

VELINA HASU HOUSTON
820 Michigan Avenue. Santa Monica. California. 90404

20 August, 1991

Ms. Loni Ding
VOX Productions, Inc.
2335 Jones Street
San Francisco, CA 94133

Dear Loni:

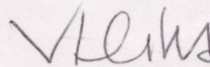
Perhaps you will remember meeting me in Santa Barbara last year. I am a playwright and screenwriter. I am Japanese Amerasian; half native Japanese, a quarter Blackfoot Pikuni Indian, and a quarter African American. My most popular play is called, "Tea."

A burglary caused the loss of many of my personal and business records. It has taken me some time to track you down. No one seemed to be able to tell me how to find you.

So the contact I promised to initiate a year ago occurs today. If you are ever in the L.A. area, I would love to sit down and talk with you regarding the possibility of working together at some point in our artistic journeys.

I've enclosed some clippings and my bio. Please take care, Loni. I hope things are going well. You may reach me at USC, where I am an assistant professor of playwriting, at (213) 740-1285.

Best regards,



Velina Hasu Houston

BIO

VELINA HASU HOUSTON

PLAYS: "Necessities," "Tea," "Asa Ga Kimashita," "American Dreams," "Thirst," "Albatross," "Christmas Cake," "Kokoro Kara," "Broken English," and "Kapi'olani's Faith." Plays in progress: "My Life A Loaded Gun," "The Legend of Bobbi Chicago" (a musical), "Tokyo Rose," commissioned by and in development at The Mark Taper Forum. Productions: Old Globe Theatre, Manhattan Theatre Club, Syracuse Stage, Whole Theatre, East West Players, Negro Ensemble Company, TheatreWorks, Odyssey Theatre Ensemble, Asian American Theatre Company, Kumu Kahua. FILM: "Summer Knowledge" (Columbia Pictures/Sidney Poitier), "Hishoku" (Director: Lee Grant), "Kalito" (American Film Institute), "Journey Home" (PBS/KCET). OTHER: Green Tea Girl in Orange Pekoe Country (poetry collection, excerpts published nationally). Editing an anthology, The Politics of Life: Four Plays by Asian American Women for Temple University Press. HONORS: 1991 California Arts Council Performing Arts Fellow, 1991 U.S.C. Faculty Research & Innovation Fund Grantee for "Kapi'olani's Faith," 1991 VESTA Award Winner for Positive Images of Women in the Arts, Japanese American Woman of Merit 1890-1990 by the National Japanese American Historical Society, Best 10 plays written by women worldwide for "Tea" by Susan Smith Blackburn Prize of London, L.A. Times & DramaLogue Critics' Choice (for "Tea"), twice-named Rockefeller Foundation playwriting fellow, McKnight Foundation fellow, Sidney F. Brody literature fellow, 1991 L.A. Endowment for the Arts Fellow for "Broken English." Phi Beta Kappa; M.F.A. in playwriting, University of California at Los Angeles. Assistant Professor, University of Southern California School of Theatre. Co-founder/president of The Amerasian League, non-profit organization dedicated to educational awareness of Amerasian culture. Managing Artist, Pacific Asian American Women Writers -- West. Her work is dedicated to her grandmother, Takechi Okazaki Fusae; her mother, Setsuko Perry; and her son, Kiyoshi. Representation: Ms. Mary Harden of Bret Adams, Ltd., New York; and Ms. Merrily Kane, The Artists' Agency, Los Angeles. Member, Dramatists Guild and Writers Guild of America, west.

Los Angeles Times



JIM MENDENHALL / Los Angeles Times

Diana Tanaka, from left, Lily Mariye, Gerrielani Miyazaki, Shuko Akune and Takayo Fischer in "Tea."

TUESDAY, JANUARY 29, 1991

STAGE REVIEW

'Tea' and Empathy

Velina Hasu Houston's Heartfelt Stories of Japanese War Brides

By DON SHIRLEY
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Five Japanese women are thrust into deepest Kansas, alongside their GI husbands, shortly after World War II. They're supposed to become a part of the great American melting pot.

But when one of them shoots herself, the others are drawn to the traditional Japanese teapot.

Velina Hasu Houston's "Tea," at the Odyssey Theatre in West Los Angeles, is an impassioned and impressionistic look at these women and, by extension, at some of the implications of one of today's trendiest buzzwords: "multiculturalism." Although her play is set in Kansas nearly 30 years ago, Houston's concerns are equally those of Los Angeles in 1991.

