

A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR

AGAIN

book & additional lyrics by **KATIE KA VANG**
music & lyrics by **MELISSA LI**
directed by **NANA DAKIN**



THEATER
MU

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ABOUT THEATER MU

Theater Mu is the largest Asian American theater company in the Midwest. Founded in 1992, Mu tells stories from the heart of the Asian American experience, presenting a fusion of traditional and contemporary artistic influences, which range from classics to up-and-coming voices in our community. Theater Mu's continuing goal to celebrate and empower the Asian American community through theater is achieved through mainstage productions, emerging artist support, and educational outreach programs. Mu provides an unparalleled resource for Asian American artists, introduces Asian American stories and issues to audiences of all backgrounds, and gives Asian Americans of all ages and ethnicities a place to connect and belong.

Theater Mu is a member of the Consortium of Asian American Theaters & Artists as well as a member of the Twin Cities Theatres of Color Coalition, proudly standing alongside New Native Theatre, Pangea World Theater, Penumbra Theatre, and Teatro Del Pueblo.

MISSION

Theater Mu produces great performances born of arts, equity, and justice from the heart of the Asian American experience.

PRIMARY ARTISTIC VALUES

- To give voice and cultural profile to the Asian American community.
- To offer opportunities for mainstream audiences to gain insight into and empathy for Asian American culture and heritage.
- To provide professional development opportunities for emerging Asian American artists.
- To promote awareness of and progressive action on issues of social justice and gender equality in society.
- To move, provoke, and challenge our audiences to understand, embrace, and celebrate diversity.

THE MEANING OF MU

Mu (pronounced MOO) is the Korean pronunciation of the Chinese character for the shaman/artist/warrior who connects the heavens and the earth through the tree of life.



KATIE KA VANG (BOOK & ADDITIONAL LYRICS)

Katie (she/her) is a Hmong American playwright and theater artist. Her plays include *WTF*, *Hmong Bollywood*, *Fast FWD Motions*, *Final Round*, *Spirit Trust*, and *Fertile Grounds*. Her work has been developed and presented at Pangea World Theater, Pillsbury House Theatre, Theater Mu, Leviathan Lab, Bushwick Starr, Brown University, the Royal Court Theatre, the Walker Art Center, Out North Art House, and more. She has received fellowships and grants from the Playwrights' Center, Jerome Foundation, NET, MAP, Knight Foundation, NPN, MRAC, MSAB, and more. She was a member of East West Players 2021/22 playwrights group. She is currently the 22/23 McKnight Fellow at the Playwrights' Center and a 2023/24 Constellation fellow. She holds an MFA in playwrighting from Brown University.



MELISSA LI (MUSIC & LYRICS)

Melissa (she/her) is a composer, lyricist, performer, and writer based in NYC and Montreal. She is a recipient of the 2023 ASCAP Harold Adamson Lyric Award, 2021 Kleban Prize, 2007 Jonathan Larson Award, and was previously a Dramatists Guild Foundation fellow, a Lincoln Center Theater writer-in-residence, and a MacDowell fellow. Works include *In-terstate* (NAMT, NYMF Outstanding Lyrics), *MISS STEP*, *Cancelled* (Keen Company), *Surviving the Nian* (the Theater Offensive, 2007 IRNE winner, best new play). Her works have been presented by 5th Avenue Theatre, Playwrights Horizons, MCC, Musical Theater Factory, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Signature Theatre, San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus, and more. In addition to working in theater, Melissa is currently writing and developing projects for film and television



NANA DAKIN (DIRECTOR)

Nana (she/her) is a queer Thai American director of new work, classics, and devised performance based in NYC. Her work pursues social equity by examining the way culture is constructed and unsettling dormant biases. Recent credits include: *Eurydice* (American Shakespeare Center), *Mammelephant* (Superhero Clubhouse/122CC), *Sorry/Not Sorry* (Ars Nova ANT Fest), *Love Letter to a Seed* (Clubbed Thumb Winterworks), *White Pearl* (Royal Court Theatre), *Richard III* (Lenfest Center for the Arts). In NYC, Nana has developed new work with Atlantic Theater Company, the Civilians, New York Theatre Workshop, the Playwrights Realm, and more. Nana is in the 2022/23 writer director lab at Soho Rep and is the board president of the Thai Theatre Foundation. MFA theatre directing: Columbia University. | nanadakin.com



MAI SEE YANG

39, Hmong American. Cancer survivor, memoirist, younger sister to Shia; holding on to memories tightly.

