

The Asian Reporter

Volume 24 Number 10
May 19, 2014
ISSN: 1094-9453

The Asian Reporter is published on the first and third Monday each month.

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News Service Associated Press/Newsfinder

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MY TURN

■ **Dmae Roberts**



Breaking the silence

For the past few months, I've been volunteering to stage readings of Asian American and Pacific Islander plays that haven't been seen or produced in Portland. Last summer, dancer and actor Chisao Hata introduced me to the work of Seattle playwright Nikki Nojima Louis, who has been touring her Japanese-American oral history play, *Breaking the Silence*, in different communities around the country.

On December 7, 1941, Louis was celebrating her fourth birthday in Seattle when the FBI entered her family's home and took her father away. On February 19, 1942, the American government rounded up more than 110,000 Japanese-American men, women, and children on the west coast and forced them into what amounted to barbed-wire concentration camps. This was done under Executive Order 9066, signed and issued by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Forced to leave quickly, most of the families lost their houses, land, and property—sold cheaply or outright stolen from them during their incarceration.

Four-year-old Nikki and her mother were forced to live in the Minidoka Relocation Center in Idaho without her father. He was sent to a prison camp in Santa Fe, New Mexico. At Minidoka, Louis was known as the "Shirley Temple of Minidoka" because she performed in the Christmas shows that toured around camp. More than 9,000 hardworking American citizens were imprisoned there.

Even after President Roosevelt rescinded the executive order near the close of World War II, many families were still in resettlement facilities and temporary housing until the camps were shut down in 1946. This generation of Japanese Americans had a difficult time talking about what happened to them. Not until the 1960s civil-rights era—when African Americans fought bravely for equality—did many sons and daughters of the internees press their parents to "break the silence" that surrounded the war years.

As a Nisei (second generation), Louis was part of the generation that fought for civil rights and redress for incarceration. Even though she was at Minidoka as a child, she knew little of the camp experience. The Issei (first generation), including her parents, rarely talked about their painful past.



"Our parents were silent about that time," said Louis, describing how many Issei believed the "nail that sticks up gets pounded down." In other words, "keep your mouth shut." But the civil-rights movement gave Nisei the motivation to speak out.

Years later, Louis attended a talk by Gordon Hirabayashi, a Seattle sociologist who challenged the constitutionality of the wartime imprisonment of Japanese Americans. He took the case all the way to the Supreme Court but lost. Later he was sent to a federal prison for refusing to join the military because of a questionnaire demanding renunciation of allegiance to the emperor of Japan. He argued that no other ethnic groups were asked to do this. Louis was so moved by Hirabayashi's story that she began researching the internment

years and wrote *Breaking the Silence*. The play premiered in 1985 to benefit Hirabayashi's defense fund for his civil-liberties trial and raised \$10,000. Hirabayashi's conviction was overturned in 1987.

Since then, Louis has travelled across the U.S., from Seattle to Appalachia, with what she calls a "living, breathing" play to help people learn about this painful time of Asian-American history. At each venue where the play is performed, Louis rewrites the last part of the script to reflect local history.

Last summer, Louis and actors from the Pacific Northwest, including Hata, took *Breaking the Silence* to the Hiroshima Prefectural Art Museum in Hiroshima, Japan. It was part of the 68th anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Louis said it was a moving experience to be part of the all-day commemoration with 50,000 audience members on Hiroshima Day.

Louis recounted the story of a man who came up to her after the performance of *Breaking the Silence*. He told her that now he knew what happened to his grandfather when he went to America. Another man who was driving the performers around Hiroshima said his grandfather had gone to America for better opportunities and faced so much racism that he returned to Japan. The driver's mother was pregnant with him when his father returned in 1945, just months before the atomic bomb fell.

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