

CHRISTMAS IN HANOI

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The world premiere of CHRISTMAS IN HANOI was produced by East West Players, Los Angeles, California, in 2013. It was directed by Jeff Liu, the scenic design was by Francois-Pierre Couture, the lighting design was by Jeremy Pivnick, the costume design was by Ivy Y. Chou, the prop design was by Tesshi Nakagawa, and the sound design and music were by John Zalewski. The cast was as follows:

WINNIE GANLEY Elizabeth Liang
LOU GANLEY Joseph Daugherty
GEORGE "GIA" TRAN Long Nguyen
OANH GANLEY/LADY ON VACATION/
CHAM GHOST/ SPIRIT MEDIUM/
GODDESS OF PO NOGAR/
MOVIE GRANDMA/NEWLYWED BRIDE Elyse Dinh
PHILIP GANLEY/IAN/
ANDRYZEJEK KOLODZIESKJA/
MOVIE SOLDIER/NEWLYWED GROOM Michael Krawic

CHARACTERS

WINNIE

LOU

GEORGE

OANH

PHILIP

LADY ON VACATION

CHAM GHOST

SPIRIT MEDIUM

GODDESS OF PO NOGAR

MOVIE GRANDMA

NEWLYWED BRIDE

IAN

ANDRYZEJEK KOLODZIESKJA

MOVIE SOLDIER

NEWLYWED GROOM

The play is designed to be acted by three men and two women. Doubling works best like this:

The same actor plays: Oahn, Lady On Vacation, Cham Ghost, Spirit Medium, Goddess of Po Nogar, Movie Grandma, Newlywed Bride.

And another actor plays: Philip, Ian, Andryzejek, Movie Soldier, Newlywed Groom.

CHRISTMAS IN HANOI

ACT ONE

Scene 1

At rise: Winnie Ganley's living room in her house in Aberdun, Massachusetts. The house is barely suggested—mostly, it's open suitcases on the floor. A door looms upstage—and will in all scenes, despite change of place. In this scene, the door is the front door of Winnie's house.

There's also a Christmas tree.

It's December. Grandpa Gia "George" Tran is sitting in a reclining chair, sleeping. By his side, there's a tray table with a game of chess in progress.

His grandchildren, Lou and Winnie, fold laundry and pack. Actually, Winnie packs. Lou wanders—sorts clothes, but then studies the chessboard, or gets otherwise distracted.

Winnie folds clothes with ruthless efficiency. Lou grabs a mirror and holds it to George's nose. Lou watches the mirror, fascinated.

There's a long silence, as Winnie grows visibly more agitated.

WINNIE. WILL YOU PLEASE STOP DOING THAT?

LOU. I can't help it. Grandpa looks like he isn't even breathing, but the mirror still fogs up. Amazing. He doesn't even snore.

WINNIE. He doesn't snore anymore. He stopped when he quit smoking.

LOU. I thought he'd never quit—

WINNIE. He quit because every time he buys cigarettes I flush them down the toilet.

LOU. That's bad for the plumbing—

WINNIE. Are you going to help? The flight's at seven A.M. Between you and Dad doing shots—

LOU. There were no shots. We were not doing shots. I had two light beers and played chess with Grandpa. You make it sound like we were all downing Jäger shots at a titty bar.

WINNIE. Dad's not supposed to drink, period. His heart—

LOU. He's Irish, dude. Cut him some slack.

WINNIE. (*Mocking, in surfer speak.*) "He's Irish, duuuude," whenever Dad gets drunk. Dad puts butter on his donuts. "He's Irish, dude." Dad nearly gets in a fistfight—with our parish priest. "He's Irish, dude." I get it. Being Irish is like being insane, or mentally handicapped—

LOU. Being Irish is great! You should have gone with me to Ireland—it's true what they say—

WINNIE. "The Guinness tastes better there!" I've heard your Ireland stories.

LOU. And now we're going to Vietnam—we'll have Vietnam stories! How hard does that rock? Don't stress about the flight. Maybe I should give you a treatment.

WINNIE. Is that drug slang?

LOU. No! Acupuncture. *Gratis.* (*Off her look.*) Look—I know you think it's mumbo jumbo—

WINNIE. I didn't say that—

LOU. —and I know you think I'm overpaid—

WINNIE. I didn't say that!

