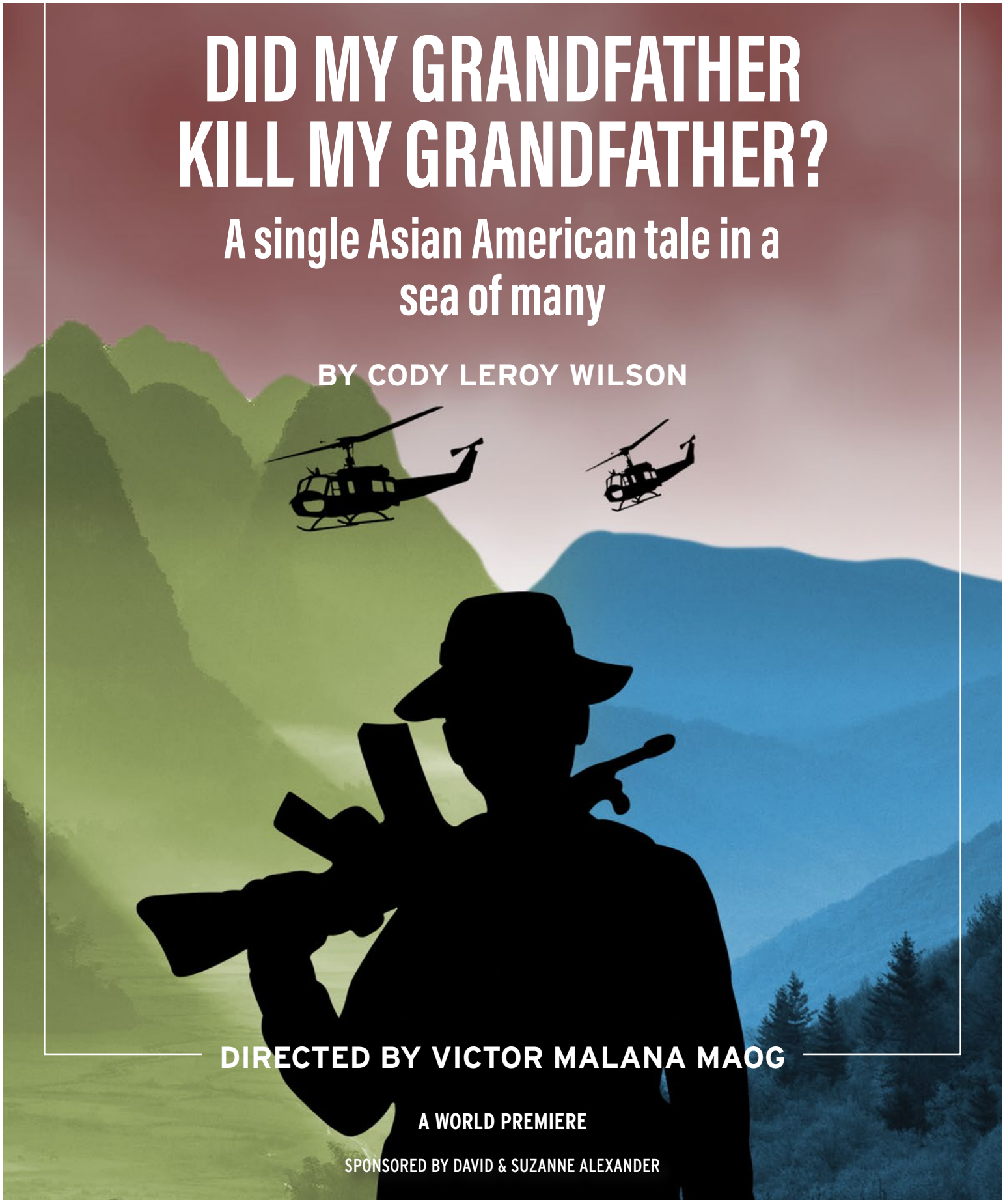
THE CONTEMPORARY COMPANION

DID MY GRANDFATHER KILL MY GRANDFATHER?