These are women who are truly torn. Attracted to America by young love and by the self-confidence of the victorious young nation, they had no idea of how stranded

and unhappy they would feel in the Great Plains, where their husbands are assigned at Ft. Riley. That national self-confidence now feels like a choking insularity.

Houston's play immediately places us at a flash point of the cross-cultural despair. In the opening scene, one of the women, Himiko Hamilton (Gerrielani Miyazaki), commits suicide—and we quickly learn that she has already shot her husband.

Himiko's problems were not caused by cultural dislocation. Her family history, even in Japan, is tragic. But her isolation in Kansas left her with few escape routes.

The other women gather in Himiko's house for a ceremonial tea—and because they urgently need to talk about their common experiences, in the wake of Himiko's death. The rest of the play is structured around that talk, which is overseen by the spirit of Himiko. But the conversation is broken up by brilliant scenes in which the women play their younger selves in Japan and Kansas, as

Please see 'TEA' F12

CALENDAR

'TEA'

Continued from F1

well as their husbands and their children.

They haven't talked like this before, because at least some of them don't like each other much. Their common bond is threatened by the differences between them. Houston is careful to respect the individuality of each character along with her cultural link.

One of the characters, Setsuko (Takayo Fischer), is based on Houston's own mother. Married to an African-American, Setsuko's wrenching departure from Japan was the subject of Houston's "Asa Ga Kimashita," seen at East West Players in 1984. Another Houston play, "American Dreams," read at L.A. Theatre Works last Thursday, also touches on Setsuko's experience. Some enterprising theater should stage these in repertory.

But Setsuko is perhaps the least vivid of the characters in "Tea." Most of the friction is between Atsuko (Shuko Akune), who married a Japanese-American, and Chizuye (Diana Tanaka), whose Mexican-American husband died shortly after her arrival in the United States. Partly out of necessity, partly out of personality, Chizuye has become more Americanized than the others, and Atsuko—the head of the local Buddhist chapter—resents her for it. There is a strain of bigotry in Atsuko, but there is also a cynicism arising from cultural loss in Chizuye.

The nervous intermediary between Atsuko and Chizuye is Teruko (Lily Mariye). Mariye enacts the most startling sea change in the play, when we see her playing Teruko's husband and "sugar pie" with an enormous Texas drawl during the funniest flashback.

Yet all of the actresses do wonders, especially considering they haven't much time to tell their individual stories. Houston compresses a lot into one intermissionless act, evoking with lyric imagery what might take too long to tell in a more naturalistic style. Occasionally, the language may sound rushed or overwrought. But generally, these actresses and director Julianne Boyd, repeating the work they did at San Diego's Old Globe Theatre in 1988, bring the women into our hearts and minds with equal clarity.

Set designer Craig E. Lathrop framed vistas of unending Kansas fields on the walls, then picked up the same straw color for the *tatami* where the women take tea, placing the *tatami* over some all-American black linoleum. C. L. Hundley designed quickly assembled kimonos to accompany Bella Arguette's carefully chosen American outfits, and J. Kent Inasy lit the stage in a style befitting the spirit of the dead Himiko.

■ "Tea," *Odyssey Theatre, 2055 S. Sepulveda Blvd., Los Angeles, Wednesdays through Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Sundays, 7 p.m.; Feb. 17 and March 3, 3 p.m. Ends March 10. \$17.50-\$21.50. (213) 477-2055. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes.*

'Tea'

Gerielani Miyazaki	.....	Himiko Hamilton
Takayo Fischer	.....	Setsuko Banks
Lily Mariye	.....	Teruko Mackenzie
Shuko Akune	.....	Atsuko Yamamoto
Diana Tanaka	.....	Chizuye Juarez

By Velina Hasu Houston. Directed by Julianne Boyd. Sets Craig E. Lathrop. Lights J. Kent Inasy. Costumes Bella Arguette. Kimonos C. L. Hundley. Sound Bruce Ellman.

'TEA' FOR FIVE: In its impressionistic look at five Japanese war brides in postwar Kansas, Velina Hasu Houston's "Tea," at the Odyssey Theatre, also goes to the heart of what's happening in Los Angeles in 1991. Reviewed by Don Shirley. F1

Amerasian playwright steep work in own life's experiences

By Sandra Kreiswirth
THEATER CRITIC

Arthur Miller once said, "A writer must lead a useful life." It's a quote Velina Hasu Houston takes seriously.

An award-winning writer, she's already had six plays published, has six plays in progress, writes poetry, children's stories, screenplays, teaches play writing at USC, has created and belongs to myriad Amerasian organizations and is a single parent raising her 4-year-old son, Kiyoshi.