*"Sometimes you gotta say no /
There's a voice inside of you sayin' 'hey I gotta go' /
Don't wanna be lyin' on my deathbed thinking 'I told you so'"*



QUEST LEE

20, American Hmong. Chronic cancer, documentary filmmaker. Enthusiastic, hopeful, clever.

*"I need you to know that I'm...famous.
Well, not right now, but that's my destiny.
I know I'm meant to be the Hmong Werner Herzog."*



SHIA YANG

43, Hmong. Social worker; older sister to Mai See. Fed up, recovering caretaker.

"I don't think things are complicated at all, not for me. I think things are very clear and I've made myself clear as well."



BROC/DOC

30-60, Asian American. He holds power in real/serious and farcical/fantastical ways.

*"Remember, we carry our home on our back.
Without it, you're just an empty shell..."*



Q&A with **KATIE KA VANG & MELISSA LI**

The first public reading of *Again* was to a packed house that helped constitute one of Mu's most attended New Eyes play reading festivals ever. Katie Ka Vang and Melissa Li had worked with director Nana Dakin and the workshop cast for a week, and on Apr 9, 2022, the audience fell under the spell woven by four actors, a piano, and a rich, candid story that so many people saw aspects of themselves in—despite the fact that the musical was still in development.

One audience member said, "This was the first time I've ever attended a performance where I could personally relate to the characters and work, both personally and culturally. I felt validated and affirmed in my experience as a Hmong woman." Another wrote, "*Again* is a piece I feel like I'm gonna say, 'I was in the room when...' Those artists are crafting a gift for the world, and we are so lucky to see its first tender offering."

Now, almost a year later, we chatted with Vang and Li about what inspired *Again*, how the story came together, and which songs were the most fun to write.

From the beginning, *Again* was a Mu commission (with help from the Jerome Fellowship). Why Mu?

KKV: I think you should ask Mu, "Why me (us)?" haha. Mu has always been one of my artistic homes so it feels natural for me to work with Mu.

ML: Although it's my first time working with Theater Mu, they have been really supportive every step of the process. For me, I was excited to work with a talented playwright such as Katie and debut this show in a vibrant theater city here in Minneapolis/Saint Paul.

Mai See is a memoirist, *Quest* is a filmmaker, and then, of course, *Again* is a musical. Was it a purposeful decision to layer so many storytelling mediums?

KKV: Definitely not purposeful at first, but once we found them (or they found us) we leaned into it. Characters start to tell you who and what they want to be, same with the story. Having said that, writing for me often stems from characters first—like the first images I'll have are of people—and then I'll put them together, and then I'll watch the conversations they have. It's part spirit, part corporeal, lots of dramaturgy, and it sort of teeters between those throughout the process.

Katie, you've mentioned that it was important to tell a cancer story from a Hmong American perspective. Could you tell me more about this, and how it played into the book and music?

KKV: That was the only thing I knew about this piece—that one of the characters had to be Hmong and touched by a cancer experience because I'm Hmong and representation matters. I just felt like why not? Why not Hmong and cancer? I don't personally think it's a show about cancer; I think it's about breaking barriers to realize and find the things one needs in life to feel whole.

Could you both talk about what it was like telling a story (at least partially) based in Katie's personal experiences?

KKV: For me it was cathartic, and sometimes very hard, but the music element made it much easier and funner and less serious. I think I really fell into the trope of a tortured writer, and working with Melissa and this musical gave me a new perspective on theater making and a new kind of magical tool I never gave myself permission to access until now.