LOU. I am, though! I'd do my job for free! You're a doctor, you know the feeling—and before you get that look, I know—I'm not a doctor! But I am a healer. When you take away someone's pain— isn't that the best feeling in the world? Wouldn't you do that for free?

WINNIE. (*Beat; looks at him like an alien.*) ...Absolutely not.

LOU. I have my needles upstairs! It only takes half an hour. Usually I sit with a patient and make my diagnosis, but you're my sister, so I already know what's wrong with you.

WINNIE. Not at one in the morning.

LOU. I gave Grandpa a treatment today.

WINNIE. To treat what?

LOU. Insomnia.

Lou gestures to George, triumphantly.

Oanh Ganley, their mother, enters—upset. She is dressed rather frumpily.

OANH. Winnie! I can't find my clothes!

Both children ignore her.

LOU. I was wondering—could I take some of Mom's old T-shirts back?

WINNIE. I'd have to find them.

OANH. Find them? Why did you hide them?

LOU. Some of them are here, right?

WINNIE. Yeah. I haven't—figured out what to do with them.

OANH. Do with them?! Some of those T-shirts I've had for twenty years! Thirty years!

WINNIE. Can't this wait until we get back?

LOU. I want to wear one of Mom's things while we're there.

WINNIE. Will you fit in one? Mom's shirts—

LOU. Mom always buys size large or x-large, men's T-shirts.

OANH and LOU. Better too big than too small! COTTON SHRINKS!

WINNIE. I forgot. . . They're in the attic.

OANH. Lou—get them for Ma. Okay?

Lou takes off, for the attic.

Oanh approaches George, and addresses him in Vietnamese. When she speaks "Vietnamese," the lighting changes and the accent vanishes.

(In "Vietnamese.") [Father, wake up! You haven't packed yet!]

Lou comes back, with purpose.

LOU. Are the boxes marked? Where are they—

WINNIE. The T-shirts can wait. We're on a trans-Pacific flight in six—no, five hours! Dad and Grandpa aren't packed! And we have to leave early for Dad's place.

LOU. Why?

WINNIE. Because he's drunk, Lou. Or "Irish-medicated," whatever you want to call it.

OANH. Your father drank?

LOU. He'll be ready. It was just a couple beers.

WINNIE. Just a couple beers?

She quickly exits, and returns—with a trash bag that makes the clink-clink sound. She takes bottles out of the bag, lines them up. It's a long line. And then, at the bottom of the bag—not one but two full six-pack carriers.

Oanh looks at the bottles, horrified.

OANH. *Trời ơi.* No, no. Winnie, your father's heart! Why did you let him drink?

WINNIE. You never have more than two beers. Grandpa had none. I don't drink. That leaves—

LOU. He's in mourning. I know it's been a year, but—

WINNIE. We're all in mourning! We all lost her!

Oanh looks on. Silent. Frustrated, as if she has been reminded of a familiar but inconvenient truth. The lights on Oanh change, and we see—she is a Ghost.

If Ma were here right now, we would be packed and ready to go. Dad wouldn't be drunk, and you wouldn't be defending him.

OANH. I am here! You cannot hear me, but Ma is here!

LOU. All I want is something of hers to wear. Something classic Mom.

OANH. I'm here! I go with you, to Vietnam! I will show you my country!

LOU. That Harvard hoodie you got her—the huge one! Do you still have it?

WINNIE. You can't wear a hoodie in Vietnam. It's like a hundred degrees.

LOU. (*Enthusiastic.*) If she can't go, we'll bring a piece back! She never got to go back to Vietnam—

OANH. I never got back to Vietnam—

LOU. That's the one I want. Harvard all the way—

WINNIE. We don't have time for this!

LOU. Just a way to remember her—

WINNIE. (*Almost shouting.*) Okay, remember her! But not with the damn hoodie!

LOU. You don't have to be so angry about it.

Winnie throws down a piece of luggage in frustration.

WINNIE. Why are we doing this? I don't give a shit about Vietnam—

LOU. You know, get in touch with our roots—

WINNIE. I don't care about my roots! Vietnam's just another place!

LOU. ...Maybe you should get some sleep.

WINNIE. Right, and leave you in charge? You'll master chess, give everyone free acupuncture, and learn a new dance move. Everything but pack.

