

“The story must be told in the traditional way, in order to preserve our culture,” my grandmother sighed. Grandma’s comment on the play I was to direct for my class’s entry in the school-wide talent show was only one of many obstacles I would encounter along the way.

The inspiration for the play struck me while I was reading a traditional Vietnamese fairytale to one of my young cousins. The story recounted how My Nuong, our most famous princess, selected her husband. As a proof of his prowess, every competitor was required to demonstrate his talent before the royal family by performing an impressive deed. The legend is one of the founding tales of our nation. Every Vietnamese child knows it by heart, and the story is always told in the same way. I thought it had grown rather stale. It was time to give My Nuong a make-over. To “globalize” the plot, My Nuong’s suitors would be an array of luminaries such as Vietnam’s Saint Giong, France’s Napoleon, China’s Confucius, and America’s Abraham Lincoln, all aiming for a place in the beautiful princess’s heart. I was determined to make this play the grandest in the history of my high school’s annual talent show.

My creative vision encountered swift opposition, and not only from my grandmother. In contrast to American education, which places great emphasis on the importance of extracurricular activities, Vietnamese high school education focuses entirely on preparing students for Vietnam’s extremely competitive university entrance examinations. Eleventh graders at my school, the country’s best-known and most competitive, were at the epicenter of this pressure cooker. Needless to say, my play was received with resentment when I introduced it to my overworked classmates. “Exams are coming up. We cannot waste time

on nonsense! And besides, this isn't the way the tale of My Nuong is supposed to be told!" Our class president summed up the prevailing view. This was not the first time one of my ideas was dismissed. This time, however, I pledged it would be different.

I labored to persuade my parents to permit me to direct the play; they feared that between the play and my tutoring at the SOS village for orphan children, I would not have enough time to devote to my studies. Cajoling my classmates into sacrificing some of their precious study time was an equally daunting task. I argued that participating in the play would provide some balance in their lives, a healthy respite from the 18 hour days which were the norm for my classmates. Ensuring the participation of several talented actors required me to strike several "bargains." I agreed to help Napoleon with her English grammar, and review trigonometry with Confucius. (I drew the line at watching Abraham Lincoln's baby sister.)

We practiced for weeks leading up to the talent show. The only major mishap was when Napoleon's grandfather showed up during one of our practices and dragged her home to study. I agreed that Napoleon would be able to work on her lines at home. For me, the stress was crushing. With only days to go before the talent show, the chairman of my English department informed me that he was counting on me to win the national English Olympiad this year. Instead of sympathy from my parents, I received a lecture on "responsibilities" and "setting priorities." My grandmother didn't have to say anything; I knew she was upset. No matter how many cups of bitter green Vietnamese tea I drank to stay up, the stack of work on my desk only grew higher.

Finally, the day of the talent show arrived. My stomach performed pinwheels. From my perch next to the stage I saw my grandmother sitting in the first row. I hoped all the work would be worthwhile. I prayed that no one would accuse me of besmirching Vietnamese history.

When the curtain closed, there was a pause, and then the hall filled with applause. Most gratifying to me was my grandmother's wide smile. But I didn't have time to bask in the glow of success for long. "Napoleon" insisted that I review gerunds.