A single Asian American tale in a sea of many

BY CODY LEROY WILSON



DIRECTED BY VICTOR MALANA MAOG

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THE CONTEMPORARY COMPANION

for *Did my Grandfather Kill my Grandfather*

by Cody Leroy Wilson

CREATED BY JACQUELINE GOLDFINGER

THE CONTEMPORARY COMPANION is a dramaturgical component designed to enhance your **CATF** experience. We've designed Volumes to act as counterparts to the five BOLD, NEW PLAYS, in this year's Festival. You can sample, survey, or study these online offerings—with no fear of spoilers!

Each companion will give you—

- An introduction to the creative teams
- An exploration of the world of the plays
- A deep-dive into the themes and conversations surrounding the plays

Come and join us as we **think**theater and **talk**theater at CATF in 2025.

CODY LEROY WILSON is a Vietnamese actor/playwright from West Virginia with a BFA in Acting from West Virginia University. Cody is honored to have his play, *Did My Grandfather Kill My Grandfather?,* have its world premiere with CATF. Previously, the play was workshopped during Pan Asian Repertory's NuWorks Festival in 2023 in New York City. He also debuted another one-man show, *Halfanese–Two Halves of a Whole Idiot,* with Pan Asian during their 2024 NuWorks Festival. Off Broadway credits include: *My Man Kono* (world premiere) with Pan Asian Rep, *Handbagged* at 59E59 Theater during the Brits Off Broadway Festival. NYC credits include: *Prisoners of Quai Dong* with Prism Stage, *Titus Andronicus* and *Midsummer* with NYSX. Regional credits include: *Book of Will, Handbagged* (US premiere), and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* with Roundhouse Theater, *As You Like It* at Folger Shakespeare Library, *Measure for Measure* at Hudson Valley Shakespeare. Film/TV include: *Hello Tomorrow, Impractical Jokers, Russian Doll, 11 Blocks to Go,* and *Gravedigger* "Pilot." Cody dedicates this show to his family, those he is grateful enough to know and love, as well as the family he has never met from Vietnam. As a Vietnamese artist, it is Cody's goal to uplift the stories and voices of Asian Americans everywhere.

INTERVIEW WITH PLAYWRIGHT CODY LEROY WILSON

Conducted and edited by Sharon J. Anderson

CATF: At the beginning of your play, you write: "The goal of the play is to take the images from my personal life experience and the daydreams of the story inside my head." What were those daydreams?
CLW: As a kid, I felt like a zebra in a den of lions. I was aware that I was on the outside of the pack. In my daydreams, I wondered, "If I were to embrace all parts of me, what would that look like? What would an Asian in West Virginia look like?" So I started with Shakespeare and all these grand speeches with simile, imagery and metaphor, and thought, "That's how I feel. I need to find more words to describe my ecosystem. If I could say everything I can feel, how big can I make it?"

Had your grandfather and grandmother told you about Vietnam?
No. It wasn't censorship, it was a choice. My grandparents were very stern with their love, and did not want to talk about how we were different.

Your mother never said anything about your heritage?
No. When I asked my mother about what it was like in Vietnam, she said, "I don't know." That was literally the conversation. When I asked my grandmother, she said it was a very easy story: your mother was in an orphanage in Vietnam, and we adopted her and brought her home. Those simple facts. We didn't talk about the war in our house, even with my grandfather's PTSD.

In 2017, a Military.com article said this about Vietnam: "**The war's effects, it has been suggested, extend far beyond those who directly experienced it. The shadow of Vietnam falls on their children and grandchildren, who suffer from the psychological and emotional toll it takes." In this play, are you trying to define the shadow?**
Yes, I place myself in the shadow to uncover the shadow.

When I first learned about the Vietnam War in high school, I thought, "Oh, something's wrong.

Something here isn't truthful." All I heard was that America did everything right. We had all the means to do it and we did it well. While looking through books and seeing dead Vietnamese, I thought, "You all are championing this? How does no one else in this classroom feel empathy towards me right now?" It was terrifying. No one was being held accountable. I was in emotional turmoil and for everyone else, it was just an everyday history class. I never felt more displaced.