ML: What I love about *Again* is the fact that it's not depressing, even though it's about cancer. It's very much in Katie's voice, and she's a funny, joyful, irreverent, edgy person. Her characters are the same way, so I really tried to reflect her vibe in the music and lyrics.

Again weaves together reality, memory, and dreams. Could you tell me more about this style and how it came to be? Or did it just happen organically?

KKV: Definitely more organic. I almost never know what the structure will be until much later in the process. And the dream realm was actually something our director Nana Dakin lifted up, and when she mentioned it, it just opened a whole other door and that was exciting.

What has been the most fun song to write together? The most challenging? Why?

ML: The best songs are the ones where we work closely together, like "Be the Boss of Your Life" and "Lifeboat." Typically, Katie will present to me a clear idea of a scene that we'd both agreed should be a song. A lot of times, Katie will have even written a full scene with dialogue and really specific concepts. From there, I'll write the music and initial lyrics, and we'll tweak the lyrics together.

"Constipation" and "Santorini" are especially fun because they're sort of these humorous stand-alone songs that inject moments of levity into the show, but they also tie in to the larger themes of what the characters struggle with.

As *Again* has evolved, has there been anything that has surprised you about its story or the process of creating it?

ML: Everything has surprised me because the show has changed SO much since we first started working on it in 2020 (it was originally a two-hander)! So the story revealed itself over time only once we started writing—I'd never worked like that before, and it was scary, exhilarating, and at the end of the day, magical.

KKV: I'm always surprised, mostly because I almost NEVER know where I'm going as I write—which in the beginning is a good thing. I'm very much an intuitive writer, which is great in many ways, and also makes it more challenging to narrow down what's at the heart of the writing. So Melissa has been very patient with me.

If you were to describe this whole creative partnership in three words, what would they be?

KKV: Arduous mystic lake.

ML: Discovery, challenge, joy.



Katie Ka Vang (bottom left), Melissa Li (right), director Nana Dakin (bottom center), and the *Again* cast

THEMES IN AGAIN



FOUND FAMILY/TRIBE. Each of the main characters deals with complex feelings in relation to their family members, as well as learning how to forge and improve relationships with their “found family.” Quest and Mai See help each other and bond over their hardship with cancer. Broc reaches out to Mai See, becoming part of her “tribe” even under duress. And Mai See and Shia only have each other to depend on after losing their parents.

STORYTELLING AND REMEMBERING. The practice of remembering holds meaning for those involved in the stories. Mai See, the writer and storyteller, has trouble remembering and needs Shia to recall things—often having to look at pictures to recall. Memory shifts and blurs. Quest, also a storyteller, seeks out where to focus her lens. In the end, all must reconcile the stories they are telling with each others’.

DUALITY AND INTERCONNECTION. Mai See and Shia have complimentary natures, similar but different. They both want to go to Santorini, but Mai See imagines it as freedom from her disease, perhaps her suffering, while Shia sees it as freedom from her responsibilities and caretaking, which may be its own form of suffering. Just like the snail and elephant’s foot symbol both emerge from the same shape, Mai See and Shia are sisters of different natures, cut from the same cloth.

Q&A WITH ALICE ENDO

When scenic designer Alice Endo first read through the script of *Again* in October 2022, the image that drew her in was the snail. Despite how ordinary the little creature may seem, in Katie Ka Vang and Melissa Li's new musical, Endo saw the snail's appearances as a way to break the audience out of reality and transport them to the show's more surreal and dream-like moments.

Fast forward four months later, and *Again* is approaching its world premiere by Theater Mu, running from March 29 through April 16 at Mixed Blood Theatre. Directed by Nana Dakin, this heartfelt and irreverent musical tells the story of Hmong memoirist and cancer survivor Mai See and a young filmmaker named Quest, who is inspired to document Mai See's story despite suffering from chronic cancer herself. And while there aren't, say, giant snail murals in Endo's final scenic design, the symbol served as an important checkpoint as she decided how best to uphold Mai See and Quest's stories.

