

The Theatre of Vietnam

BY JOANNA ROTTÉ



Last summer I visited Vietnam with my son who is a doctor studying global health. We landed in Ho Chi Minh City, formerly called Saigon. Who has ever seen so many motorbikes and so few cars on a city street! Knowing it would be rainy in Vietnam, I'd bought a poncho at an Army Navy store back home without realizing the pattern was camouflage

– contemporary digital camouflage. Day one in Vietnam, my son said, "If you put that on, you're going to look like an American soldier." And then it rained. Everyone on a motorbike slowed down just long enough to cover up in a poncho. I put on the camouflage and from then on, with or without the poncho, I felt conspicuous as an American in Vietnam.

We visited the War Remnants Museum. On the grounds outside, there were huge American helicopters and mega tanks. It was war booty, captured by the North Vietnamese or abandoned by the US military. Standing beside a tank, a body becomes insignificant. Inside the Museum we saw exhibits documenting the effects of Agent Orange: wall after wall of photographs of deformity. We entered rooms evidencing the power of napalm to incinerate jungle, village and flesh. I was in college during the peak of the Vietnam War and philosophically not in favor of the United States invasion. While naturally I'd heard of the millions of gallons of chemicals we sprayed, B-52 aerial bombardments, and massacres of civilians, the devastation wasn't visceral to me until the War Remnants Museum, where I looked at immense suffering through tears. There was shame in being an American.

I've considered why the military uses the word theatre in speaking of war. It does seem like something is being staged. Troops dress in costume and carry special props. The players have a scenario to bring to fruition. Each scene reaches a denouement, preferably victory for the protagonist. Reality is heightened and compressed. It's all quite dramatic, a story that has been enacted time and time again. The difference, of course, is that in the theatre of war the dead actors are really dead. Nobody gets up off the ground to take a curtain call. The wounded are really in pain and when the show is over their pain continues.

On a sunny morning, we boarded a tour bus for the Cu Chi Tunnels. Infamously, the District of Cu Chi was a Viet Cong (North Vietnamese) underground headquarters in the South, not far from American-held Saigon. The Cu Chi Tunnels was a maze of more than 75 miles (part of a tunnel network throughout Vietnam) hand dug by peasants and guerillas. Within the tunnels were spaces for sleeping, cooking, eating and meeting, as well as places for hospitals, schools, weapons manufacturing, storage, and command centers. The tunnels were equipped with a filtration system to keep hundreds of residents alive and

a booby trap system to render GI invaders not alive. Now enshrined by the Vietnamese government to "venerate the Heroic Martyr who sacrificed for the fortune of people liberation," Cu Chi is a tourist site.

At the Cu Chi visitor's center, where my son and I were the minority nationality, busloads were invited to watch a black-and-white movie from the 1960's. Set to alternately triumphal and sorrowful music, the movie commended the virtues of smiling Viet Cong and lambasted "crazy, mad devil" Americans. The visitor center ombudsman spoke proudly of how the Viet Cong had used modified farm tools in the defeat of a superpower.

Setting out into the Cu Chi war park, we traversed pathways through the now reforested jungle. We descended into open-air dugouts to move among life-sized models of Viet Cong in postures of cooking, sewing, and living life underground – like on a stage set. (During the War these scenes would have been enacted completely underground.) We shimmied down the entrance of a tunnel, now widened to accommodate tourist bodies, and experienced the claustrophobia of crawling under the earth through pitch black. (The original Cu Chi Tunnels were not only narrow at the entrance but narrowed down even further to a size way too small for an American body to wriggle through. Even without supplies on his back, a GI could and would get stuck in the walls of a tunnel; and horribly, that was that.) We were shown eight different kinds of booby traps that dotted the ground above the Cu Chi Tunnels. We saw the "armpit trap" where an unsuspecting soldier, stepping on jungle leaves scattered over a latticework of twigs concealing a hole, would drop straight down onto bamboo spikes pinning him at the armpits.

For the Viet Cong, the Cu Chi Tunnels was eminent and decisive in "countering against the enemy for saving the country" in what is now called the Anti-American Resistance. Employing B52s, early on in the war the US military massively bombarded Cu Chi. In response Cu Chians dug deeper, dug down four stories to where the bombs didn't reach. Near the end of the war, the US military massively bombed again. Though tunnels collapsed under the bombing, our firepower was ultimately futile in defeating the Viet Cong. They tunneled from Cu Chi to the Saigon River. From there they swam underwater by means of bamboo tubes for breathing, all the way to Saigon, presumably to infiltrate the South Vietnamese "puppet

army" of the USA. (There's another theatre reference: soldiers as puppets!)

At the Cu Chi Tunnels, I thought: What was the sense of the conflict between them and us? What kind of liberation was there supposed to be? I heard Vietnamese say, "We don't hate Americans." But why do they not hate us? We brutally damaged and destroyed the land and the people of Vietnam. Through unthinkable quantities of herbicides, we rampantly brought birth defects to successive generations. We wrought defoliation and deforestation. Through the infamy of incendiary devices, we eviscerated villages and villagers. (The napalm we used in the Vietnam War, petrol mixed with a chemical thickener, attached itself to the skin in the interest of producing fifth degree burns, which means a person is on fire down to the bone.) And when we actually finally departed Vietnam upon our defeat in 1975, we unloaded bombs, apparently too cumbersome to carry home, onto the bridges and roads of South Vietnam. We left a legacy of landmines across the countryside. I heard Vietnamese say, "Why should we hate Americans? We won the war." What did the winners win and at what price?