In your play, you write, "I knew that the Vietnam War was a chapter in American history that had a veil over its truth. If it were a painting, you would see water marks distorting the image, making it hazy and nebulous. If you stared at it long enough, your eyes would confuse you, and you wouldn't know what lines were truly set and where they became blurred. Nowadays, we call them 'fuzzy lines' or alternative facts. It's amazing how history repeats itself." How is history repeating itself at the moment?

What I think is unforgivable is that we are in an era that allots for honest, vast communication, and the amount of abuse in that power is astounding. I've been listening to a new documentary series on the Vietnam War that features all of the hidden tapes between Kennedy and McNamara and LBJ. What you hear for the first time is the truth. You hear, "We don't have the power. We can't win this war," but it gets to the point that they needed to give some good news to the American people, so they gave them body counts. "We'll talk numbers. If we give them the body counts, we will show them that we are winning." Now it's a similar thing from election lies, to what Russia is doing to Ukraine, to how many immigrants we are shipping off. It's all about numbers because unfortunately, the civilian population is easily manipulated. We have lost the ability to think critically because of, in my opinion, the cellphone. People choose what is comfortable and assimilate to those around them. We are damning ourselves by aligning for safety. My people against your people. How are we still doing that?

Your play includes many violent, powerful and brutal images from the way, including the immolation of a Buddhist monk.

I remember the first time I saw the image of that monk. I was still in high school, and I was amazed by how quickly everyone else could turn the page. Just because it happened decades ago doesn't mean it wasn't impactful. Some people grow up not understanding the gravity of history. The image of that monk stopped the world for half a second. In 1963, this monk set himself on fire, but more importantly, Kennedy was shot. That is the important part for America.

At the end of your play, you tell us that, "we each have a special, unique, sometimes heartbreaking take of how we came to be here. What I discovered about being Asian American is that it is ownership of your story. Not apologizing to the past you can't change. Embracing what you know to be true: living life to the fullest by holding on to what's most important to you. And above all else, knowing that you have the right to be happy regardless of the color of your skin."

Empathy, if it is not taught, needs to be learned. The only way you learn about empathy is when you learn more about yourself. I learned to empathize with others because I realized my individual story was filled with empathy. If I feel this intensely about myself, I can only imagine what nine billion other people on the planet feel. As much as my play is about me, it feels like an "every man" play. The most amazing experience I ever had as an actor and an artist was after I previewed this play for the first time at the Pan Asian Repertory Theatre in New York City. Asian patrons came up to me to share their immigration stories from Korea, Japan, Thailand, The Philippines, etc. They had so much passion. I gave people permission to tell their story. It was awesome. Now I have a larger purpose that drives me more; makes me produce more work. I already have more plays dedicated to Vietnam that I am trying to curate. It became a mission statement: I am going to become a playwright for my people.

Do you gravitate toward one heritage over another?
Not really, because I love wearing flannels and hiking mountains, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't like a good cup of moonshine. West Virginia is my heritage. I love that I can be a representation of these two vastly different peoples. My family in West Virginia was very rural and I love them unconditionally. I can't tell you how much I learned from all of those people. Likewise, there's this entire group of people that I've never met that I feel like I've gotten so much enrichment out of. I have this imaginative family where I feel like I am supported and loved and motivated by.

On your Instagram account, you share: "If you ever feel like your story isn't enough to create art around, don't count yourself out! Everyone has a tale, shout yours from the rooftops."
I want to empower others. I never knew that was a goal.

What do you think of this line—a recurring theme—from Samuel Beckett's novel, *The Unnamable*: "Words are all we have."
That didn't feel true for me for the first half of my life. Thought was all I had. Words are spoken, and I left so many things unspoken. I had crippling social anxiety. I didn't want to talk to people. Then I became an actor. When I started to speak in college—and it really was through the power of Shakespeare—I finally got words that mattered. I realized that my voice has strength. And as I write and as I perform—even if it's in the smallest role, sometimes literally five words—those are the words I have. Neil deGrasse Tyson said, "People will say, 'like' and 'um' because they are not thinking about what they want to say." If words are all you have, you should probably think about what you want to say.

PLAYWRIGHT'S INSPIRATION

Writing a play that is both intensely personal and steeped in a specific historical moment presents unique challenges. The playwright must braid together intimate moments, family history, and overarching cultural events. In the Playwright interview, Wilson discusses his approach to creating a show based on his lived experience. In addition, he has shared with us the list of resources that he used when writing the play to help him understand the dramatic impact of historical events.

