

49 ghosts

A Play
by
Hoa Pham

August 2002

Copyright Hoa Pham

Set:

The centre table serves as the hospital bed in the opening scene. The kitchen contains a cupboard where dishes and cutlery are stored, and an ancestral shrine. The shrine consists of a small table with a picture of BA flanked by red candles and a vase with gladioli in it. In front of the picture is a plate of fruit and an incense holder.

The projection of Avoltketera can be a slide projection or actual statue of the goddess of mercy, a representation of the temple and surrounds.

Stage right serves as Hong's bedroom, downstage right is a school yard representing the outside world. Downstage left and centre is left open as a walkway.

Cast:

HONG: A fourteen year old Vietnamese - Australian girl.

VAN: Hong's father

NHAN: Hong's stepmother

PHUC: Hong's ten year old brother

ANIA: Hong's Anglo Saxon best friend

GIANG: Hong's aunt

MONK

MS KNOX, a teacher

THREE VIETNAMESE HOMEBOYS

BA: Hong's grandmother

Playwright's note:

The mantra cited in English in the script is the Buddhist heart sutra. In the original conception of the play this would be performed in Vietnamese. Some of the dialogue was also originally conceived to be spoken in Vietnamese.

This script is loosely based around a novella 49 Ghosts (Longman 1998) also written by the author.

Scene 1.

A tableau.

HONG (fourteen year old school girl) is standing by the side of the hospital bed. She is looking at BA (GRANDMA) who is lying draped in a sheet with her eyes closed. VAN (Hong's father) is holding a bowl of rice in front of the body. NHAN (Hong's STEP MOTHER, severely dressed) is standing next to him holding incense. GIANG (Hong's aunt and Van's thirty-ish sister) and PHUC (Hong's younger ten year old BROTHER) are on the other side of the bed. Everyone has been crying.

VAN places the bowl of rice in front of BA. NHAN lights the incense sticks she is holding and sticks them in the rice bowl. Smoke rises.

VAN pulls the white sheet over BA's face. The FAMILY line up as pallbearers and lift BA's body up.

A bell chimes, a precursor to the ceremonies about to occur. The FAMILY proceed to the front of the stage carrying BA's body and then exit stage left.

Scene 2.

VAN walks into the kitchen in his dressing gown. He reaches for the dishes to set the table for breakfast.

Then he stops as if hearing something.

VAN turns around.

VAN: Ma?

He looks over his shoulder to the head chair at the table and no one is there.

A bell chimes.

VAN puts a hand through his hair and puts the dishes down, hands shaking. He glances at the shrine where his mother's picture sits.

He unsteadily sets out four places. NHAN joins him followed closely by HONG and PHUC. They sit at their respective places at the sides of the table.

VAN then sets a plate at the head of the table. This seat is empty and is where BA used to sit.

HONG: Dad why are you setting a place for grandma?

NHAN: Ssshhh Hong

PHUC: Where has Ba gone? Is she coming back?

VAN: Hong, Phuc, you're both old enough to know. Your grandma hasn't gone yet. In 49 days her spirit will go to Nirvana. But at the moment she's still with us.

HONG is astounded and shocked.

VAN: I felt a presence at the foot of the bed. After we came back from the hospital. She's still here.

NHAN: We have to maintain the shrine and then Ba will be happy. (to VAN) It's a shame you don't have any good photos of her when she was alive.

VAN looks set upon. HONG glances at her father then at the empty place.

HONG gets up and goes into her bedroom. PHUC follows her. NHAN watches disapprovingly and HONG ignores her.

PHUC: It still smells of grandma in here. (pause) I woke up and saw Ba at my door. I think she was trying to wake me up.

HONG: You saw her too?

PHUC nods and then goes back to the kitchen as if he has said nothing special. HONG stares after him in disbelief then at BA's bed. She sits down on her own bed and starts to cry.

Scene 3.

ANIA walks into the schoolyard space, an Anglo Australian girl in her school uniform, smoking. She looks over her shoulder and HONG looks up from her bed. HONG walks over to talk to ANIA.

HONG :Ania do you believe in ghosts?

ANIA: Yeah I see dead people.

HONG: No but seriously. I think..I think my family's seeing grandma.

ANIA: But she's dead isn't she? (pause) Oh. (pause)
You mean your entire family is seeing ghosts?

HONG: No only dad and Phuc I think. Not me. Or
Nhan. But Nhan is just my step mother. She
doesn't count.

ANIA (looking at her oddly) :When my dad died I only
dreamt about him. I didn't see him.

HONG: I don't get it. Dad is putting out dishes for
Ba as if she's still there. But if she's still
around she should be seeing me!