Houston, 33, like many writers, creates from personal experience. And with a background as rich and diverse as hers, she doesn't have to go far to find ideas.

Born in Tokyo, the daughter of a Japanese mother and a black/Blackfoot Indian father, she and her parents settled in Junction City, Kan., near Fort Riley when she was a child. Her father was stationed there.

Growing up Amerasian in Kansas and later realizing what it took her parents, especially her mother, to raise her and her sister, she fashioned the seeds of her own story into "Tea," a play about five Japanese war brides in Kansas. It makes its Los Angeles area debut Saturday at the Odyssey Theater Ensemble in West L.A.

Created in 1983, "Tea" was produced at the Manhattan Theater Club in 1987, at the Old Globe Theater in San Diego in 1988 and at Olympia Dukakis' Whole Theater in Montclair, N.J., in 1989, all directed by Julianne Boyd, who is at the helm of the Odyssey production.

Several miles away, Houston and Kiyoshi live in a small house in Santa Monica. Outside, a small wooden plaque invites visitors to remove their shoes before entering. "You can bring them inside," says Houston, indicating some friends who left their shoes outside recently had to go home barefoot.

Whether she's writing original works such as "Tea" or her next play, "Necessities," which premieres at the Old Globe in July, or adapting a



RICHARD N. LEVINE/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Velina Hasu Houston, daughter of a Japanese mother and a black/Blackfoot Indian father, talks about how that background affects her writing.

The message (my father gave me) was, 'Be who you are,' and it's been the guiding light for my life.

— Santa Monica playwright **Velina Hasu Houston**

(MORE)

TEA

'TEA' TIME

Santa Monica playwright
Velina Hasu Houston
draws on Amerasian roots
in writing./D3

Japanese novel into a feature film titled "Hishoku," directed by Lee Grant, Houston's goal is to bring her own experience and passion to the material and to explore new ideas about the changing face of our society.

"When I was 4 years old," she says, "I asked my father why he was chocolate and Mommy was vanilla."

He drew her an analogy through Neapolitan ice cream. Chocolate and strawberry represented his heritage, half black, half Indian. Mixing it with vanilla turned it all into a cinnamon color, which was Velina.

"This is you," he told his inquisitive daughter. "Now, can you separate it back into colors?" She could not. "The message was, 'Be who you are,' and it's been the guiding light for my life," she says.

And it's been a life of accomplishment.

Her list of credits, awards and honors covers four pages single-spaced, acknowledging such achievements as Phi Beta Kappa with a master of fine arts in play writing from UCLA and bachelor of arts in both journalism and theater with a minor in philosophy at Kansas State University.

She's a Japanese American Woman of Merit, a McKnight Foundation Fellow, a Rockefeller Foundation Playwright Fellow (twice), co-founder of the Amerasian League and a managing artist of Pacific Asian American Women Writers West.

But Houston began her career as a free-lance journalist quite happy to be making her living by writing.

"I couldn't become a playwright right away," she says, explaining her Japanese mother's belief that practical aspects of survival always take priority over creativity. Even so, Houston wrote her first poetry at 6, her first play at 13.

Houston's mother and father met in

Kobe, Japan, at the close of World War II.

Her mother was 17, her father 30. Their courtship lasted nine years, complicated by Houston's grandmother's illness.

They married after the grandmother died and the grandfather committed suicide within a month.

Houston blames her grandfather's death on the shame of Japan's defeat in the war, the loss of most of his land to the Americans and the shock of his wife's death.

"Shame is a big factor in Japanese culture," Houston says.

After Houston was born, the family relocated to the States, where the barrenness of the Kansas landscape was shocking to Velina's mother.

A difficult time

The community of Japanese international war brides and Amerasian children was shocking to the town. It was a difficult time.

"In the fifth grade," Houston recalls, "the Amerasians in my school were forced to take our IQ test over again, because our scores were so high. So when I saw 'Stand and Deliver,' I was amused."

Growing up, she never played with dolls. She was drawn instead to school.

"I was interested in different kinds of papers and writing instruments. And I loved books. My child is repeating that."

Her own mother was a dressmaker but had literary instincts.

"The war stunted the developmental path of many people in Japan," Houston says, "and she couldn't pursue things she wanted to."

Houston adds that even today her mother reads complex books, which seems to amaze her friends.

Her father died in 1969, and 10 years later her mother married a retired soldier who is black and several years her junior. They live in Kansas in what Houston calls a comfortable life.