FICTION

- *Novel Without a Name* by Duong Thu Huong (https://bookshop.org/p/books/novel-without-a-name-duong-thu-huong/7552168)
- *The Sorrow of War* by Bao Ninh (https://bookshop.org/p/books/the-sorrow-of-war-a-novel-of-north-vietnam-bao-ninh/10381267)

FIRST-HAND ACCOUNTS

- *We Were There: Vietnam: Eyewitness Battlefield Stories* Edited by Hal Buell (https://a.co/d/0yAjYjE)
- Vietnamese Boat People (https://www.vietnameseboatpeople.org/podcast)
- *Turning Point: The Vietnam War* (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt36242714)
- *The Greatest Beer Run Ever* by John Donohue (https://bookshop.org/p/books/the-greatest-beer-run-ever-movie-tie-in-a-memoir-of-friendship-loyalty-and-war-j-t-molloy/18500945)

MOVIES

- *Good Morning, Vietnam* (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0093105/)
- *Apocalypse Now* (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0078788/)
- *We Were Soldiers* (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0277434/)
- *Full Metal Jacket* (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0093058/)

MONA KASRA is an Iranian-American new media artist, interdisciplinary scholar, and Associate Professor of Digital Media Design at the University of Virginia. Her artwork has been exhibited extensively in galleries and film festivals across the U.S. and worldwide, and she has received two Helen Hayes Award nominations in the Outstanding Projections/Media Design category. Mona holds a PhD in Arts & Technology. Selected design credits: *This Much I Know* at Theater J; *Unseen*, *Till Trilogy*, *Andy Warhol in Iran* at Mosaic Theater; *We Swim, We Talk, We Go to War* at Golden Thread; and *Holy Bone*, *Flesh World*, *(w)hole* at Dead White Zombies.

AN INTERVIEW WITH PROJECTION DESIGNER MONA KASRA

CATF: How long have you been designing projections for theatre and live performance? What drew you to projection design?
MK: I've been designing media and projections for live performance for over a decade. My journey began through collaborations with DWZ, an avant-garde ensemble in Dallas led by artistic director Thomaz Riccio. The bold, experimental approach—particularly through site-specific, immersive performances in vacant or abandoned spaces like warehouses in West Dallas—deeply influenced my creative path. These early collaborations showed me the creative potentials of projection design in live performance. Coming from a background in fine arts and new media, I was drawn to how projections could become integral to storytelling.

I'm also currently an Associate Professor of Digital Media Design at the University of Virginia, where I teach courses on projection design, projection mapping, immersive media, and interactive digital art. My work as an educator continues to inform and expand my creative practice.

What is your process when you first receive a script?
I usually begin by reading the play to understand the story, and to connect with its themes, emotional arc, and visual language. As a designer, I also pay close attention to how the playwright uses specific imagery and stage directions to shape the narrative. In my subsequent readings, I take detailed notes on time, place, tonal shifts, and technical needs. This helps me identify how projections might support, enhance, or complicate the storytelling.

The playwright shared pictures of his family within the script itself which informed the designer's creative process. This picture of a young Patsy was included in the script.

Photo credit: Cody LeRoy Wilson Family Archives

How do you move from the first reading or discussion of a play through your process to a final design?
Early collaboration with the scenic designer is essential! We need to work closely to ensure the set is projection-friendly—identifying surfaces, considering projector placement, and accounting for projectors' technical requirements. This prevents logistical issues later and enables a seamless integration of design elements.

Once the set design is in finalized, I move into visual research, develop scene-by-scene breakdowns, and begin sketching visual ideas. This iterative process continues to evolve in response to conversations with the director and the creative team.

You're also an accomplished time-based/media artist. Does your independent art and your projection design influence one another?
Thank you! Absolutely—they're deeply interconnected. My creative practice encompasses video art, immersive installations, and experimental storytelling, all grounded in my training in fine arts, technology, and media studies. I approach projection design as more than a visual backdrop; to me the visuals layer is a meaningful, dramaturgical tool. I want the projections to carry emotional and narrative weight, not just serve as spectacle.