Lou puts a calming hand on her. He says, with solemn face, but as a joke—

LOU. Will you teach me how to pack? I never learned.

WINNIE. Just help me, you loser.

Winnie gets back to packing, and Lou actually helps. Oanh takes a breath, becoming calm. Light on her changes.

OANH. I never went back to Vietnam. But you will go. Maybe there, you can hear me.

Lights fade out on Oanh. She exits. Silence.

Someone pounds at the door. Winnie nearly leaps out of her skin—and then again when the howling wind blows the door open with a bang. Standing there is Philip Ganley, wild-haired, wearing a Red Sox baseball cap, a huge coat, his shoulders covered with snow. He carries a suitcase in one hand and a tiny urn in the other. He slurs his speech—not like someone freshly drunk, but like a sleep-deprived man doing a long booze marathon.

George stirs, but does not wake. Philip cuts off his daughter's protest.

PHILIP. Don't worry, I didn't drive. I brought your mother's ashes!

Philip trudges in, struggling with the suitcase.

LOU. Dad—let me help you with that.

Lou grabs the luggage, puts it with the kids' luggage—all packed and ready to go.

(Gently, to Winnie.) I told you he'd pack.

PHILIP. I was lying in bed, thinking, why should the kids have to pick me up tomorrow? I used to pick them up. I should come to Winnie's house. I can go on half an hour of sleep! Out of the Company since '75 but I still got the training!

WINNIE. Dad.

PHILIP. Holy mackerel, George is really sleeping. Did you hold a mirror under his nose? Christ on a stick, Lou, you're a miracle worker. It's so good to have a doctor in the family.

WINNIE. Dad...

Philip notices the beers lined up by Winnie.

PHILIP. JESUS, Winnie! Lay off the beers! We have a frigging flight tomorrow! Here, hold your mom's ashes, Lou. Do not spill this.

WINNIE. DAD!

Silence falls.

We didn't cremate Mom.

PHILIP. I know. But—I took some dirt from her grave, and, you know—"grave dirt" sounds so crappy. I don't want your mom's ashes in Vietnam, believe me—I'm keeping the old girl with us! But just a piece of her there, in the right place—she'd like that. You know they do a second burial, up North.

WINNIE. Dad—

PHILIP. They dig you up seven years after they buried you, and bring you home! Second burial!

WINNIE. We're not doing that.

PHILIP. Of course not. It's not seven years yet. Oh, shit! I forgot her hair...I need to go back! I wanted to bury a lock of her hair.

I have to go back. (*Composure breaks; starts to cry.*) I just—I just miss your mother so much.

When he opens the door, the winter wind gusts in. He exits, singing a verse of “Molly Malone.” Pretty voice. Offstage, we hear him—

She died of a fever
And no one could save her
And that was the end of
Sweet Molly Malone.

WINNIE. We better...

LOU. Yeah.

WINNIE. Dad! Wait up!

Winnie and Lou throw on their winter clothes. Lou is almost out the door, but Winnie still is big sister—

Lou—wear a hat!

LOU. It's in my pocket.

And they both exit. George's eyes open. He looks around, slyly. He puts the needle on the record player next to him. Music comes on—old French music (pre-1950) would be good. Old Tango music would work too. He pulls out a chest. He opens it to reveal whiskey, some nice tumblers, and yet another locked chest. George has the key. He unlocks it. Inside is a copy of a Bible. He opens it. It's a false book—and inside of that is the pièce de résistance, pack of cigarettes. George opens it, removes a cigarette. It shines like a jewel. He puts it in his mouth, letting it dangle in a cocksure way. Also in the chest: a black beret. He puts it on, and looks very dashing. The man is clearly reliving something from long ago, and looks good doing it. He pours himself a nice drink. George sits himself back in his recliner, positions his drink just so on the table, and savors the cigarette in his mouth. He lifts a lighter to his cigarette—when Winnie bursts into the room, like a force of nature. And pulls the cigarette right out of George's mouth.

WINNIE. Nice try, Grandpa.

She snaps the cigarette in half as the lights go black.

Scene 2

A dark stage. We hear the roar of plane engines, and then the sound of a Vietnamese crowd slowly rises. While the set is changed, over a PA system, an official-sounding female voice gives brief instructions in Vietnamese, Japanese, Chinese, Thai, French, and English.