Rather than comfortable, Houston calls her own life challenging, particularly being a single parent with no system of support to fall back on, especially in time of illness.

"I do have a very good boy," she says, looking at her spirited young son who sports a long tail at his neck line.

"I'm 4¼ years old," he says, setting the record straight, his attention otherwise fixed on putting together his Mr. Potato Head.

Proving them wrong

"People said when I was pregnant that I'd never write again," says Houston, who is now also fiddling with his toy. "But now I'm even more prolific. My life is more enriched now that I have the complex responsibility for the life of another human being."

"Me?" asks Kiyoshi, looking up coyly.

"See," says his mother, "he's already got a performing flair."

DRAMA-LOGUE®

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HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA

JAN. 31-FEB. 6, 1991

THEATRE REVIEWS

Tea*

Produced by Ron Sossi and Lucy Pollak for the Odyssey Theatre Ensemble, 2055 S. Sepulveda Blvd., L.A.; (213) 477-2055. Opened Jan. 26; plays Wed.-Sat., 8; Sun., 3 & 7 (Feb. 17 & March 3 only); closes March 10.

This fine play has seen several productions over the past three years, beginning with the original outing at the Manhattan Theatre Club in October of 1987. Like the tea ceremony itself, Velina Hasu Houston's work has a sometimes lyrical, sometimes formal pacing, considerably enhanced by Julianne Boyd's fluid direction. *Tea* examines the Japanese "war brides," a term considered derogatory by the ladies themselves, who prefer to be called "international brides." There were over 100,000 of them after World War II, and their experiences in the United States, replete with ugly incidents of hateful prejudice, are most effectively depicted in *Tea*. It is a problem very much with us as international brides and Vietnamese refugees suffer madness on our shores.

In addition to examining a sociological phenomenon in some depth (Houston interviewed 50 Japanese women living in Kansas), *Tea* is strongly autobiographical. One of the five ladies we come to know so well, Setsuko Bands, is based upon the author's mother. It is a pleasure to report that *Tea*'s theatricality is as powerful as its insights into an area of our history that has been begging for examination since the late 1940s. This

is a woman's play in the best sense of the word, and never more entertaining than when the actresses play their husbands.

Four women gather in Fort Riley, Kansas, to honor a fifth who has committed suicide—and who haunts the proceedings. That is the plot of *Tea*, but by no means its essence. Five very talented actresses give breadth and depth to a very poignant drama, and in the clash of cultures illuminate an extraordinary and, unfortunately, timely aspect of war. The bottom line for Houston is that "Countries last, but love is mortal."

Gerrielani Miyazaki as Himiko Hamilton, the recent suicide, moves with the grace of a cherry blossom bowing with the wind, but is also capable of slugging barbs into the air like Babe Ruth casually hitting home runs during batting practice. It is a performance that combines aspects of dance as well as psychological authority, and Miyazaki's work ultimately becomes as haunting as the character she portrays.

Takayo Fischer's Setsuko Banks endures a double dose of prejudice as the bride of a black soldier, but her sweetness and patience allow life-saving resilience to whatever calumnies are hurled.

Lily Mariye's Teruko Mackenzie is a simple country girl with a remarkable talent for observing reality without embellishments. In many ways Mariye presents the norm. She will not

let the Yankee rudeness get under her skin, nor will she permit her Japanese American sisters to acquit themselves dishonorably.

Shuko Akune's Atsuko Yamamoto is a snob and a natural target for our contempt. A bluenose in a blue blouse, we spend most of the play arching our back in her direction, only to embrace her at the moment we understand the pain and loneliness she has been forced to endure, the special problems of living with a Japanese American soldier whose values seem so alien.

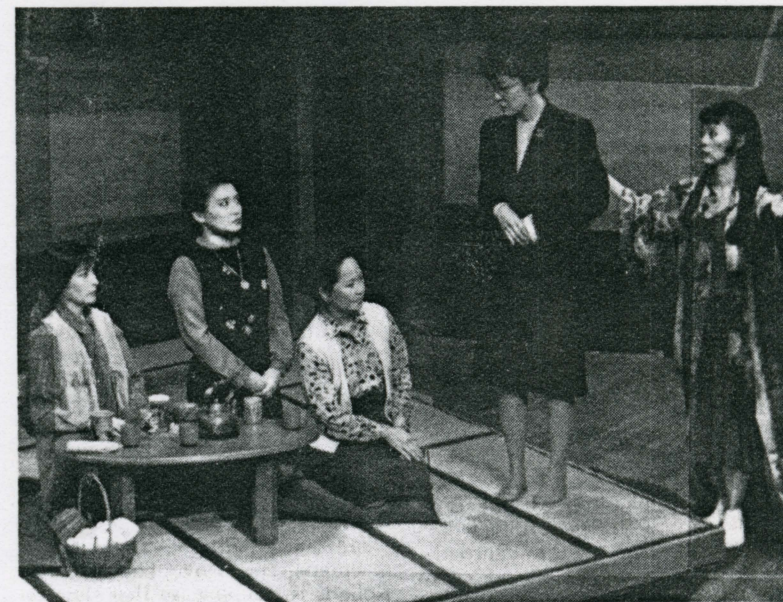
Diana Tanaka's Chizuye Juarez is the most contemporary of the five women, dressed in hippie clothing, with an American accent that almost hides her exotic past.

