough in terms of supporting and funding HIV/AIDS programs. People living with HIV/AIDS must look to foreign aid if they want any chance to survive this pandemic. I hope that through the lens of HIV/AIDS in Vietnam, people will come to look at HIV/AIDS on a global level, affecting and infecting people all over the world, not just ones in their community.

How are the specific stigmas that relate to the experience of women living with HIV told through the narrative?
Even though the play focuses on the women's day-to-day struggle for survival, the stigmas are these exterior threats that constantly find a way into Mrs. Hue's house, and each of the women deal with them specifically through the narrative. For example, under the constant threat of bricks

being thrown through their windows, they've boarded them shut. They never use the front door. They want to sing at the mid-autumn festival, so they wear masks while performing so that they're not recognized. And Mrs. Sau, the oldest of the group, tells the heroic story of the Trung Sisters each night for the women in order to fill them with courage and hope and to lessen the mental pain of being stigmatized.

The play exists in a fantastical world. Can you describe how this manifests on stage?
There is a moment in the play where the intimate interior of Mrs. Hue's house breaks open to reveal ancient Vietnam with mountains and ravines. The challenge is to balance the epicness of the play with the emotional connection that comes with the intimacy of the women inside the sitting room of a very small house. And to do that theatrically calls for creative solutions; I'm looking forward to seeing how our designers solve some of these production challenges.

Red Flamboyant incorporates aerial choreography. Can you describe how this came about and how it has been developed?
Along with the epicness of the world the Trung Sisters live in, I knew from the very beginning that I wanted to see the Trung Sisters fly. It serves as an homage to the kung fu soap operas my parents would spend hours upon hours watching. The characters in these soap operas flew all the time. There was never an explanation for it. It was just how it was. And that's the same for the Trung Sisters. Similar to those kung fu soap opera characters, the Trung Sisters possess something inside them that allows them to "fly over crowds and skip across clouds." Of course, flying on stage is very expensive and very dangerous. This is where the aerial choreography comes in. We've partnered with one of the best aerial choreographers in the country, Karen Fuhrman, who operates Grounded Aerial. She held a flying workshop for the artistic team and introduced the notion of single-bungee aerial, which is beautiful to watch. It allows the performer to smoothly glide across the stage, or flip and kick in the air as if they had superpowers. It's truly something to behold, and I can't wait to see how the audience reacts to it.

What was the inspiration behind the donation of 10 percent of ticket sales to Vietnam Relief Organization?
Mrs. Hue's Red Flamboyant support group has no easy or immediate way to donate money. There's no website, she's not on social media, as far as I know. There truly remains a boundary between her world and ours. So I was delighted to discover Vietnam Relief Services, a nonprofit organization that directly funds Mrs. Hue's support group and is in constant contact with her. The play does not just function as an exciting evening of theater; it must also raise awareness for the pandemic that is affecting so many people in Vietnam. At my request, Firebone Theatre Company is happily donating 10 percent of ticket sales to Vietnam Relief Services so that we can continue helping Mrs Hue and her group as much as we can. I also want to mention Amazin Le Thi, global ambassador for Athlete Ally and Vietnam Relief Services. We have partnered with her on publicity and outreach. Her own foundation works to inspire and empower HIV and homeless LGBTQ children and youth through sports and education.

What do you hope audiences will take away from Red Flamboyant?
I hope our audiences walk away with a greater sense of the world in general, that there are these

untold stories in little pockets of the world that need to be told. I hope they are entertained by not only the fantastical elements of the play which include the air combat, but also the more intimate story of these women just trying to make it every day with their strength and dignity intact.

Don Nguyen's full length plays include: Red Flamboyant (2015 GAP Prize Winner, Ojai Playwrights Conference; finalist, O'Neill NPC), Sound (BAPF 2014; Playwrights Realm Fellowship; Civilians R&D), The Man from Saigon (NYSAF; Naked Angels), and The Supreme Leader. Don's work has been developed or produced at The Public Theater, The Flea, Ojai Playwrights Conference, New York Stage & Film, Naked Angels, Naked Radio, The Civilians, Ma-Yi Theatre, The Playwrights Realm, The Bay Area Playwrights Festival, Joe's Pub, The 52nd Street Project, SPACE on Ryder Farm, and Tofte Lake. Don is the recipient of the 2015 GAP Prize from the Aurora Theatre and New York Stage & Film Founder's award, and has been a finalist for The O'Neill National Playwrights Conference, The Princess Grace Award, Woodward International Playwriting Prize, and New Dramatists. Nominations include the Laurents/Hatcher award and the L. Arnold Weissberger Award. Don is a proud member of the Ma-Yi Writers Lab, the Public Theater's inaugural Emerging Writers Group, The Civilians' inaugural R&D Group, the 52nd Street Project, and a co-founder of Mission to (dit)Mars, a Queens-based theater arts collective. For more information, please visit thenuge.com.

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