

by Norman Nadel

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NEW YORK--"Santa Anita '42" is the kind of universally meaningful drama that comes along only once in a long, long time, and is destined to be staged by professional, amateur and school theaters across the country, ~~as well as abroad.~~

Whether it will be done as well as this premiere production at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's enlightened Chelsea Theater Center, remains to be seen. Finding other Japanese-American actresses, or Occidental women who can play Japanese-American, who are as exquisite, deft and spiritually resourceful as Lani Gerrie Miyazaki, will be problem enough. Nevertheless, there are other actresses, other companies, other directors, and they will rise, in varying degrees, to the material. And the material is exceptional.

Just about everybody knows of Santa Anita as a Southern California race track, but few will recall it as an internment camp for Japanese-Americans during World War II.

Inevitably, moral outrage enters into what playwright Allan Knee has to describe, and to comment on. It was outrageous, not only that the Japanese-Americans were interned while German-Americans went free, but that any group of American citizens should be totally deprived of their freedom, their property and their Constitutional rights.

Despite this, outrage is not the tone of "Santa Anita '42," nor is that its ultimate point. Rather, it an examination of the courage, the resiliency, the phoenix-like ability to rise reborn from ashes, that enables one woman to endure, and to survive in spirit.

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Miss Miyazaki portrays Tamako, first as a mature woman and wife attending a class at the Santa Anita internment camp during the war, then, in a progression of flashbacks, as the teen-age "mail-order bride" who came from Kyoto in 1920 to marry a considerably older Japanese-American already settled in California.

The audience shares her dismay on seeing her husband for the first time, as well as her baffled, resentful and finally resilient adjustment to him, to marriage, to a new way of dressing, and to Southern California. After raising a son, she falls in love with an American engineer and becomes pregnant by him.

If this sounds like a rehash of "Madam Butterfly" the resemblance is only in a few details. As touching, poignant, tragic, elevating, romantic and joyous as Knee's drama manages to be at various points in the narrative, it stays free of sentimentality. Not only the playwright, but the cast and most emphatically the director, Steven Pobman, are responsible for this.

The internment ^{camp} class which opens and concludes the play, and eventually the play itself, both deal with the traditional Japanese philosophical concept of a garden as a reflection of life. It can be planned, but even when the ^{to} ~~play~~ goes awry, whatever remains can be looked upon in a new way, still capable of providing contentment if not joy, solace if not stimulation.

Other than players who are or appear to be Oriental in the cast (half the ~~actor~~ roles are for fairly typical Americans), "Santa Anita '42" makes no unreasonable production demands. It does require taste, ^{beauty} ~~beauty~~, warmth, humanity and wisdom. In this premiere production, these requirements are abundantly met.