Before *Again* opened, we sat down with Endo, who has previously worked with Mu as assistant scenic designer on *Man of God* (2022) and design intern on *Today Is My Birthday* (2021). From incorporating ancient Greek scenography, to collaborating with other designers, to explaining just what about that snail struck her, Endo offers insight into creating the world of *Again*.

So the snail stood out to you. Why?

I'm naturally drawn to—and generally, designers looking for visual inspiration in the script get excited about—the moments when we can break out of the mundane world and into a heightened reality, fantasy, or dream. And so in the script, there are the sort of little moments at the beginning of the play, like where a little snail appears and crashes Mai See's desk. You don't know if it's a hallucination, or a fantasy, or what's exactly happening. ... But the snail felt like an important symbol because the rest of the play is very true to the realities of our lives, and so the snail was exciting as a chance to break out of that.

It also represents the connection to Hmong textiles. That's another throughline, the snail and the elephant foot motifs in Hmong textiles. That visual encapsulated a lot of the play's themes, the fantasy elements of it, but also Mai See's relationship with her Hmong identity.

How has your design concept changed from your first instincts to the finished product?

In the beginning, I was playing around with hospital curtains as a motif, and as something that could move on the set and let us see lots of different configurations of the stage. But ultimately, in conversation with Nana, the director, we decided that the play needs to be about real humans, so it doesn't suit the story to visually always be in the hospital. The characters aren't symbols—the play is very specifically about the specific experiences of the humans onstage.. So we chose to dial into that specificity, instead of going in a more abstract visual direction.

From there as a designer, I treated the set as a big puzzle, asking, "How can we get all the furniture on and off, and make the things rotate, and make the flats do what they need to do?"

When you say "the flats," do you mean the rotating triangle columns?

Yeah, we haven't come up with a good name for those. We call them the flats, which isn't the most descriptive term. The idea came from this technique that dates back to ancient Greek scenography.

Q&A WITH ALICE ENDO

... It's this very ancient technique called a periaktoi, where you essentially have a triangular prism, a three-faced surface, that can rotate about a single point in the center. And you could have a couple of them or the whole stage lined up with 40 of them. If they all rotate, it's a way of having three different backdrops using the same set without flying anything in or out.

For this musical, there are so many locations that we need to travel through in the past, and it was important to the director and me that we felt like we were really in those locations. When we were looking at Mai See, we wanted to really be in her apartment and see the little details of her personality. And so, the periaktoi shape and its ability to rotate while not taking up that much space was a really useful trick.

Are there aspects or symbols of Hmong culture that influenced the set design?

Some of that comes in the specificity of Mai See and Shia, the two sisters in this play, and what their apartments look like. It was great to have so many Hmong artists working on the process because people could chip in details to make those settings more specific.

But aside from the textile motifs, the snail and the elephant foot, it felt important not to make the set too simplistically Hmong, if that makes sense. *Again* is about these individual characters who are Hmong grappling with that throughout the play, and with what family and community mean in that context. Mai See is a writer, so she's tapping into a lot of her memories of that cultural identity. But she is so many other things, and the story is about so many other parts of her identity. It was important that we didn't force this show to be the Hmong play, because it's ultimately a show about Mai See, an individual Hmong American woman.

For those who are less familiar with the behind-the-scenes of theater, could you talk more about how you work with all the other designers?

This has been a big collaboration show between Kenji [Shoemaker, properties designer,] and me, because it is realism, so furniture is a huge thing we collaborated on.

I was the first designer brought on and started conversations with Nana back in the early fall. And then, as more designers were added to the process, we were able to have meetings where most of the designers were there, and there wasn't the time pressure of the impending first rehearsal. We were able to brainstorm ideas freely without the rigidity of disciplines, and that was a really great thing.

Sometimes, a set designer has already come up with a set design by the time anyone else gets introduced to the process. In this process, it was great to have input from Erik [Paulson, lighting designer], who also happens to be a set designer, or from Kenji, as the props and set worlds are so closely linked in this play. ... We were able to have a longer form collaboration. And then, as we've gotten closer to production, the collaboration has become much more granular and about specific details like, "If I hang a light here, will this mess with your thing that's hanging behind it?" That collaboration comes easily because we've been working together for a while.