Each of these actors performs on a very high level, and their impersonations of husbands and children are equally deft.

Craig Lathrop's set design consists of a versatile interior with horizontal windows exposing a Kansas prairie, and it is a beauty. Bella Arguetty's costumes embrace two cultures with considerable skill. C.L. Hundley's kimono design is a treat for the eyes. Bruce Ellman's sound design is sensitively tuned to the fragile tragedies *Tea* reveals. Finally, J. Kent Inasy's splendid lighting design is a textbook example of how to travel through time and space without ever taking one step.

*CRITIC'S CHOICE

—Bruce Feld



Diana Tanaka, Lily Mariye, Takayo Fischer, Shuko Akune and Gerrielani Miyazaki in "Tea" at the Odyssey Theatre Ensemble

DAVID SEGAL

Los Angeles Times

SUNDAY, JANUARY 27, 1991

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Playwright Draws on Experience of Growing Up in an Interracial Household

By JANICE ARKATOV

From a very early age, Velina Hasu Houston knew she was different.

"We were an immigrant community," said the playwright (the offspring of a half African-American, half American Indian soldier and a Japanese mother), who was raised on an Army base in Junction City, Kan. "The Euro-American majority either didn't like us or was uncomfortable with us; we were even ostracized by the traditional minority groups: African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans. So we became sort of the low men on the racial totem pole."

Houston, 33, tells the story of four of these military wives in "Tea," opening this weekend at the Odyssey Theatre Ensemble in West Los Angeles. "These were Japanese women who'd come from various parts of Japan, from various class backgrounds, who'd married American servicemen at the end of World War II," she said. "Because of Army resettlement policies for active-duty personnel who were married to Oriental women, they ended up in Kansas."

Set in 1968, Houston's story is unabashedly personal: One of the characters is based on her mother.

"As I came into my teens, I began to sit down and have tea with my mother and her friends," she said. "They'd get together in the late afternoon, drink tea and talk about their lives. The older I became, the more I understood the strength they'd had to muster to be able to survive—both as native Japanese and members of interracial couples—and began recording some of the things they'd discuss."

At the time, Houston (whose interview circle eventually grew to include 50 women) was herself involved in an interracial relationship. "I was also beginning to get involved in various politics. Most of all, though, I was moved by the nature of their experiences. I also realized that these women's voices had never been heard in American literature or dramatic literature."

"Tea," which premiered in 1985 in a Rockefeller workshop production at San Francisco's Asian American Theater Company, went on to a dozen professional stagings, including the Manhattan Theater Club, Olympia Dukakis' Whole

Theatre in Montclair, N.J., and the Old Globe in San Diego. Julianne Boyd directed these productions, and is remounting the one here with her cast from the 1988 Old Globe staging. Houston proudly describes their alliance as "one of the few woman director-woman writer teams in the country."

The Odyssey run represents a breakthrough of sorts for Houston: Although she has lived in Los Angeles for a decade, she has seen little of her work done here.

"It hasn't been easy," she said. "I have this 'peculiar' writing voice in the sense that it's very lyrical, poetic. Critics of my work have said, 'That's not how people talk.'" Odyssey artistic director Ron Sossi concurs: "There is an edge to her writing, a kind of lyricism. I also liked the idea of the play—people pulled out of a big, ancient culture like Japan and placed in the middle of rural America. It's kind of an extreme portrait of the kind of cross-cultural uprooting that goes on in our world now, especially in L.A."

Although she often uses her own life as a basis for her work, Houston says she's not restricted by it.

"Whatever the subject, I have to have a passion for it," she said. "But as I write more and more, I'm beginning to explore things outside my family experience." An example is her newest play, "Necessities," set to open at the Old Globe in July. "It's about illegal adoption," Houston said, "a woman who sets out to buy a baby. But it's also about a woman exploring her humanity and the meaning of trust in a long-term relationship. She also discovers a lot about herself politically and personally."