*ANIA stops smoking for a moment and looks at HONG. Then
the school bell cuts across their conversation.*

Scene 4.

*GIANG and NHAN are sitting at the kitchen table snipping
white pieces of material into headbands. HONG goes to the
kitchen and stops when she sees what they are doing.*

NHAN: Hong. Come in. Your aunt is here to help us.

Resigned HONG sits at the table.

NHAN: We have a headband for you.

*HONG grimaces. NHAN puts a headband around her head and
tightens until it hurts. Then she knots it so a tail goes
down HONG'S back (a la Karate Kid).*

GIANG(to NHAN) She needs a tail, she's blood related
family. I'll need a tail too. You don't, you're just
related by marriage.

*NHAN purses her lips and shoves bobby pins in roughly to
pin the band to HONG'S head. HONG frowns at her. GIANG
clicks her tongue and then puts a headband minus tail
around NHAN'S head. When NHAN does a band for GIANG she
moves as if to tighten it but GIANG glances up and NHAN
stops.*

*GIANG leads the way out of the kitchen as a bell chimes.
NHAN and then HONG follow her to stand at the base of the
Avoliketera statue.*

Scene 5.

THREE VIETNAMESE BOYS in slick back haircuts and homeboy jeans are smoking trying to look cool. They have sports bags at their feet.

VAN and PHUC lead the way on stage from downstage left in mourning garb, white tailed headbands in formal dark clothing. GIANG, NHAN and HONG join them. As soon as HONG passes by she is checked out by the three boys. The FAMILY proceed to downstage right where they stand and wait for the funeral to begin.

HONG: Dad who are they? Are they related to us?

VAN shrugs.

The MONK enters front right holding the chime used during the ceremonies. He approaches the boys. He says something to them. Then he comes over to VAN.

MONK: We need to discuss how you would like to remember her.

The BOYS stub out their cigarettes. They reach down to their bags, pull out grey monk robes and put them on. HONG quickly looks away from them. NHAN comes over and begins to straighten up her top.

NHAN: Is this the best top you have? You should have borrowed one of mine.

HONG makes a face behind her back as NHAN then turns to join the conversation with VAN and the MONK.

The MONK nods then gestures to the boys. They line up to follow the monk as he rings the chime. Behind him the FAMILY assemble in order, VAN PHUC GIANG NHAN and HONG. The procession walks slowly from stage right to left then up to upstage left where the MONK stands in front of AVOLIKETERA. The MONK chimes the bell and he and the boys murmur the heart sutra along the way. The family kneel down VAN and PHUC at the front and the women behind.

MONK : Form is emptiness, emptiness is form....

Lights down.

A bell chimes.

Lights up.

MONK: Gone, gone to the other shore.

A bell chimes.

Lights down.

Scene 6.

ANIA is painting her nails in the school area. HONG is pouring her heart out to her and gets more upset as she talks.

HONG: If I hear another bell I'm going to scream. There are seven more ceremonies left.

ANIA: That's overkill all right. (PAUSE) I want to see you in that Karate Kid headband thing.

HONG: No way. (PAUSE) God the entire thing was so bizarre. Dad told me back in Vietnam the funeral takes three days. We got the truncated version. My real mother died when I was too young to remember all this crap.

ANIA:(reflectively) When my dad passed away we actually went to church for the first time. We heard hymns and stuff but we didn't have to sing them thank god. At least you don't have to wear black for two years or whatever. You'd never pick up if you had to do that.

The school bell rings and HONG claps her hands to her ears and screams.

Scene 7

NHAN and GIANG are in the kitchen going through BA's clothes and jewellery on the table.

HONG enters and then stops in surprise.

NHAN: Oh. You're home from school. Your hair's a mess. If you don't take more care of your appearance you're never going to get a husband.

HONG slams her bag down on a chair.

NHAN: Giang says that there was a gold bracelet that your grandma used to wear. We've been through all the jewellery. Have you seen it?

HONG: No I haven't. I don't go through other people's things.

GIANG: Some of this will be yours since you're her only granddaughter. The clothes and the bed we're giving away.

HONG exits suddenly to join ANIA in the schoolyard.

ANIA: So Nhan just wants to take over your life.

HONG (angry): Ever since Ba died she's been trying to tell me what to do. She just doesn't get it. There's more to life than boys and cooking. After all she's just a housewife.

ANIA snorts.

HONG : I know I'm not that good looking but she doesn't have to remind me about it all the time. And it's not as if I want to go around made up like a dead corpse with that white foundation and red lippy she wears. God knows what color her actual skin is. I've never seen it.

