



ROLE CALL

An Austin attorney takes her creativity to the page and the stage.

INTERVIEW BY LINDSAY STAFFORD MADER

PHOTOGRAPH BY LINDSAY STAFFORD MADER

Christine Hoang and her husband, James Hughes, stand about 10 feet apart on the stage of Hyde Park Theatre in Austin. The audience is full, and the room is completely dark except for the spotlights illuminating Hoang and Hughes's faces as they tell the true stories of their fathers who served in the Vietnam War—his as a U.S. Army lieutenant and hers as a captain in the South Vietnamese Army.

This performance of *Two Fathers: The Vietnam Vet and the Vietnamese Refugee* was chosen as one of the Best of Fest for FronteraFest 2016. Hoang, an attorney for the Texas Education Agency, wrote the script at night at her kitchen table, and Hughes helped research and agreed to recite his lines onstage. *Two Fathers* is the second piece by Color Arc Productions, which Hoang founded in 2015 to promote diverse stories through the arts. Its first, *People of Color Christmas: The White Elephant in the Room*—which she wrote, produced, acted in, and directed—received positive critical reviews and audience feedback.

Hoang hasn't always spent this much energy on art. A daughter of immigrant parents, she knew she needed a dependable livelihood and went into law. But once her own child grew past the toddler stage, Hoang decided to nurture her creative side. "I always had the artist in me that I suppressed," she said. She organized the inaugural Evening of Attorneys in the Arts with the Austin Asian American Bar Association, founded the singing group Law Capella, and did a play inspired by a 19th-century court case about the Chinese Exclusion Act. When she and Hughes were unable to have a second child, Hoang eventually saw an opportunity. "I grieved and I mourned," she said. "When that window closed, I continued this artistic path."

Now, Hoang is putting together the third annual Attorneys in the Arts, is rehearsing for a feature role in an upcoming play, and is planning an expanded version of *Two Fathers* as well as a new Color Arc Productions play for spring 2017. "I don't think it's too late if you still have the fire within you," she said of following your dreams. "It's too late if you're dead."

Christine Hoang performs *Two Fathers: The Vietnam Vet and the Vietnamese Refugee*, which was named one of the Best of Fest at FronteraFest 2016.

What was it like growing up as the artistic kid? In grade school, the teacher often chose me to do stuff like write a poem to present on behalf of our class at the school assembly. I remember during pick-up one afternoon, the school principal told my mom about a speech I read to commemorate our school janitor's birthday. I remember thinking it wasn't my best work and was surprised the principal liked it. I think that's common for artists to doubt themselves and question whether they are good enough. It's also important to be encouraged and supported, and I was lucky to receive both.

How did being raised in New Orleans affect your creativity?

It has influenced my perspective on life and my storytelling. As a kid, I went to Mardi Gras parades every year with my family. The anticipation I felt when they were playing a block away, marching toward our end of the parade route with horns blowing, drums beating, and the metal taps of the majorettes' shoes rhythmically clicking away on the pavement—it's a community celebration. The pageantry that New Orleanians showcase in public is theater in its purest form.

What led you to realize your responsibility to honor your immigrant parents by choosing a well-paying career, and was this an easy decision?

Like most creative people, I am a daydreamer. But as a child of Vietnamese refugees, I am also a pragmatist. I never considered rebelling and becoming a full-time artist because I never believed I could be self-sufficient. My parents made sacrifices every day and put their kids first. My dad had two full-time jobs. My mom had one full-time job. I view working only one full-time job in an air-conditioned office where I am not on my feet all day as a luxury and a privilege.

My career choice was also an issue of reach. When I was growing up, I saw no successful Asian American women artists. I didn't allow myself to dream that big because I was convinced I wouldn't find any work. The idea of being a

starving artist did not appeal to me. I like to eat. So after college, I tried to achieve the best of both worlds by attending law school to become an entertainment lawyer. Then I did an internship at a movie studio and discovered that the fields of entertainment and the arts were not the same thing. So I became a litigator. I am a practical creative, a "born-again artist" who does not starve.

Where do you find ideas for your productions and what is your creative process like?

I usually get inspired by real life (a song, a conversation, a photo), and then I let my daydreams take over. Once an idea takes hold and I'm committed, I then write on the computer at home, usually at night after the kid's in bed when things are quiet.

What was it like to write, produce, direct, and star in *People of Color Christmas: The White Elephant in the Room*?

Wearing all of those hats was challenging, stressful, exhilarating, fulfilling, joyful, scary, terrifying, fun, hilarious, and monumental. At times, executing all those duties

did not feel good for my health. But in the end, I had to prove to myself that I could do it and earn the confidence to do it again.

Being a full-time attorney provides you with a financial safe haven to be creative in your free time. What effect does this have on your art?

It forces me to prioritize, be efficient with my time, and make realistic goals. My aim is to produce no more than one new work a year, and give myself plenty of time to rest in between projects. I think I can meet that goal. Accelerating that schedule to create more could compromise the quality of the work and take away from other fulfilling things in my life.

What has been your parents' response to your recent artistic achievements?

They love it. They drive nine hours from New Orleans to see all of my shows, and I always reserve the best seats in the house for them. **TBJ**



Christine Hoang (right) onstage with castmate Michelle Alexander in *People of Color Christmas: The White Elephant in the Room*.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANTONY P. NG