The Vietnamese of united Vietnam no longer live under the flames of napalm or the stink of Agent Orange, but they live with the leftovers. Our wonderfully smart, gracious and outspoken tour guide, a high school history teacher who can earn more educating a bus of tourists than teaching in a classroom, told us the Vietnamese have won the right to vote, though, he laughed, it's a one-party system. What I noticed wherever my son and I travelled throughout Vietnam, in small towns or the big city and at the seashore, was that the Vietnamese exercise the liberty to do business. Persons may open a clothing shop or sell produce at a market stall or just offer stuff for sale on the street. Everywhere Vietnamese are selling something, and everywhere they are glad of more and more tourists, especially Americans, coming to buy. Surely there were artists, musicians, doctors and professors working somewhere, doing well, but out in the open most people were playing the role of businessman. I hope the liberation of Vietnam evolves toward something more uplifted than the liberation of materialism.

Things are cheap in Vietnam, and the food is thoroughly fresh and delicious. Housing is crowded according to Western dimensions. Public propriety is loose. If one is Vietnamese, he may leave his trash in the gutter or on the beach. He and his cohort may squat on the sidewalk or occupy little plastic chairs to build a fire at the curb for grilling dinner, like an urban picnic. He can ride his motorbike along the one and only North-South highway in the nation (with one lane going north and one lane going south), where bus drivers will honk at him incessantly, and where he can pass everybody else by entering the oncoming lane of traffic. And although in Ho Chi Minh City, the motorbike driver wears a mouth mask against pollution, he is at least above ground.

At a little food stand at the Cu Chi Tunnels, I enjoyed grilled corn on the cob with hot sauce within earshot of a firing range where for a dollar I could have shot a real AK47 or M16 rifle or a M60 machine gun. I could, like other tourists were doing, have shattered the air with blasts of noise. I sat at the food stand encompassed in deafening sound and imagined what it was like for an American soldier, say a 17-year old kid from Newark,

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JOANNA ROTTÉ is a writer, teacher, director and actor. Her books include *Scene Change: A Theatre Diary: Prague, Moscow, Leningrad* and *Acting With Adler*. She is Professor of Theatre at Villanova University and Director of Asian Studies. She performed in Villanova's repertory theatre, in "Long Days Journey Into Night," "Mother Courage," and recently in "The Beautiful Life of the Woman Komachi." She has directed featured productions for the Philadelphia Fringe Festival, including her own plays "Art Talk" and "Prajna" (based on a script by the Tibetan meditation master Chogyam Trungpa). Her play "All Victorious Ocean: the Noble Life of Yeshe Tsogyal, Tantric Yogini" appeared in the Fringe Festival. As a practitioner of Buddhist meditation, she is a member of the Council of Shambhala International.



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by Ronald Rand

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in 1969? What if he were a part of reconnaissance here in the jungle, and it's all so foreign, humid and hot, and he's loaded down with pounds of equipment; and what if there's fire exchange and the air becomes unbearably loud, and maybe he does or doesn't know about the bobby traps – either way is anguish and awful. Like at the best of theatre, sitting there as audience in the war park of the Cu Chi Tunnels, I felt empathy, really terrible empathy, fully for the first time in my life, for the American soldier, and I felt empathy for us all: GI, VC, all.

According to current proclamation, the "profound aspiration" of the Vietnamese people is to be "loving of peace, independent, happy and warmly well-fed permanently." That sounded pretty good to me and liberating. My son thought the Vietnamese looked healthy, excepting the war-torn. I thought the elderly people looked happy and the young people looked anxious. Most liberating, it seemed was that a lot of us could be there together: Europeans, Australians, French, Vietnamese, and Americans. We had harmed each other and ourselves. We had killed each other. Now we share a bus back from the Cu Chi Tunnels.

Update on Theatre in Philadelphia – Jiri Ziska, founding co-Artistic Director of the Wilma Theatre in Philadelphia, was a survivor of Czechoslovakia's revolution against totalitarianism. Jiri died this last winter. For three decades he directed smart and memorable theatre in Philadelphia. I knew him as a genuinely nice, genuinely curious person. Early on – I think it must have been 1984 – I worked for the Wilma as a voice teacher. Though head of the Wilma, Jiri came as a student to my class. For the Wilma Theatre's remembrance of Jiri Ziska, please visit: www.wilmatheater.org/history ♦2012

Written for The Soul of The American Actor

"Strive for what is eternal in art, which will always remain young and close to human hearts."

– Constantin Stanislavsky



The Actor's Art and Craft

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art will become your doorway to the entire world.

But make no mistake – the actor's life is a hard one. Even the most recognized names in our industry struggle. But should you choose to pursue this craft fully, if you pledge yourself to your work, if you let it feed you, nourish you, create and re-create you – no matter what happens, no matter what the world throws at you – you will always be able to hold your head up high. When people ask you, "What do you do?" You can respond with pride that you are an actor. You are an artist. And if they don't understand, there's no point to saying anything further. ♦2008

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