The political thread is a constant. "I guess most of my plays are political in a personal sense; they have a social consciousness about them that hopefully allows people to understand each other better and lead to some sense of enlightenment. Usually the plays explore elements of culture, often my own."

(MORE)

I think an exploration of my culture is an exploration of everyone's culture, because I'm very racially and culturally mixed."

It has led her to speak out often on behalf of what she considers a neglected minority, the Amerasian.

"First of all, we're very new to this country—the creation of American military presence in Asian countries," she said. "The media understanding of the Amerasian experience is very limited. Also, whenever the Amerasian is handled dramatically, we're usually pictured as this poor waif whose mother commits suicide, and the great white father must rescue us and take us to America—a *la* 'Miss Saigon.'"

The writer sighed. "I'm tired of that. I'm also tired of the multiracial portrayal in general. In 'Showboat,' Julie is ostracized by both communities, damned because of her multiracial heritage. Of course, historically, there's a lot of truth to that. Society loves categories, whether it's humans or cars or whatever. They want a category that makes everything—excuse the expression—black or white. Gray is very difficult to accept."

Houston's activism led to her 1981 co-founding of the Amerasian League—plus a busy schedule of speaking engagements at theaters, universities and civic conferences.

"It's exhausting," she said. "It really began as a matter of accident, but the truth is I'm a political activist; it's part of the nature of my birth and the fact that I was given a voice. I have to use it. Whenever I'd hear something

about Amerasians, it was always some scholar talking about us poor Amerasian folk and how psychologically disturbed we were, being half-American and half-Asian."

Because of her exotic looks, Houston often finds her ethnic heritage a matter of public curiosity. "People always think I'm something else," she said. "I get everything from Micronesian to Balinese to Puerto Rican to West Indian to Somalian; they can never quite put their finger on it. My feeling is, I just want to be who I am. If being who I am takes some explanation because it's something new, then I'm bound and determined to explain it."

Doesn't it get tiring?

"It does. But the need to solidify and create consciousness about who we are goes on. It's like being Jewish or African-American: You could say, 'All right, enough. Let's get on with it.' But the reality is, in the getting on with it, experiences come up that need to be challenged, addressed. It's not like I go around with a sign saying, 'I'm Amerasian and let's have a political discussion about it.' I just go about my life—writing, teaching, being a mother—then I walk into a bank, and somebody says something."

Houston, who was recently offered a permanent teaching position at USC, began writing at age 6 when her mother encouraged her to write *haiku* poetry.

"I think it was a relaxation technique," she said, laughing. At 13, with the encouragement of a teacher, she wrote her first play—filling up on O'Neill, Ibsen and Chekhov for inspiration—and dis-

covered a passion for play writing. At Kansas State University, Houston minored in philosophy ("which made me think"), double-majoring in journalism ("which made me go out and meet people") and theater, where she built sets, directed and acted. "It helped me to see everyone's perspective," she said.

At UCLA graduate school, Houston's senior thesis, "*Asa Ga Kimashita*" (about her paternal grandfather) won the David Library Playwriting Award for American Freedom—and the Loraine Hansberry Award for best play about the black American

experience. Not surprisingly, some black students were not amused. "People have to think beyond this very closed, exclusive community," Houston said. "The reality is that the African-American experience extends to Japan because of World War II."

The playwright's strong ties to Asian culture continue with her 4-year-old son, Kiyoshi.

"My mother raised me knee-deep in Japanese culture; I'm doing the same with him because it's what I know best," she said. "Last week the plumber came, and I said, 'You'll have to remove your shoes.'"

He flipped open his transmitter and said, "Mike, we've got another one of them Hindus here in Santa Monica." Houston grinned. "Kiyoshi was following him around saying, 'You don't understand—you can't wear your shoes in the house. It brings in the demons and dirt from the street.'"

"Ted" plays *Wednesdays through Saturdays* at 8 p.m. and *Sundays* at 7 p.m. at the *Odyssey Theatre*, 2055 S. Sepulveda Blvd. in West Los Angeles, through March 10. Tickets are \$17.50 to \$21.50. (213) 477-2055. Janice Arkatou writes regularly about theater for *Calendar*.

(MORE)

STAGE NEWS & NOTES

DARYL H. MILLER

Japanese war brides' story hits home for playwright



for tea.

These women, like her mother, were Japanese war brides — Japanese women who married U.S. military personnel after World War II.