Lights up on Winnie, Lou, Philip, and George, dressed for warm weather, carrying luggage. They stand in line. George leads the way. Philip looks anxious.

LOU. Ong, what do you feel? What's it like to be here?

GEORGE. The airport?

LOU. No! Back in Vietnam.

PHILIP. *(Preoccupied, before George can answer.)* We're almost up!

LOU. Let me talk to immigration control for us! I took the Rosetta Stone class for Vietnamese—I mean, the Rosetta Stone class for *(Earnest but horrible, just excruciating.)* —*ngôn ngữ tiếng Việt.*

GEORGE. *(Cheerfully.)* Rosetta Stone ripped you off.

PHILIP. Just one more!

WINNIE. So what's the plan? What's next? Tell me now—because I have to go to the bathroom—

Philip talks right over Winnie, speaking French—his secret code with George. Philip's French is broken. George is fluent.

PHILIP. George—do we, you know, er—*donner un petit cadeau*? Er—*avoir un fil a la patte*?

GEORGE. What?

PHILIP. *(Hits it hard, one syllable at a time, but at least gets the sounds right.)* *La—corruption!*

GEORGE. Ah! *Graisser la patte!*

PHILIP. *Oui!* That thing. *Exactement, mon ami.*

GEORGE. *Non. C'est pas comme l'autrefois. J'ai entendu parlé—*

WINNIE. That's not nice. We don't speak French.

LOU. Yeah, you gotta include us.

GEORGE. Shut up, both of you.

WINNIE. What did you just say to Dad?

GEORGE. Just relax! When we speak to immigration control, just let me do the talking.

WINNIE. ...I have to go to the bathroom—

GEORGE. Perfect! I hope it's number two. Go, relax!

Winnie runs off to the bathroom.

LOU. How about you, Dad? What do you feel? What's it like?

PHILIP. Not now, Lou. We're up soon—

GEORGE. *(To Lou.)* Stay here. Watch the luggage!

LOU. I'm a thirty-year-old man with a killer job and a banging hot girlfriend. I'm not a kid—

GEORGE. *(Putting his foot down.)* You are a kid now! You are demoted! You are ten years old, you are happy to watch the luggage!

George and Philip exit together. Lou looks bored instantly. He pulls a travel guide to Vietnam out of his bag.

Lights up on Winnie, in a different part of the stage, standing in line for the women's room.

In front of Winnie in line is Oanh—but Oanh is now a Vietnamese Lady on vacation, reading a newspaper. Winnie is impatient, checking the time on her cell phone, bouncing her leg.

WINNIE. Jesus, let's get a move on.

The Lady turns around and smiles sympathetically at her. Winnie screams, falling to the ground in fear.

LADY. *(in Vietnamese.)* Trời ơi! Chuyện gì vậy?

The light changes. Winnie realizes that it's just a Lady on Vacation.

WINNIE. I thought you were my—I thought you were someone else. I'm so sorry.

The Lady helps her get up. Sympathetically, she fans Winnie with her newspaper.

LADY. (*Heavy accent in English.*) You poor girl! Flight too long!
Makes people crazy!

WINNIE. I don't speak Vietnamese—

LADY. Was speaking English! Breathe.

*The Lady's English should be markedly worse than Oanh's.
When Winnie doesn't breathe, the Lady insists.*

BREATHE! Deep in and out. Like this!

WINNIE. (*Complying.*) I'm so embarrassed. You don't even look like her—

LADY. (*Still fanning Winnie.*) Must be someone scary, for you to fall like that!

WINNIE. You have no idea. Oh—you were on our flight. The big group with the baby—

LADY. My grandchild. I have five grandchildren. We come back for the third time, all together!

WINNIE. Really? That's—I mean, isn't this a hard country to visit with babies?

LADY. Just carry the baby! Only grown-ups get cranky. Baby doesn't know if he is in Vietnam or California. I had sandwich shop in Westminster—you know Orange County?

WINNIE. No. Not really.

LADY. Not important! I am now—*retired*. More time for family! You work?

WINNIE. I'm a doctor.

The Lady looks at her approvingly, smiling, and gives her an emphatic thumbs up.

LADY. Good! You make your mother proud! Whole family came to Vietnam this time?

WINNIE. Yeah. We came.

LADY. First time? I can tell, is your first time! Don't be scared, it's a good country! My children, my grandchildren—they love it. It's too hot, but that's okay! You'll see.