ANIA: Come on. You're all right. At least you don't freckle and you don't get fat.

HONG:(automatically) You're not fat.

ANIA:(ignoring her comment) Mum just treats me like I'm someone else living in her house. Nhan treats you like you're a kid.

HONG: I wish she'd back off me. I want everything back to normal. No more temple ceremonies. This is nuts. My entire family is nuts. It's not normal.

ANIA: What's normal? When dad died mum became bitter and twisted. I wouldn't mind having a dad like yours. Having sit down meals and stuff. That's what I liked about being at your place when your grandma was alive.

HONG is silent, embarrassed.

HONG: You haven't come over for a while. You should. Nhan does all the cooking now. Some of it's a bit salty but it's all right. She fries steak and puts it over sauteed potatoes and eats it with fish sauce.

ANIA laughs.

Scene 8

GIANG is in the kitchen by herself. She is folding up the Ba's clothes.

Suddenly she stops folding and puts the clothes down on the table.

Involuntarily she looks at the shrine.

A bell chimes.

She shakes her head, quickly finishes the folding and exits carrying the clothes away.

Scene 9

In front of Avoliteketera. The MONK stands holding the bell citing the heart sutra.

Monk: In emptiness there is neither form, nor feeling, nor perception...

The MONK sounds the bell.

Scene 10

HONG is seated at the kitchen table studying. Her folders and text book are next to her, this is the only available study area. GIANG has come over to visit and has seated herself directly opposite HONG. GIANG is in a business jacket and trousers she has come from work.

PHUC is playing with a truck at the head of the table. He is talking to himself and everyone else is ignoring him except HONG.

HONG is staring at PHUC because PHUC is talking to BA's place at the table as if BA was actually there.

PHUC: Today me and Eric played in the sandpit with this truck. Maybe later you can take me to the park Ba.

GIANG is looking over HONG's maths test.

GIANG : See this is what you are doing wrong here.

HONG (frustrated): Yeah I see it. I just didn't in the test. It was as if my brain had seized up or something.

GIANG looks at her sympathetically.

NHAN comes in to the kitchen to set the table.

GIANG: It's all right. You're smart and by the time the exams come...Once you have a degree you can get a good job and you won't end up like...

GIANG looks at NHAN.

HONG cannot resist smirking and NHAN notices.

NHAN picks up six empty plates and carries them over to the table. The first empty plate goes at the head of the table.

PHUC looks up and moves his truck aside without speaking further. NHAN puts down the second plate, then the third.

NHAN stands over GIANG and HONG.

NHAN: It's dinner time now. Hong clear your books away. Phuc put your truck in your room.

HONG stares after him and looks at the empty place where NHAN is now serving some food onto BA's plate.

Lights down.

Scene 11

In front of the Avoliketera statue.

MONK: In emptiness there is neither form, nor feeling, nor perception...

MONK sounds the bell.

Scene 12

HONG is lying down on her bed. She shifts and feels something hard underneath her back. Sitting up then she finds a silk pouch with cherry blossom embroidered on it amongst the bedclothes. She opens up the pouch and finds a gold bracelet.

HONG puts it on her wrist and admires it. Then she pulls her school jumper sleeve over it to hide it.

Scene 13

HONG is showing ANIA the bracelet in the school yard. ANIA is fascinated.

ANIA: My god that's gorgeous. Where did you get it?

HONG looks away, unsure of what to admit.

HONG: It's my grandma's

ANIA: Cool. She gave it to you.

HONG: Sort of. I found it under my pillow. Don't tell anyone.

ANIA: Who would I tell?

HONG: I'm not 'posed to have it. Co Nhan and Co Giang were going through all her stuff the other day looking for it. But I want to keep this myself.

ANIA: I would. That's real gold isn't it?

Sound of a bell.

Scene 14

VAN is showing PHUC where to put a drawing, on the shrine in front of BA's picture in the kitchen. The drawing is of footballers taking a mark.

VAN (to PHUC): This is where Ba can read your letters and your drawing.

PHUC smiles. Then he walks out of the kitchen picking up a toy truck along the way. He is very happy.

PHUC goes downstage by himself and sits down. A teacher MS KNOX enters stage right and is watching him from a distance concerned.

PHUC: Now Ba, we are going to drive onto the freeway...

MS KNOX walks over and stands next to him.

MS KNOX: Hello Phuc.

PHUC pauses then looks up at her.

PHUC: Hello Ms Knox.

MS KNOX: What are you playing today? You play with that truck a lot.

PHUC: Me and Ba are driving along the freeway.

MS KNOX: Ba?

PHUC: Grandma.