They are the subject of Houston's play "Tea," at the Odyssey Theatre Ensemble in West Los Angeles.

The women always seemed calm and passive, Houston recalled during a recent telephone conversation. Yet, as she listened to them, she realized that they were incredibly strong.

They had to be, because they were continually pushed and pulled between cultures. They found themselves ostracized by their old and new cultures, and they saw the same thing happening to their Amerasian children.

Houston is preserving this history by recording it and sharing it with others.

Her play focuses on several Japanese war brides whose Army husbands are stationed at Fort Riley, in Kansas. They gather for a ceremonial tea after one of their number commits suicide, and they talk about the choices that brought them to America.

"I want (the audience) to enter the world of these women, and for an hour and a half to see the world through their eyes," said Houston,

who now lives in Santa Monica.

"I hope the play will enlighten them, stretch their consciousness."

She said the story is, in many ways, the story of all immigrants. It is a tale of people who come to a strange new place and must adjust to it. Some succeed; some don't.

"It's a story that is the spine of the history of America, because most of the inhabitants of this land are immigrants from another land or descendants of immigrants from another land."

Houston's "Tea" tastes bitter at times, but it is also mellow and warming.

For instance, there's the character who recalls her courtship in Japan with an American soldier.

She explains that although she was interested in the man, she was nervous about being seen with him. So, to make her feel more comfortable, he took her to the movies in the company of seven of her friends.

Houston bases this story on the courtship of her own Japanese mother and her African-American/American Indian father. When her parents returned to the States, they — like the play's characters — were stationed at Fort Riley.

Houston bases much of her play on memories of her mother's afternoon teas. But she did extensive research so that she could better understand Japanese war brides — or "international brides," as they prefer to be called. She interviewed 50 such women, as well as some of the husbands.

"Tea" was first staged at the



Velina Hasu Houston's play "Tea," now at the Odyssey Theatre Ensemble, is inspired by the experiences of her mother, who was a Japanese war bride.

Manhattan Theatre Club in 1987, and then at San Diego's Old Globe Theatre in 1988. The Old Globe cast has been reassembled at the Odyssey, once again under the direction of Julianne Boyd.

Daily News

The Outlook

Japanese war brides serve up a satisfying 'Tea' at Odyssey

By Sandra Kreiswirth
THEATER CRITIC

REVIEW

TEA, written by Velina Hasu Houston, directed by Julianne Boyd, set by Craig Lathrop, lighting by Kent Inasy, costumes by Bella Arguetty, produced by Ron Sossi and Lucy Pollak, 8 p.m. Wed.-Sat., 7 p.m. Sun. through March 10, 3 p.m. Feb. 17 and March 3, Odyssey Theater Ensemble, 2055 S. Sepulveda Blvd., Los Angeles. Tickets: \$17.50-\$21.50. Information: 477-2055.

Cast: Shuko Akune, Takayo Fischer, Lily Mariye, Gerrieani Miyazaki and Diana Tanaka.

Velina Hasu Houston's "Tea" at the Odyssey Theater sneaks up on you gradually before it knocks you for an emotional loop.

Funny, warm and ultimately heartbreaking, this is the story of four Japanese war brides who come together in a ceremonial tea to honor one of their own, a fifth war bride who has committed suicide in the play's first scene.

While the quartet sips tea and compares lives, the newly dead Himiko Hamilton (Gerrieani Miyazaki) roams the edges of the room. Alive, she was left to wander in two worlds. Dead, she is now suspended between each of them.

Seamlessly directed by Julianne Boyd, and performed by an exceptionally strong ensemble cast, the intermissionless one-act is set in Fort Riley, Kan., in 1968, where we meet these five women who fell in

love with American soldiers in Japan. After the war, they married, and as "international brides," came to America clutching their own culture while dreaming of things unknown and new.

For some, those dreams turned out to be nightmares; for others, disappointments. Interrogated mercilessly before they got here, shunned when they arrived, they each made their own bargain as a way of surviving in a strange world.

This gathering at Himiko's house is not really a reunion. Most of these women haven't

stayed friends. And none of them ever befriended Himiko, who was an embarrassment to them. She killed her abusive husband, Billy, was acquitted on charges of self-defense, then suffered the final blow of losing her 20 year-old daughter, who was brutally murdered.

For this wan, lost woman, who hides her dark hair under a blond wig, life has gone from merely bad in Japan to unlivable in America. And while hers is the most gripping portrait, Houston doesn't drown the audience in the morose and maudlin. Instead, she sketches the four remaining characters with a delicate brush, telling their stories with humor as well as anger as each actress not only flashes back to her own youth, but plays her child as well as her husband, each with amazing facility.

