

19: A Reporter's War weaves together the story of three very different people, whose lives are brought together in the last days of the war in Vietnam – Hugh Lunn, the Australian Reuters reporter; Pham Ngoc Dinh, the Saigon Reuters Office Manager; and the young Australian soldier whose story is told through the song, I Was Only 19.

The seed of an idea for the play, 19: A Reporter's War germinated after a dramatisation of Redgum's iconic song, "I Was Only 19" was presented by Blackfriars drama students for the song's writer, John Schumann in a public performance in 2018. A Blackfriars old scholar, Schumann, was visibly moved by the performance, and suggested that this short play had the makings of a full-length performance. Judging by the audience reaction, it seemed to me that Australians wanted to talk about this war that until recently nobody was comfortable mentioning. Yes, we had the blockbuster action Hollywood Vietnam War movies – but there was so much more that needed to be explored. Schumann's song raised awareness about post-traumatic stress among the Australian Vietnam veterans, but the boatload after boatload of traumatised Vietnamese refugees who fled the conflict and settled in Australia also had a back-story that needed to be told.

The challenge was finding a way that gave the song integrity and to weave the Australian soldier's narrative into the story of the Vietnamese people caught up in the conflict. Hugh Lunn - the Walkley Award winning journalist's book, Vietnam: A Reporter's War - provided that back-story. This book not only tells of his own experience as a Reuters reporter in Vietnam in the final years of the conflict, it also gives us an insight into the Vietnamese experience told through the eyes of the Saigon Reuters office manager, Pham Ngoc Dinh.

It is through Dinh's commentary and observations that we are made aware of the Vietnamese perspective on the conflict. Hugh Lunn is reminded by Dinh that, "Vietnamese people do not want foreigners to take over Vietnam," and reminds him that it is, "quick and easy for foreigners to be killed in Vietnam." This ever-present danger, forces these two young men to recalibrate their perspectives on the conflict and in the process, get a deeper appreciation of the importance of friendship.

Dinh teaches the young Australian reporter that the Vietnamese people value Confucian spirituality with its strong sense of tradition and respect for the ancestors. He pointedly tells Lunn, "You see Mr Hugh, Vietnamese people not like being prisoners or refugees," and this idea becomes a subtext in the play, with one of the Australian soldiers killed in Vietnam, and whose story is presented on stage, being the son of Ukrainian refugee migrants to Australia who fled the destruction of war-torn Europe.

The story of the Vietnamese refugees fleeing conflict and settling in Australia is strongly foreshadowed in the narrative. This play is very much their story.