MS KNOX frowns.

MS KNOX: Your grandma passed away a month ago didn't she?

PHUC: Yes. She died but she is still here with us. So she and I go playing together. At home Dad and Mum put out food for her and she eats with the rest of the family.

MS KNOX looks appalled.

The sound of a phone rings.

MRS KNOX escorts PHUC off stage.

Scene 15

HONG is on her bed reading a library book on ghosts and paranormal manifestations.

There is a knock.

HONG: Yep?

VAN comes in.

VAN: The school rang me today.

HONG starts, scared it might be her school.

VAN (heavily): Your little brother has been... They're worried about him. We don't pay enough attention to him and... the only time we take him anywhere is to the temple. I don't think its good for him.

HONG holds her breath not wanting to interrupt.

VAN: Could you take him to the aquarium this weekend?

HONG draws breath sparked to anger.

HONG: Dad, I don't have time. He's Nhan's son why can't she..

VAN (defeated): Your grandma would have taken him. Nhan doesn't have the confidence.. I guess I could take him.

VAN stares ahead.

VAN(heavily wanting to unburden himself): The school told me that he sees Ba and plays with her during lunch time.

HONG:(angry and hurt) Well she doesn't come and visit me does she?

VAN glances at his daughter not knowing what to say or do. VAN stands up and pats her on the shoulder.

HONG stares at him waiting to see what he will do.

VAN walks to the kitchen where PHUC is sitting at the table waiting for him.

PHUC looks up at VAN non comprehending.

VAN: Ms Knox is worried about you. She told me that you play by yourself and you don't play with the other children.

PHUC:I'm not by myself. Ba is with me.

VAN takes a deep breath.

VAN: Phuc...

VAN tousles his son's hair.

VAN: Other people don't see BA the same way we do.

PHUC frowns.

VAN: Phuc it's better if you only talk about Ba when you are at home, or to your family. Other people like Ms Knox don't understand.

PHUC frowns again.

PHUC: But she's a teacher.

VAN: She's... not Buddhist Phuc. Some people don't believe in spirits. Some people believe in God instead.

PHUC: But Ba is not like God.

VAN (wearily): No Ba is not like God. Can you promise me that you will just speak to BA at home? And just talk about her to us?

PHUC responds, not understanding the reasons why but wanting to please his father.

PHUC: I promise Dad.

VAN smiles and gives his son a hug.

VAN: Who are your friends at school?

PHUC: There's Eric.

VAN: Good. Good. Play with Eric tomorrow. Do you think Eric would like to go to the aquarium?

PHUC's eyes light up.

PHUC: Yes!

Scene 16.

HONG goes over to talks to ANIA in the schoolyard.

ANIA: That's really screwy. I'm glad you're not seeing your grandma around here.

HONG stares at her not knowing what to say.

ANIA: So what are you doing with the weekend.

HONG: Another bloody temple visit. Five down two to go.

ANIA: Glad it's you not me.

Scene 17.

At the base of the Avoliketera statue.

A bell chimes.

MONK: No eye, or ear, or nose or tongue or body or mind
No sound, no smell, no taste

Scene 18

FAMILY are eating dinner in the kitchen. GIANG is there as well in the sixth place. There is still an empty place at the head of the table for BA. HONG rolls up her sleeve while she is eating and reveals gold bracelet on her arm. NHAN notices almost straight away.

NHAN: Hong where did you get that bracelet?

HONG freezes and finishes chewing.

HONG: What bracelet... (notices Nhan's gaze) I found it.

NHAN: Where did you find it?

HONG: On my bed. A few weeks ago.

NHAN: Why didn't you tell me or your father?

HONG: I thought it was a present.

NHAN: You stole it. Take it off and give it to me.

HONG: I did not steal anything.

NHAN: Give the bracelet back to me Hong. That bracelet's gold. It's too valuable for you to wear.

HONG: I didn't steal it. I haven't done anything wrong.

NHAN: Giang has been looking for it Hong.

GIANG: I have been looking for it to give to Hong, Nhan.

NHAN: What?

GIANG: Ba intended that Hong be given the bracelet. Ba wanted you to have it.

NHAN glares at GIANG and then looks away. VAN glares at GIANG. PHUC ignores all the adults trying to ignore them.

HONG looks at the empty place at the table.

A bell chimes.

Scene 19.

HONG is in her room lying on her bed. NHAN and VAN are having an argument in the kitchen and HONG can hear every word.

NHAN: I still think that bracelet is too valuable for a young girl. I should keep it for her. She's been wearing it to school. She could lose it or someone could steal it off her. Like that Ania girl.