In terms of design for *Did My Grandfather…*, what were your first impressions when you read the play?
Cody's script resonated deeply with me. The exploration of hyphenated identity, the legacy of war and its aftermath, and its reverberations in civilian lives felt both personal and urgent. As someone who grew up in post-revolutionary Iran during the Iran-Iraq War and later immigrated to the U.S., I saw reflections of my own experience in the themes Cody explores. His ability to present those experiences with authenticity and vulnerability drew me in immediately.

This is a photo of the playwright's grandparents, LeRoy and Patsy

Photo credit: Cody LeRoy Wilson Family Archives

As you got to know the play better, what ideas or images began to inform your creative process?
Did My Grandfather… is a deeply personal piece, and Cody had already identified moments where projections could amplify the storytelling. Overall, some projections provide historical or contextual layers, while others evoke interior states—dreams, memories, emotional undercurrents. The design also shifts the audience between environments and temporal spaces.

How did Cody's family photos inform your design choices?
The images of Cody and his family appear throughout the play and serve as powerful visual anchors. They identify the characters, and help deepen the emotional connection. They are integral to the story.

What other images, sounds, or inputs influenced your design choices?
Archival footage and media from the Vietnam War era help ground the play in its historical context. Projections also serves as a visual indicator between different environments and landscapes by transporting the audience between different times and locations.

The playwright shared photos with designers that he found compelling when doing research on the Vietnam War like this image of a soldier moving kids to safety during fighting around Saigon.

Photo credit: AP Photo Archives

What do you hope the audience takes away—from the show and from your projection work specifically?
I hope the projections support and elevate Cody's performance and the broader narrative. Good projection design, like any element of theater, should be in service of the story. When done well, it creates a unified, cohesive experience that draws the audience deeper into the emotional and thematic currents of the play.

Do you have any favorite books or articles about design that you would recommend to someone interested in learning more about projection design?
A foundational resource I often recommend—and use in my classes—is *Digital Media, Projection Design, and Technology for Theatre* by Alex Oliszewski, Daniel Fine, and Daniel Roth. It's a comprehensive introduction to projection design and media integration in performance contexts.

OPERATION BABYLIFT: AN ONGOING VIETNAM WAR CONTROVERSY

While Wilson's play, *Did My Grandfather Kill My Grandfather?*, focuses on a single child's adoption by an American soldier in Vietnam, thousands of Vietnamese children were airlifted to the U.S. as part of Operation Babylift.

It's estimated that over 10,000 Vietnamese civilians flooded the U.S. Embassy and 5,000 made it onto helicopters evacuating the city.

photo credit AP Photo Files, 1975

In April 1975—in what would be the final days of the Vietnam War—U.S. troops and allies scrambled to escape the advancing North Vietnamese Army. Panic seized Saigon. Homes were abandoned, businesses liquidated, and families separated in the melee.

Over a million Vietnamese fled by land, sea, and air with only the clothes on their backs and small bundles of belongings in their arms. One of the most iconic images of the fall of Saigon shows thousands of people attempting to scale the 14-foot wall surrounding the U.S. Embassy in hopes of being airlifted out of the city.

In the chaos, President Ford announced that the U.S. would airlift orphans out of Saigon. This was not an entirely new endeavor. Throughout the War, American soldiers and families had adopted individual children and flown them to the U.S.

However, as Saigon was falling, over 3,300 young children were mass evacuated from the city, mostly in military cargo planes bound for Western countries. Some of the children were pre-adopted by families in the West and others were not. ("Pre-adoption" meant families had agreed to adopt a child without first meeting them.)

Children were initially airlifted in military cargo planes but as the North Vietnamese Army rapidly closed in on Saigon, American businessman Robert Macauley mortgaged his house to charter commercial planes like this one to transport children. Often, flight attendants cared for the children on the long flights.

photo credit Gerald Ford Presidential Library

In the haste to airlift children, paperwork was sometimes mislaid or entirely overlooked. As a result, the exact number of children airlifted and their familial identity is unknown.