Chizuye Juarez (Diana Tanaka) lost her husband that first winter. These days, she is the least Japanese in look and manner, wearing bell bottoms, a

vest and a peace symbol. She drinks coffee, not tea, and calls everyone by nickname.

This particularly irks Atsuko Yamamoto (Shuko Akune), whose husband is Japanese-American, has the best tea collection in town, is president of the local Buddhist chapter and is bigoted against other Asians, notably Koreans.

Setsuko Banks (Takayo Fi-

comedy and rage from the others. The attention to detail in the text is matched in the physical production: where Craig E. Lathrop's wheat-colored tatami upon which the women drink their tea complements the murals that indicate the barren plains outside; where Bella Arguetty's American costumes and C.L. Hundley's kimono define the wearers; and where J. Kent Inasy's lighting defines the moments.

And these series of moments gradually build into a jewel of a theater piece, a play that takes you on a journey that not only informs but touches the heart.

'Tea'

sch), like Houston's own mother, married a black/American Indian. Naive to racial bigotry and not comprehending the term "interracial," she arrived in Kansas to be turned away at the inn. "But my husband works for your government," she complains.

Teruko Mackenzie (Lily Mariye) smiles a lot, calls her Oklahoma-born husband "sugar pie," to the disdain of her daughter, and manages to maintain the same sweetness she had as a young girl.

In delivering this story, Houston mixes her modes seamlessly — the poetic, lyrical nature of Himiko blended with

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A-12 ●

Monday, December 7, 1987

Don't let 'Color of Honor' fade from view

By A. A. Smyser

If I could have a wish granted in connection with this year's Pearl Harbor attack anniversary, it would be that the movie "The Color of Honor" be re-shown on public television in Hawaii at least once a year from now on.



Smyser

And it's a story that shouldn't be lost.

"THE COLOR OF HONOR" is about the way America treated its Japanese Americans in World War II and how they responded. Interestingly enough, it was conceived and produced by a West Coast woman of Chinese ancestry, Loni Ding.

It was one of the centerpieces of

last week's Hawaii International Film Festival. It also has a permanent home in the Smithsonian Institution's new exhibit entitled "A More Perfect Union: Japanese Americans and the Constitution" in Washington, D.C.

It tells about:

■ The internment of West Coast Japanese.

■ The heroic record of U.S. combat soldiers of Japanese ancestry who fought even though many of their families had been forcibly taken from their homes and imprisoned in camps with barbed wire and armed guards around them.

■ The now-vindicated refusal to serve of a minority of Japanese young men who said they wouldn't fight as long as their families were being treated like that.

■ The barely-known accomplishments of Japanese-American interpreters in the Pacific whose prisoner-of-war interrogations made Gen. Douglas MacArthur a superbly-informed combat commander, yet had their accomplishments labeled "secret" for years afterwards.

AT ITS ROOT is the fact that

America mistreated a whole class of its citizens just because of their ethnic background.

I am of German background. No large German groups were given similar treatment in either World War I or World War II. Nor were Italians.

It was just assumed that because they looked different Japa-

Film should be shown every year at this time

nese Americans were somehow more dangerous than German Americans or Italian Americans.

"The Color of Honor" brings this story home graphically by using old film footage and current interviews with Japanese Americans who experienced those events.

In a way it may be said to have been made just in time, because articulate survivors of those years will not be around in great numbers for too much longer.

We in Hawaii might fault the film for not focusing as much on Hawaii as we would like. But that is a small fault. The major offense — the internment of a whole section of the population for the

crime of ethnicity — didn't occur here, fortunately. It occurred only on the West Coast.

Here less than one percent of our residents of Japanese ancestry were interned — still too many, probably, but for reasons such as particularly close connections with Japan that may have been excused in the emotional aftermath of the Pearl Harbor attack.

The 99 percent of Hawaii's Japanese not interned gave a resounding vindication of their freedom — and indictment of West Coast policy — by committing not a single act of sabotage and by providing the U.S. army with its most decorated combat fighters.

AS LONG AS the cry "Remember Pearl Harbor!" is remembered (and I think it will be quite awhile) there will be an anti-Japanese connotation to it.

"The Color of Honor" is a lasting influence that will bring better understanding of a very complex, sad and tragic American experience that still was marked by nobility. It is a memory that shouldn't be lost.

A.A. Smyser is contributing editor of the Star-Bulletin.