VAN is silent

Hearing ANIA's name HONG tenses.

VAN: I told you I'll tell her to be careful with it.

NHAN: Phuc is her brother and she has family duties. She has to look after him too and learn how to cook.

VAN: Hong is Australian. She was born here. She goes to high school. She might go to university. She's different. And Phuc will be different too (resigned).

HONG touches her bracelet nervously.

NHAN: I don't want her to be like Ania.

VAN: Ania is all right. It could be worse. They could be on drugs.

NHAN: I've done everything that your mother wants. Every day I tend the shrine. I try to make Hong into a proper Vietnamese woman. But I get no thanks for it. No one ever says that I am doing the right thing.

VAN: Nhan everyone appreciates...

NHAN: No one wants me to be in this family. Even your sister thinks I'm doing the wrong thing. She didn't tell me that your mother willed the jewellery to Hong. And neither did you. I may as well not be here for the attention that you all show me.

VAN: Nhan that isn't what...

NHAN: Your mother has gone and all people can think is how I'm not like her and I can never be like her.

Lights down in the kitchen.

Scene 20

HONG is sitting on her bed her sleeves rolled up the gold bracelet still prominently on her arm. She is staring into space, disturbed at what she has overheard.

There is a knock. HONG jumps out of her skin. It's VAN. VAN sits down next to her awkwardly.

HONG: Is Nhan leaving?

VAN: Do you want her to leave?

Pause.

HONG: Dad is it my fault?

VAN: No. It's not your fault.

Silence.

VAN: The last weeks have been very hard on your stepmother. She has been looking after us and been good to us. But we have to be good to her too.

HONG: Are you mad at me?

VAN is silent for a moment.

VAN: No. I'm not mad at you for taking the bracelet. Ba wanted you to have it. But why didn't you tell us?

HONG: Because Nhan would have taken it from me!

VAN: Hong...It's difficult for your step mother. Your grandma didn't leave her anything.

HONG looks at him astounded.

VAN: Ba wanted everything to stay in the family. She gave the jewellery to you and Giang, and money to me and Phuc. Because we are her children and grand children.

HONG: And Co Nhan is.. (trails off)

VAN: Your stepmother is having a hard time. Here is not... Not like Vietnam.

HONG: No it's not. (pause) Thanks Dad.

HONG and VAN hug awkwardly. VAN exits stage left.

HONG sits on her bed thinking. Then she gets up to go to the kitchen.

HONG walks into the kitchen and stops.

NHAN has her back to HONG and is standing in front of the shrine, unaware that HONG has entered the room. She has put down a plate of food and is staring at the picture of BA.

NHAN sighs. She is the most vulnerable that HONG has ever seen her, she is not wearing make up and is in her dressing gown.

HONG swallows. Then impulsively she walks over to the shrine and stands next to NHAN.

NHAN straightens up her spine and starts rearranging the flowers in the vase.

HONG: I liked what you cooked for us tonight.

NHAN is taken aback. A smile starts breaking through her normal façade.

HONG walks downstage to where ANIA is sitting.

ANIA: So you got sprung- and you still got away with it.

HONG: Yeah.

ANIA takes a drag from her cigarette.

ANIA: So you seen any ghosts lately?

HONG's face falls.

She walks away from ANIA and goes towards the Avoliketera statue.

PHUC is conversing to a space in front of the statue.

HONG approaches him then stops before she can get too close. The MONK sees where she is watching and joins her.

HONG: He sees my grandma. But I don't.

The MONK looks at her then glances down at her bracelet.

HONG touches it and the MONK looks into her eyes.

MONK: Have you spoken to her?

HONG stares at him. Then she looks over at her brother.

PHUC: We're going home now. Dad is taking me to the zoo next week.

Lights down.

Lights up.

The MONK is standing alone by the Avoliketera statue.

Monk cites mantra:

MONK: nor mental functioning, nor consciousness...

A bell chimes.

Scene 21

HONG is in front of the kitchen shrine trying to feel something. She lights up the incense.

HONG: Tomorrow is the 49th day.

HONG looks at her grandma's picture on the shrine.

HONG: I wish you were still here.

HONG cries.

Lights down.

A bell chimes.

Scene 22

HONG wakes up in her bedroom. BA leans down and kisses her on the cheek.

Lights down.

Scene 23

In front of the Avoliketera statue.

MONK : Gone , gone, gone to the other shore, gone together to the other shore. O Awakening. All hail.

The MONK sounds the bell.

The FAMILY are arranged in front of him, headbands on. They remove their headbands and return them to the MONK.

PHUC: I saw Ba last night.

HONG (smilins): So did I.