Operation Babylift was hailed as critical humanitarian outreach by the American government and international aid organizations. As supplies dwindled orphanages could barely feed their wards. In addition, as Western staff evacuated Saigon, there was no one to ensure that the children would survive. It was also rumored that orphans who were progeny of American GIs or looked mixed race would be targeted by the incoming North Vietnamese Army. However, the implementation of Babylift also raised complicated moral, ethical, and legal questions including: Are these children actually orphans? According to PBS' *American Experience*, "A worker with the U.S. Agency for International Development in Saigon, Bobby Nofflet, recalled the tumultuous days of Babylift: 'There were large sheaves of papers and batches of babies. Who knew which belonged to which?' ... Tran Tuong Nhu, one of a small number of Vietnamese Americans living in the Bay Area at the time, volunteered to assist with Babylift arrivals in San Francisco's Presidio. She and the other volunteers were surprised to hear children talking about their living family members. Many of the children did not appear to be orphans at all."

To pause the fast-track adoption of Babylift children in America, nurse Muoi McConnell filed a lawsuit arguing that some of the children might not be orphans based on inconsistent paperwork, the children's own testimony, and cultural differences. For example, sometimes in Vietnam parents facing poverty placed children in orphanages, so the children were cared for, but the caregivers did not intend for the children to be adopted. Instead, the caregivers would visit periodically then return and retrieve the children when they could care for them again. The Vietnamese parents might not have understood that leaving their child in an orphanage, especially one run by Western staff, meant that the child could be adopted by another family.

McConnell's suit was unsuccessful and agencies continued to rapidly process Babylift adoptions. Over the next few years, a handful of Vietnamese families tracked down their airlifted children and sued for custody with varying degrees of success.

For the past 50 years, the emotional and psychological ramifications on children who were adopted from Vietnam during the war have raised complex questions surrounding the removal of

children from their culture and the long-term effects on their identity and well-being. In 2025's *Out of the Fog,* The Verge reported:

"A sociology student named Indigo Willing started one of the first groups for people adopted from Vietnam, called Adopted Vietnamese International (AVI). Willing was adopted from Vietnam to the suburbs of Sydney in 1972. Her family was loving, she told me, but that didn't make her forget how she got there. She likened adopted people to lost souls wandering the earth, searching for answers.

'There's not a day that I don't look in the mirror and I wonder, 'What is my face? Who are my people? Where do I come from?' she told me. AVI is now a Facebook group of around 2,000 members, where people share baby photos and scans of government flight rosters. They list the names of their birth mothers and 50-year-old addresses, asking, 'If you know anything, please let me know.' They fundraise for trips back to Vietnam to hand out DNA kits, in the hopes of expanding the databank of birth families. They organize heritage tours. Willing has traveled back to Vietnam, but she's never found her birth parents."

Operation Babylift also had an impact on international law. According to Cindy Trieu's *Litigation, Legislation, and Lessons: "Operation Babylift" and International Adoption*:

"The disagreements, the controversy, and the public nature of Operation Babylift caused lawmakers to reevaluate whether the type of regulation that existed for domestic adoption should also exist for international adoption. The U.S. legal system and its overall structure were incompatible in dealing with international adoption on a class action basis. On an individual basis, court cases show that state law was too varied to address the overarching scope of international adoption...Approximately a decade after Operation Babylift, new laws such as the "Declaration on Social and Legal Principles Relating to the Protection and Welfare of Children" and the Hague Convention emerged that directly addressed such issues. The role of the extended family, the importance of reunification, and the emphasis on mutual understanding between the parents and countries involved show that these laws were put into place in order to avoid another Operation Babylift."

Operation Babylift adoptee Kim Lan Duong wears a traditional Vietnamese dress during ceremonies commemorating the 40th anniversary of Operation Babylift where she and other adoptees connected with the soldiers and volunteers who cared for them.

photo credit AP Photos/Mel Evans

In the history of the Vietnam War, Operation Babylift remains a controversial topic. While there might never be a consensus on the success of the mission, it gives us a window into the complexity of humanitarian work in a time of war.

If you wish to learn more about Operation Babylift, a good starting place is the PBS series *American Experience*. (https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/daughter-operation-babylift-1975/).

KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING

Did My Grandfather… explores themes of identity, immigration, and the American Dream. Keep conversations from the play going long after the curtain falls by diving into these resources.