If you were to use three words to describe your design concept for *Again*, what would they be?

Specificity is a word I've said a lot in this conversation. The human details of a person's life and what looking at a person's living room tells you about what's going on in their head, who they are as a character. So specificity.

Fluidity. Ease of transitions and the way that, ideally, in this play scenes flow from one to another, sort of spinning around the main character as she's experiencing everything she is.

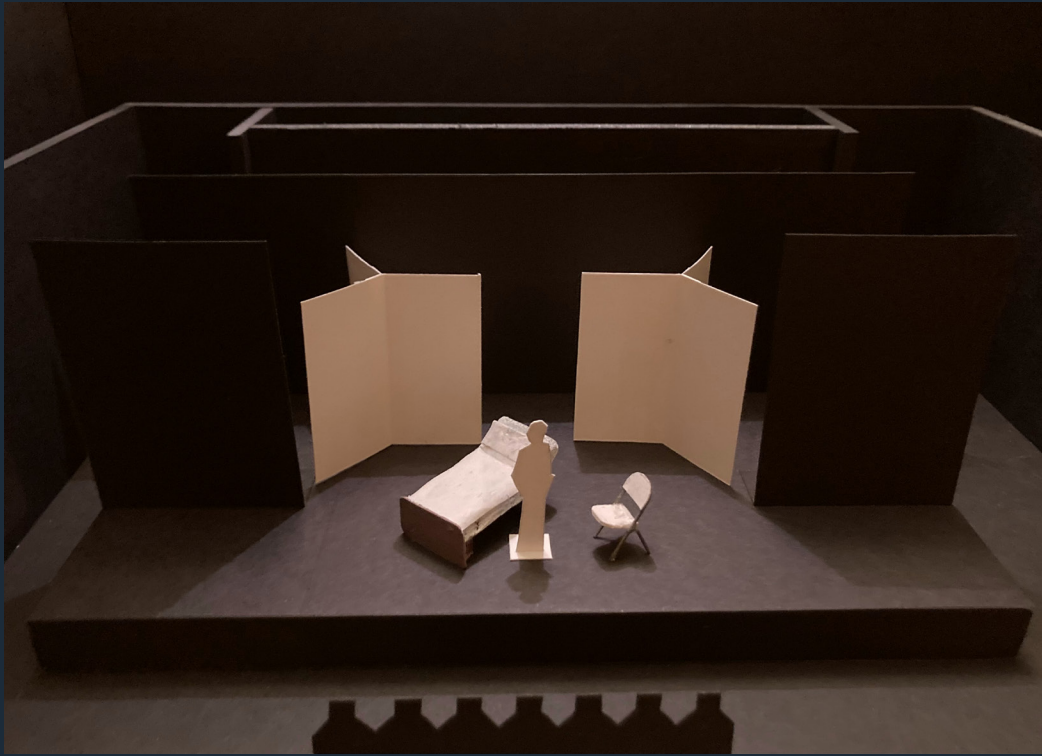
And I'll say cinematic, too, in the sense that I think this is a play that's inspired by TV and movies. And, in a way, what we're trying to do with the set design is to emulate what a set design can be in TV and movies, transplanted to the firehouse at *Mixed Blood* in a more fluid musical theater sense.

What do you hope audiences will take away from *Again*?

The lives represented in the characters of *Again* are very specific to what they're going through. And I think for most people watching it, we're watching someone go through a bigger struggle than a lot of us go through on a day-to-day basis. But there's some detail in *Again*, some bit of humanity, that can teach everyone in the audience a different thing.

This interview has been edited for clarity, length, and style.