WINNIE. I'm not exactly sure why we came...

LADY. Why not? Last year, I was very sick—breast cancer. I'm

better now. Something happen like that—you remember what is important. I am seventy-four years old. I want to see Vietnam again with family—maybe last time. I want to see my mother and father, again.

WINNIE. Your mother and father are still alive?

LADY. No. I mean see their monument. Their grave.

Lights down on the women. Lights up on Lou. Still reading. A voice comes over the loudspeaker—soft-toned, but too loud to ignore.

OANH'S VOICE. Lou!

Lou hears it—but goes back to his reading.

Lou.

Now he's officially creaped out. He puts the book down. He pulls his phone out, and checks it.

Lou...the voice is not coming from your phone.

Lou nearly drops the phone at that.

Then, as mist pours in, the door upstage opens—and there is Oanh, wearing the large Harvard hoodie. She looks quite charming in it. As she calls his name, Lou begins to shake.

LOU. I don't hear anything!

OANH. Yes you do. Lou!

Lou dives back into his book, ignoring her. Suddenly, lights up on Winnie, right next to him. Much louder—

WINNIE. Lou!

Lou fairly leaps out of his skin.

...Who were you talking to?

Scene 3

The lights come up on Philip and Lou at a restaurant in Saigon. They sit with a beer, a map unfolded. Philip puts the urn of Oanh's grave dirt on the table next to him.

Lights up on Oanh, watching him as if from a distance.

OANH. When I met you, you didn't drink. You said Irish men should not start.

Philip stares ahead, not seeing her.

You also said—you did not need a translator. You tried so hard to impress me with your Vietnamese. But when you spoke Vietnamese, your secretary could not understand a word—she would come to me, in tears, beg me to interpret for her. I told her—"I translate English into Vietnamese—how can I translate Vietnamese into Vietnamese?"

Philip stares at the beer in front of him.

Translate, translate. How do I translate for you, so that you can hear me now? Please, Philip. Put the beer away. Go to the hotel, go to sleep.

LOU. *(As if it's his idea.)* You know—maybe we shouldn't. For a bit.

Philip doesn't respond directly. But wordlessly, he pushes the beer away.

OANH. Lou—good Lou.

Lights out on Oanh.

PHILIP. I've been here before you know. It's a restaurant now—before it was just a bar—but same building. I used to come to this place with Lou.

LOU. Dad—I'm Lou.

PHILIP. The Lou you're named after.

LOU. I didn't know I was named after anyone.

PHILIP. You are. Andryzejek Kolodziesjska.

LOU. I thought his name was Lou.

PHILIP. He was an insane Francophile—insisted on being called Louis—and peppered everything with bad French. Said “Bonjour” instead of “Hello,” wore a horrible beret, that kind of nonsense. He was a Polish defector—he’d escaped the Eastern block on foot when he was twenty, walked from Warsaw to Austria—if you can believe it. He came to the States, hitchhiked across the whole country, and decided he wanted to work for U.S. intelligence and fight communists in Vietnam.

Lights up on the table behind Philip and Lou. A glass and a bottle of vodka are there.

And God, he was obnoxious when he was drunk—which was always. When he wanted a waiter, he’d take his fork and bang his glass...

A sound rings out, of a fork hitting a glass—as Andryzejek calls a waiter to wherever his soul now resides.

He was my best friend out here.

LOU. You’ve never said a word about him.

PHILIP. Your mother wasn’t crazy about him. I had to beg to give you his name. His nickname, even. (*Imitates the Polish accent.*) “Philip, my friend, why did you marry a translator when there are so many hookers around?” Two years older than me, and thought he knew everything. We were going to save Vietnam’s illustrious three-thousand-year-old civilization from the communists.

LOU. What happened to him?

PHILIP. (*Straightforward.*) He got drunk in a bar in Thailand and started a fight. A bunch of Thai guys got fed up with him, dragged him outside and threw him in front of a bus.

The lights on the table go out.

LOU. Jesus.

PHILIP. (*Unsentimental.*) Yeah. We didn’t stop the communists, either.

He downs the rest of his drink.

What a downer! Let’s go back to the hotel.

A phone starts to ring. Lights down on Philip and Lou, and come up on Winnie and George, in George’s hotel room.

The play doesn't end here...

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