BOOKS

- *Journey of the Adopted Self* by Betty Jean Lifton (https://bookshop.org/p/books/journey-of-the-adopted-self-a-quest-for-wholeness-revised-betty-jean-lifton/12394934)
  This is an accessible and engaging non-fiction book about an adopted child's identity journey by a well-regarded counselor in the adoption community.

- *Partly Colored: Asian Americans and Racial Anomaly in the Segregated South* by Leslie Bow (https://bookshop.org/p/books/partly-colored-asian-americans-and-racial-anomaly-in-the-segregated-south-leslie-bow/6519469)
  This critically acclaimed non-fiction academic text analyzes American popular culture to investigate the ways in which Southern laws and culture, like segregation laws and popular music, shape the Asian American immigrant experience in the Deep South.

- *Half and Half: Writers on Growing Up Biracial and BiCultural* edited by Claudine Chiawei O'Hearn (https://bookshop.org/p/books/half-and-half-writers-on-growing-up-biracial-and-bicultural-claudine-c-o-hearn/8497095)
  Eighteen poignant and insightful essays that address the difficulties of not fitting into and the benefits of being part of two worlds. Through the lens of personal experience, they offer a broader spectrum of meaning for race and culture.

- *Mexican WhiteBoy* by Matt de la Peña (https://bookshop.org/p/books/mexican-whiteboy-matt-de-la-pena/15284605?)
  This thoughtful Newbery Award-winning and *New York Times* bestselling YA novel is a story of friendship, acceptance, biracial family, and the struggle to find your identity in a world of definitions.

- *We All Live Here* by Jojo Moyes (https://bookshop.org/p/books/we-all-live-here-jojo-moyes/21480263?ean=9798217067473&next=t)
  A light "summer read" novel about a blended family from a NY Times bestselling author.

THEATRE

- *Yellow Face* by David Henry Hwang (https://bookshop.org/p/books/yellow-face-tcg-edition-david-henry-hwang/10489011)
  This funny and provocative play is a contemporary American classic. In the play, an Asian American playwright protests yellowface casting in the blockbuster musical *Miss Saigon*, only to mistakenly cast a white actor as the Asian lead in his own play. It addresses the complexities of racial identity in America.

- *Cambodian Rock Band* by Lauren Yee (script: https://www.amazon.com/dp/0573707243?_encoding=UTF8&psc=1&ref_=cm_sw_r_ffobk_cp_ud_dp_XYSMC9G4N0ATVQWY2X9T & music: https://www.amazon.com/Cambodian-Rock-Band-Original-Recording/dp/B085RSFBNN)
  In this captivating play with music, Chum fled Cambodia in 1978 and narrowly escaped the murderous Khmer Rouge regime. Thirty years later he returns in search of his wayward daughter Neary. Jumping back and forth in time, this thrilling mystery meets rock concert as both father and daughter are forced to face the music of the past. It explores the shifting idea of identity and familial history over multiple generations.

- Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* (https://leonardbernstein.com/works/view/9/west-side-story) and Lin-Manuel Miranda's *In the Heights* (https://playbill.com/production/in-the-heights-richard-rodgers-theatre-vault-0000003064)
  These contemporary classic American musicals explore immigration, ethnicity, and the American Dream in New York City in different eras.

FILM AND TELEVISION

- *Minari* written and directed by Lee Isaac Chung (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt10633456/)
  A tender and sweeping film about what roots us, *Minari* follows a Korean-American family that moves to an Arkansas farm in search of their own American Dream.

- *Fresh Off the Boat* created by Nahnatchka Khan (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3551096/?ref_=ext_shr_lnk)
  This popular sitcom, loosely inspired by the life of chef Eddie Huang, revolves around the Huangs, a Taiwanese-American family and touches on themes of multigenerational immigration and assimilation.

- *Three Identical Strangers* by Tim Wardle (https://www.amazon.com/Three-Identical-Strangers-Tim-Wardle/dp/B07F7YWTKH)
  This powerful documentary tells the extraordinary true story of Robert Shafran, Eddy Galland, and David Kellman. These identical triplets were separated at birth and reunited by chance at age 19.