SET DESIGN IMAGES



Early concept model featuring periaktoi



Final Scenic Rendering of Broc & Books Bookstore

STARING DOWN THE TIGER STORIES OF HMONG AMERICAN WOMEN

From the publisher: Tsov tom, or tiger bite—an insult in Hmong culture—means you were stupid enough to approach a tiger and get bitten. In this remarkable new book, Hmong American women reclaim that phrase, showing in prose and poetry that they are strong enough and brave enough to stare down the tiger. ...

Only after climbing a mountain in Nepal can Kia M. Lor finally understand her mother's life. Pa Xiong provides a recipe for squirrel stew, remembering in telling detail the gender roles that mark each step—and how her mother broke those rules. Kao Kalia Yang sketches the extraordinary everyday achievements of a Hmong leader, her older sister, Dawb. [More than 20] contributors to this volume bring life and character to the challenges of maintaining identity, navigating changes in gender roles, transitioning to American culture, and breaking through cultural barriers.

These pieces were brought together through the work of Hnub Tshiab: Hmong Women Achieving Together, an organization founded in St. Paul to be a catalyst for lasting cultural, institutional, and social change to improve the lives of Hmong women.

Stop by Magers & Quinn in LynLake to pick up a copy of this “fresh, bold, honest, and always engaging” anthology, or order it at magersandquinn.com.

SPIRITED AN IN-PROGRESS DOCUMENTARY BY JOUA LEE GRANDE

When filmmaker Joua Lee Grande learned that Hmong shamans determined that she would one day become a shaman, she embarked on a journey to capture her experiences and to learn from other shamans about this ancestral spiritual practice and how it is shifting in her generation in America. Joua follows the stories of other shamans and everyday Hmong Americans as they share what it is like to be at the cross-section of identity, cultures and communities.

In Hmong spirituality, shamans/spiritual healers are called upon by community to perform healing rituals to address physical and mental illness or to provide spiritual cleansing. Healers are well respected and spend a lot of time meeting the needs of their community. The Hmong terms for shaman are “txiv neeb” (tsee neng) and “niam neeb” (nia neng). In America, they are called “shaman” in the English language. Some prefer the term “spiritual healer.” | spiriteddocumentary.com

Come back to Mixed Blood Theater on Apr 15 at 4:30 p.m. for a free screening of an excerpt of this documentary, followed by a special Q&A with filmmaker Joua Lee Grande and expert Hmong shaman Billy Lor, moderated by writer and performance artist May Lee-Yang.

LOCAL RESOURCES

GILDA'S CLUB TWIN CITIES

Inside the red doors, Gilda's Club Twin Cities is a place to go for free support for everyone living with any type of cancer—men, women, teens and children—along with their families, friends and caregivers. As an affiliate of the worldwide Cancer Support Community, our program comes with more than 30 years of expertise behind it, a one-of-a-kind, evidence-based program of social and emotional support.

Website: gildasclubtwincities.org

Phone: 612-227-2147

PATHWAYS: A HEALING CENTER

Pathways serves individuals who seek healing for body, mind, heart and spirit. A nonprofit organization created in 1988, Pathways offer free holistic services for people with life-threatening and life-changing health situations—as well as caregivers—who may or may not be using conventional medical treatment. The organization encourages the understanding that healing and curing are two different things and that healing is always available even when a cure is not.

Website: pathwaysminneapolis.org

Phone: 612-822-9061

HMONG CULTURAL CENTER & MUSEUM

Hmong Cultural Center's Mission is to promote the personal development of children, youth, and adults through education while providing resources that enhance cross-cultural awareness between Hmong and non-Hmong. Hmong Cultural Center celebrates and nourishes Hmong culture by teaching music, dance and ceremonial arts. Our storefront museum, speaker's bureau, and online classes about Hmong history and culture elevate individuals to become culturally aware members of the community.

Website: hmongcc.org

Phone: 651-917-9937

HMONG MUSEUM

Hmong Museum is the first and currently only museum dedicated to the preservation and education of Hmong culture, history, experiences, and arts. We do this through the creation and collaboration of programs that document Hmong history & knowledge, exhibit Hmong culture & art, and share Hmong experiences & stories.

Website: hmongmuseummn.org

Phone: 651-428-3979